Accidental Feminists?
Recent Histories of South African Women

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Women in South African History: Basus'iimbokodo, Bawel'imilamho/ They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers edited by NOMBONISA GASA. (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007). 536 pp. ISBN 10: 0-7969-2174-1

In her introduction to *African Women and Feminism,* Oyeronke Oyewumi notes, 'African women and feminism are at odds because despite the adjectives used to qualify feminism, it is Western feminism that inevitably dominates even when it is not the subject under consideration.'[1] Distinguishing between 'feminism' and 'feminist', she continues:

> The term *feminism* usually refers to historically recent Europe and American social movements founded to struggle for female equality. ... the term *feminist* has a broader reach ... it describes a range of behavior indicating female agency and self-determination... Filomena Africa ... wrote about Africa as the original home of feminist principles. In this sense, then, African feminism is a tautology.[2]

In addition, as Lewis has noted, 'essentialist evocations of geographical, national or racial criteria as decisive grounds for defining African feminism' are increasingly untenable in this globalizing world.[3]

1 O. Oyewumi ed. *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (Asmara: Africa World Press, 2003), I.
2 Oyewumi, *African Women,* 1-2.
3 D. Lewis, 'African feminisms'. *Agenda* Vol. 50 (I), 2001, 4. See also E. Salo,. 'Gendered citizenship, race and women's differentiated access to power in the new South Africa' *Agenda* Vol. 72, 2007, 187-196 for a discussion of two decades of debate as published in *Agenda* since the first edition in 1987; T. Mtintso 'Representivity: False sisterhood or universal women's interests? The South African experience' *Feminist Studies,* Vol. 29 (3), 2003; S. Msimang 'African feminisms II: Reflections on politics made personal' *Agenda* Vol. 54, 2002; B Guy-Sheftall 'African feminist discourse: A review essay' *Agenda* Vol. 58, 2003.

At heart is the historical question of the various and shifting meanings of gender and the character of African women's agency before the collision with colonial power, and the impact of western imperialism (including that of western feminists) on African women's access to power, including the power to name themselves, to speak. In contexts where sex and gender do not automatically coincide (are there contexts where they do?), where women are not necessarily bound by gender oppression, it is impossible to remove gender analysis from feminist methodologies. To recognize and analyse gender within African contexts is a feminist project, and conversely, histories that simply 'add women' and ignore gender need not address feminist concerns. Within South African historiography, questions concerning the relationship between (South) African feminism/s and women's histories are relatively recent, and the impact of transnational, African, and local, feminist theory and scholarship continues to be felt unevenly. The recent publication of two books focusing on histories of South African women provides the opportunity to assess the relationships between women's histories and feminism, and between feminism and feminists, in the scholarship presented in Helen Scanlon's monograph *Representation and Reality: Portraits of Women's Lives in the Western Cape 1948-1976* and Nomboniso Gasa's edited volume *Women in South African History: Basus'iimhokodo, Bawel'imilambol They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers.*

Since the 1980s, a key issue facing feminist historians in and of South Africa within what was then the revisionist paradigm has been the classic struggle between Marxism and feminism, a debate famously associated with Belinda Bozzoli's 1983 article which has attained iconic status as launching a feminist materialist critique of South African history.[4] Analyses of racial capitalism were by definition predicated on race and class; the issue became how to 'add gender' to these analyses, without leaving the paradigm. Helen Bradford pointed to 'the uneasy relationship between Marxism and feminism'; in an essay where she expanded the linguistic framework of 'articulation of modes of production' to include gendered spaces, Bradford argued that:

> unless the personal is perceived as the political - and unless the (predominantly female) sphere of the family is articulated to the (predominantly male) domain of political economy - black resistance cannot be adequately understood.[5]

The focus shifted from the state ('structure') to people ('agency'), and black women's protests and resistance became foci of analysis. Scholars associated with the Wits History Workshop and SOAS in particular contributed to the limited but growing recognition that feminist perspectives had value, that to analyse gender, and to acknowledge the politics of the 'domestic', might enrich understandings of

4 Bozzoli, B. 'Feminism. Marxism and Southern African studies', *Journal of Southern African Studies,* Vol. 9 (2), 1983. See also L. Sargent (ed.), *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (Cambridge, MA, South End Press, 1981).

5 H. Bradford, 'We are now the men': Women's beer protests in the Natal countryside, 1929" in B. Bozzoli (ed.) *Class, Community and Conflict.* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press. 1987), 293.

the race/class nexus. However, gender was seldom centred and indeed analyses that employed gender as an analytical tool tended to be seen - by malestream academia - as increasing rather than reducing subjectivity.

Simultaneously, scholars were engaged in the empirical study of women in South African history. The recognition that women had been ignored and that they had played important roles historically led to the production of a significant body of empirical research on women that did not overtly claim allegiance to feminism, but sometimes asked feminist questions.[6] Although by adding women the scholarship written within an empiricist paradigm offered useful information, such works did not 'stir', they did not unsettle established academic androcentricity. Beyond these approaches, scholarship emerged that was radical in its feminist historiographical critiques, challenging androcentricity and racism within the academy itself. This certainly did 'stir' in the sense of 'disrupt' and 'unsettle', and in many ways was personally risky, tending to be the work of doctoral students located on the margins of the academy, whose potential employers were often implicated in their critiques.[7] But not all were mere irritating flies in the androcentric ointment; not all wrote from the margins, and some of these feminist historians have contributed to Nomboniso Gasa's *Women in South African History.*

This brief overview does not pretend to be exhaustive, but it should demonstrate that over the past two decades there have been a variety of approaches within the academy to the study and significance of women in South African history. Social history, almost by definition, has engaged 'the community' beyond academia, but a direct challenge from that community was arguably first felt by feminist academics at a South African Historical Association (SAHA) conference in 1991. As Lewis has recently observed, 'South African writing on gender, identity and difference has fixated on national dynamics and politics, with some of the most animated discussions focusing squarely on conferences, institutional dynamics and research trends in the country.'[8] These - at times heated - discussions have had major significance for feminist scholarship. From feminist critiques of androcentric historiography, the spotlight shifted to the limitations of white women with secure academic jobs under apartheid who challenged racism and sexism theoretically and historically (within western feminist paradigms) but at no apparent personal sacrifice or risk. They had been writing feminist histories of African women (many returning from exile) who had not had their privileges, who had been denied access to the South African academy. Finally, South African feminist academics

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6 See, for example, R.C-H. Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press published by University Press of New England, 1994); K. McKenzie, 'My own mind dying within me: Eliza Fairbairn and the reinvention **of** colonial middle-class domesticity in Cape Town', *South African Historical Journal.* **Vol.** 36, 1997; E. Van Heyningen, 'The social evil in the Cape Colony 1868-1902: Prostitution and the Contagious Diseases Acts', *Journal of Southern African Studies,* Vol. 10 (2), 1984.

7 See, for example, Y. Abrahams, 'Disempowered to consent: Sarah Bartmann and Khoisan slavery in the nineteenth century Cape Colony and Britain' *South African Historical Journal,* Vol. 35, 1996; Y. Abrahams, 'Was Eva raped? An exercise in speculative history' *Kronos.* Vol. 23, 1996; D. Lewis, 'The politics of feminism in South Africa' in M. Daymond (ed.) *South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory and Criticism.* (New York: Garland, 1996); P. van der Spuy, 'Gender and slavery: Towards a feminist revision", *South African Historical Journal* Vol. 25, 1991; P. van der Spuy. "What, then, was the sexual outlet for black males?': A feminist critique of demographic representations of women slaves at the Cape of Good Hope in the eighteenth century', *Kronos.* Vol. 23, 1996; J. Bennett, 'The politics **of** writing'. *Agenda* **Vol.** 46, 2000: G. Smith, 'From suffering in silence.to drawing strength from the margins', *Agenda* Vol. 46, 2000.

8 D. Lewis, 'Feminism and the radical imagination', *Agenda* Vol. 72, 2007, 18.

were drawn into key debates concerning African feminisms in the face of western feminist imperialism. Perhaps ironically, western feminists' insistence on authorial subjectivities thus became a critical aspect of South African feminist concerns, and began to become evident in publication. The establishment of the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town, and the publication of *Feminist Africa* were among the important initiatives that would ensure that these debates remain foregrounded within the academy.

The first book of essays specifically dealing with the history of women and gender in southern/ South Africa was Cheryl Walker's 1990 edited volume, *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945,*[9] published around the same time as the SAHA conference, but reflecting earlier academic concerns. In conceptualizing this volume, Bozzoli's scholarship was key: following her concept of the 'patchwork quilt of patriarchies', and using her 1983 article as the starting point of revisionist feminist historiography, Walker's volume was concerned with the historical interaction between 'the indigenous and the settler sex-gender systems' before 1945:[10] One can observe the collision of these two systems and the domination, under the unifying forces of colonialism and capitalism, of the settler over the indigenous.[11] Jeff Guy's chapter, 'Gender oppression in southern Africa's precapitalist societies' exemplifies a late 1980s approach that stressed structural oppression rather than women's agency. He started from the premise:

> that the history of African women in southern Africa is the history of their oppression, and that ... the nature of this oppression and the nature of the exploitation upon which it is based, are dynamic and have undergone qualitative changes over time.[12]

In 1990, Walker could note that

> there is considerable disagreement, not to say confusion, about how to explain women's oppression in contemporary South Africa, as well as how to analyse the intricate interrelationship of gender, race and class and their differential impact on women. We are still a long way simply from mapping women's position, both historically and in the present, while much must be done to integrate these findings into our conceptualization of society. One major difficulty, noted in many of the chapters, is the absence from the historical record of women's voices, most pronounced in the case of black women....[13]

Walker's (and Guy's) key concern was how oppression *impacted on* women, rather than how women acted on their own behalf, but Walker also raised the need to listen for women's voices, a continuing contentious concern within feminist his-

9 C Walker. *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990).
10 Walker, *Women and Gender, 1.*
11 Walker, *Women and Gender,* 1.
12 Guy in Walker, *Women and Gender,* 34.
13 Walker. *Women and Gender,* 2-3.

tonography (if the subaltern cannot speak, how can we hear her voice?). In 1990 South African feminists had not yet begun to radically rethink their methodologies, to search for new kinds of sources and new ways of listening through which African women's voices might better be heard. In the nearly two decades since the publication of Walker's volume, many exciting strides have been taken in this regard, reflected in both books under review here. Continuities persist: concerns with the relationship between past and present; how to explain women's contemporary oppression using historical tools; and relatedly, how best to examine the historical and contemporary relationship between gender, race and class, in a context where race and class continue to claim supreme explanatory authority.[14]

Thus, despite the promise inherent in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945,* feminist historians in 2007 must continue to challenge the notion that the history of women is necessarily feminist history. As Amina Mama has noted, 'there have always been studies of women'.[15] Although the *discovery* of women, the answer to the 'where are the women' question, may be an important initial step of feminist research, it is insufficient if women are to relocate from the margins of historical meaning to meaningful *recovery* of women's lives. In the past two decades, women have continued to be added to history, and one of our questions in assessing new scholarship must be how far it takes seriously feminist concerns, moving beyond 'digging up our foremothers'[16] to contributing to a paradigm that does not merely add to established malestream historiography, but that reflects on the need for scholarship 'on women, by women, for women', and engages with 'the feminist agenda of liberating women.'[17] This agenda cannot be met by essentialising women and men; it requires sustained gender analysis.

Both Helen Scanlon's monograph *Representation and Reality: Portraits of Women's Lives in the Western Cape 1948-1976* and Nomboniso Gasa's edited volume *Women in South African History: Basus'iimbokodo, Bawel'imilambol They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers* focus on histories of women in South Africa. Scanlon's work emerges from the revisionist tradition of social history, and is a response to the absence of academic recognition of women activists in the anti-apartheid movement; her focus is the Western Cape. Nomboniso Gasa's volume is political in a different sense, having been initiated by government officials, reflecting, perhaps nation-building if not nationalist imperatives which may intersect with, but are not framed by, or limited to the academic enterprise. The motivations behind, and intended readership of each book are therefore somewhat different, and need to be taken into account in assessing their value to readers of this particular journal.

The title of Helen Scanlon's *Representation and Reality: Portraits of Women's Lives in the Western Cape 1948-1976,* raises somewhat false expectations. We expected a nuanced reading that would reflect a gender analysis of 'women's lives'

14 Walker, *Women and Gender,* 4.
15 A. Mama, 'Women's studies and studies of women in Africa during the 1990s', (Dakar: CODESRIA Working Paper Series. No. 5. 1996), 2.
16 C. Landman, (ed.) *Digging Up our Foremothers: Stories of Women in Africa* (Pretoria: UNISA, 1996).
17 Mama, 'Women's studies', 2.

and, crucially, interrogate the notion of 'reality' and its relationship to representation. 'Reality' is itself written within cultural systems, and as Crenshaw and Pellar note, what is at stake is 'which, and whose narrative structure will prevail in the interpretation of events in the social world.'[18] If we accept, as Hall argues, that people's actions depend in important ways on how the situations in which they act are defined, then it becomes increasingly difficult to 'assume either a natural meaning to everything or a universal consensus on what things mean,' and the processes of representation by which 'certain events get recurrently signified in particular ways' becomes increasingly important.[19]

Despite the title, this book does not emerge from post-colonial/cultural studies or engage with questions around representation. Instead, it is located firmly within the social history tradition associated with Scanlon's doctoral supervisor, Shula Marks. Although there is no indication of it in the title, this book is about women's public political activism in the Western Cape, largely within national liberation movements. The time frame is wider than the title suggests; the iconic year 1976 is irrelevant to this study. Scanlon is certainly sensitive to feminist concerns around perspectives on 'reality', but she does not question the existence of objective reality, including the constructedness of 'women' as well as 'race', a task at the heart of feminist praxis. Rather, she focuses on the need for sensitivity in the interpretation of personal narratives, as 'what people believe to be true may be more important to them, and have more impact on their world, than the objective truth.' (p. 14) She is therefore sensitive to the feminist concern that historians should not search for 'the past as it really was', but rather interrogate 'the truth of our experiences', in the words of the Personal Narrative Group, which she cites (p. 14):

> Through the use of personal narratives, I have tried to explore wider questions concerning the political life of some women: namely the areas of family and protest, which are often contradictory; and the tensions between their public and private worlds. In so doing I have attempted to examine some of the connections that transcended racial and class divisions ... with the aim of understanding which factors in a racially divided society served to bring women together... The individuals featured in this book were united in their desire to change the social environment for women suffering under apartheid; some by radical means, others by more moderate methods. ... each of these women made a stand and sought to alter what she regarded as the injustices prevalent in her society at that time (pp. 2-3).

Being aware of potential pitfalls around oral history methodologies, the author's concern is to restore women to the political history of the Western Cape in the 1950s and 60s, in the process rethinking the definition of political for these

18 Cited in A. Ferber, *White Man Falling* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 7.
19 S. Hall, 'The rediscovery of ideology: Return of the repressed in media studies', in O. Boyd Barret and C. Newbold (eds.), *Approaches to the Media* (London: Arnold, 1997), 3561

women. This process is uneven and in our view inadequately theorized: there is a lack of clarity around the concept of 'political', and no interrogation of that of 'the personal'. Scanlon's analytical construct is 'women', essentialised in the text in unproblematised apartheid-race as well as class terms. Her project shares the goals and methods of earlier studies such as Robin Cohen, Yvonne Muthien and Abebe Zegeye's *Repression and Resistance: Insider Accounts of Apartheid,* published in 1990, which, written by black South Africans under apartheid, was also concerned with the recognition of women's actions as political - including some of the specific women in Scanlon's purview.[20] Given theoretical advances over the past several decades, we expected to see Scanlon interrogate the gendered concepts she engages. However, she defines neither personal nor political. Both concepts are taken as given; for the most part Scanlon does not question the categorical divide between private (personal) and public (political). From a feminist perspective this diminishes her book's ability to challenge the hegemonic paradigm in which gender is so to speak invited to the table, but has no say concerning the menu or how the food is eaten. The task appears to be to reveal the role of the personal (family, the domestic, women's gender roles and identities) in the development of women's involvement in what she refers to as 'the public realm'.[21] Within the domestic, the task seems to be to distinguish apolitical from prepolitical, rather than to recognise the political nature of the domestic itself. It is of course important to demonstrate the profound significance of gendered roles, relationships and identities delimited under patriarchal and racialised constraints in determining life choices. However, it is a different matter to interrogate the notion of 'the political' itself, and an opportunity has been lost in this regard.

Scanlon's work thus recalls the social histories of the 1980s, although in constructing her own narratives she is more analytical towards the personal stories she uses as her sources than was common in earlier oral histories. A key point of reference in this context is Belinda Bozzoli's *Women of Phokeng,* and *Representations and Reality* fits well into the tradition established particularly by Bozzoli's analysis of personal narratives. Through the concept of social consciousness, Bozzoli made analysis of the individual acceptable within southern African social history. Scanlon notes a post-1994 shift in respectability of the individual, rather than the collective, as historical subject. She cites Sarah Nuttall's insight that 'personal disclosure has become part of a revisionary impulse, part of the pluralizing project of democracy itself. The individual in this context emerges as a key, newly legitimized concept.'[22] Bozzoli arguably made this shift years earlier, in seeking to write social history from the perspective of individual women, seeking to allow the truths of women's perceptions of their own lives to shape historical analysis.[23]

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20 R. Cohen. Y. Muthien and A. Zegeye (eds), *Repression and Resistance: Insider Accounts of Apartheid* (Warwick: Hans Zell Publishers, for the Centre for Modern African Studies, 1990).

21 See N. Yuval-Davis *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997), 79-80: S. Andrade, 'Gender and the public sphere in Africa: Writing women and rioting women', *Agenda* Vol. 54. 2002, 45-59; S. Hassim, 'Terms of engagement: South African challenges', *Feminist Africa; Women Mobilized* Vol. 4, 2005, 10-28; G. Fester, 'Merely mothers perpetuating patriarchy? Women's grassroots organizations in the Western Cape 1980-1990', in A. Gouws (ed) *(Un)Thinking Citizenship: Feminist Debates in Contemporary South Africa* (Cape Town, UCT Press, 2005).

22 Sarah Nuttall, quoted in Scanlon, 16.

23 B. Bozzoli, with M. Nkotsoe. *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983.* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1991). See Scanlon, 13 and 227.

In the post-TRC era, *Representations* continues this trend of justifying historical analyses based on 'the individual', but in a different direction: revisiting the political, or, rather, seeking links between 'political' activism and 'personal', family- or domestic- based, concerns and experiences.

The book is divided into two sections. The first is designed to provide the context for the brief biographical narratives that follow in the second half of the book.[24] In the introduction, Scanlon provides a very useful summary of the historiography on women in South African history, including an overview of feminist approaches and issues, but she does not locate herself within this literature. Her discussion of personal narrative-based methodology recognizes both the advantages and limits to her approach, and sets expectations for a nuanced analysis. However, there is a disturbing absence in both historiographical and methodological sections of self-reflexivity, of how Scanlon's own positionality has shaped her research and narrative, and of where she stands in relation to other historians. Nevertheless, she establishes her agenda clearly in her introduction:

> This study investigates the history of women's lives in the Western Cape during the 1950s and 1960s in order to offer a more personal investigation into the variety of experiences of women in the region, as well as the motivations of some of those who engaged in political involvement. ... By analyzing the experiences of a number of significant women ... I hope to illuminate some of the broader social processes affecting women at that time. (p. 1)

The women in this collection are pre-selected as 'significant'. They are 'strong'. This is 'great women' history from below. The fact that this is the first such collection points to the gaping silences in the historiography of South African women. Many of the women featured in *Representations and Reality* will be familiar for their roles as activists against apartheid, but thus far most have not been granted academic attention (Ray Alexander is an obvious exception). The author notes:

> One of the apparent ironies in gender relations in South Africa is that, although the society is intrinsically patriarchal ... it has nonetheless had a long history of radical women ... a multitude of strong women (p.2).

In fact, not all the women who come under the spotlight in this book are 'radical women' (specifically, 'white' middle class women are singled out as almost accidental activists against apartheid), although they were indeed all 'prominent' in public anti-segregation or anti-apartheid activism.

24 An appendix contains brief biographical summaries of 27 women. In the text, Jean Bernadt's last name is spelled variously as Bernadt (typically) or Bernardt (176, 236, 238, 247-9, 251).

Specifically, Scanlon argues that the apartheid laws and policies around the Coloured Labour Preference Policy and influx control shaped the lives of women in the Western Cape - and their political choices - most profoundly. These policies shape the contextual chapters, which are excellent introductions to the history of their impact on African women's lives and women's wide range of responses. The particularity of apartheid's assault on the Western Cape is summarized well in the second chapter, and Chapter 3 surveys key anti-apartheid organizations in the Western Cape that included women. As Scanlon notes earlier:

> there is no doubt that apartheid's most virulent attack on the lives of African women was conducted in the Western Cape, principally from 1955, when the Coloured Labour Preference Policy (CLPP) was adopted in the area ... Controls over the movement of African women were implemented more stringently than in any other region of South Africa. The effect of both influx control and the CLPP meant that during the period of analysis African women in the Western Cape 'were a vulnerable, threatened group (pp. 1-2).

However, Scanlon complicates an apparent victimology by highlighting different choices and actions. Here, the 'agent versus victim' debate emerges less from feminist discourse and more from the structure/agency binary that has framed so much South African historiography over the past several decades. This debate continues to engage writers of South African history; however, the theoretical imperative in Gasa's *Women in South African History* (see below), is derived from feminist concerns about locating women as agents (or, as one author puts it, victors) rather than as victims.[25] Scanlon traces major apartheid legislation *impacting on* African women: specifically in Cape Town, noting, 'as the 1960s progressed, so did the ferocity with which influx control legislation was enforced ... officials were ruthless in enforcing the law' (p.37). The author's intention is to examine

> the impact of these laws on individual women, and [to explore] how industrial and demographic change confused and reshaped the relations between the sexes ... While the description of law and of legal discrimination and deprivation of blacks in the Cape has been documented elsewhere, this chapter explores how the law affected women in the region on a personal level (p.35).

The author details some of the ways in which the laws were evaded or circumvented, whether by African women, corrupt white male officials, the Cape Town City Council itself, or white women speaking on behalf of African women (especially in the early years). This chapter, then, provides a socio-legal overview of the impact of influx control and the CLPP on African women in Cape Town,

25 C. Wanjiku Kihato, 'Invisible lives, inaudible voices? The social conditions of migrant women in Johannesburg', in Gasa (ed), *Women in South African History*, 397 ff.

rather than the Western Cape as a whole. Indeed, most of this book is firmly located within Cape Town, although we do venture forth into some other towns and regions in the 'portraits' section. However, even where the analytical narrative leaves greater Cape Town, there is no focused analysis of the rural Western Cape. Justification for the urban focus is provided only in chapter 5 (p. 118). It seems that 'rural' is significant only in relation to the urban migration of African women. Neither do these chapters examine the impact of apartheid legislation on coloured women in the entire region, other than as privileged in relation to African women (in terms of skilled labour and higher wages for domestic work). We have to wait for the biographical portraits in the second half of the book to learn a little more about the lives and politicisation (in Scanlon's terms) of (two) coloured women (Chapter 7).

Scanlon underlines the point that, despite their small - and decreasing - numbers, African women were central to apartheid policies in the Western Cape in the 1950s and '60s. The need for white officialdom to control African women is evident, specifically legislators' frustrated efforts to remove African women from the Western Cape in their attempt to create a white and coloured 'homeland' and control African women in order to control African men's labor and movements. However, the author also points to - but does not explore - the collusion between some white officials and African men, specifically husbands, to control wives. On the other hand, in a later chapter the author points to some of the ways in which the Cape Town City Council sought to assert its own authority and find loopholes within central governmental directives, to provide breathing space for some women (at least from the point of view of Eulalie Stott, who served on the Council) (pp.156-57).[26] Importantly complicating a narrative of oppression and resistance, there are oblique, but unexplored, references to the ways in which some, older, presumably 'respectable', perhaps married, African women sought to control presumably younger, less 'respectable' single women; and of predatory white women super-exploiting illegal African women as domestic workers. Scanlon notes that single women with children were most vulnerable. She points to the rise of women-headed households, but she does not explore in any depth the conflicts between legal and illegal African women, and between legal African men and illegal African women.

Having posited the pass laws as the core around which Western Cape women's lives and activism were located, Scanlon focuses on 'political organization' among women, again complicating uncritical and monochromatic praise of women's anti-apartheid resistance to explore some of the complexities and contradictions among women's choices. The author makes the point that 'the focus in the literature on the grievances and defiance against the pass laws has tended to repress a more complex and contradictory story, in which women were sometimes complicit with, rather than resistant to the implementation of these laws' (p.64). Remaining within

26 Eulalie Stott argued that her presence on the Council was greatly responsible for this; self-aggrandisement aside, the fact that in the 1950s and 1960s the City Council was non-racial, and included women (in 1950-1963 Cissie Gool as well as Stott) suggests that a great deal more could have been explored in terms of the intersections between a city government which did not easily reflect apartheid government, and the spaces African women carved out for themselves.

the locus of apartheid legislation aimed at African women, she argues that 'the specific socio-economic circumstances of the Western Cape meant that anti-apartheid political organisation among women often reflected the impact of influx control and the Coloured Labour Preference Policy' (p.64). This impact was not always predictable, as the previous chapter has demonstrated.

Readers are assured that 'politics' includes the politics of survival:

> highly gendered responses to the urban environment emerged, where survival issues usually outweighed political concerns, or indeed *were* the overriding political concerns for women (p.64).

However, on page 72 we read: 'For the many working-class coloured women and the small number of African women in Cape Town, survival issues usually outweighed political questions.' Thus, survival was not 'political'. Part of the problem, perhaps, lies in the fact that the chapter is structured around certain formal organizations, thus implying that 'political' action is necessarily formal, public, organized. After a very brief discussion of 'gender and nationalism' which mentions Nira Yural Davis' and Floya Anurias' typology of five ways in which women are 'implicated in nationalism', Scanlon draws our attention to one of the key issues in South African feminist historiography, which is also central to Gasa's volume: motherhood, and its relationship to women's militancy and to 'feminism' (pp.66-67). Typically, however, Scanlon simply surveys the literature and does not provide her own analytical perspective. The chapter then surveys the following organizations that were active in Cape Town in the 1950s and 60s: The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) (and a discussion of the CPSA and trade unions), women's food committees, The Federation of South African Women (FSAW) and the Cape Association for the Abolition of Passes for African Women (CATAPAW), an organization that connects the contextual chapters in this book.

In line with her tendency to see the domestic (or personal) as potentially pre-political, Scanlon notes that a number of women who led the vigilance associations then 'progressed' (our word) into membership of FSAW or the CPSA:

> However, viewing women's involvement in the food campaigns simply as a preface to their calls for national liberation is misleading. While the food committees did politicise many previously isolated women, for others the motivation remained simply domestic... Sophia Herman['s] ... involvement was essentially based on her household concerns. Nevertheless, the committees helped to identify the potential for political activism among women on issues directly affecting them (p.82).

The assumption seems to be that *motivation* determines whether or not an action is *political.* Actions are deemed political only if they do not derive from conservative motivations; to protest a raise in food prices does not qualify as political except in so far as such actions bring women together and 'politicise' them for further actions towards national liberation. Thus, 'political' is by definition

radical or progressive, by definition anti-conservative; it is also only located in a public, non-domestic realm. The final sentence in this chapter reiterates: 'women ... resorted to fluid and temporary alliances to pursue *both* political *and* immediate domestic goals' (p.91, our emphases). This position undermines the suggestion made earlier in the chapter that actions aimed at survival are political. It seems that for this author, the personal is not political per se; rather, the personal mobilized women and projected them into 'political' configurations. In discussing tensions within FSAW (and in the white organizations of the next chapter) Scanlon underlines how subjectivities shape political protest, or, as she might put it, how the personal shaped the political (pp.82-89).

Frustratingly, the summaries of each organization are cursory, at times merely listing the names of women involved (literally 'adding women'). The task seems to be to demonstrate the presence of women (and where possible to name them) rather than to examine how these women might have shaped the politics of the organizations themselves. The scope of the project is presumably too broad to allow a deep analysis, and we were relieved to discover that the biographical portraits in the second part of the book to some extent address this issue.

Chapter 4, 'Upholding people's rights and liberties', focuses on the 'politicization' of white, largely liberal, English-speaking, middle-class women in two organizations that became more radical in the Western Cape than elsewhere - the Black Sash and the National Council of Women (NCW) - and seeks to explain this exceptionalism. Scanlon notes: 'Social organizations were often women's only entry point into public life in South Africa, and this was particularly obvious in the case of white middle-class organizations such as the NCW and the Black Sash' (p. 113). This chapter:

> examines how the lines of welfare and politics became blurred during the 1950s and early 1960s, often as a result of white liberal fears of communists. It also explores how social and political events were to dictate the later evolution of these organizations [NCW and Black Sash] in radically different directions (p. 102).

Again, the term 'the public realm' is used to denote the political. The definition of 'political' is assumed rather than given: 'During the 1950s, a number of white women's associations, traditionally divorced from political life, came to develop a more obvious political stance in the Western Cape'(p.lOl). As noted above, involvement in CATAPAW connects chapters, and Scanlon points to different motivations that brought white, as opposed to African, women into this organization. She investigates the apparent contradiction between conservatism and progressive politics in this region, with particular reference to the NCW.

The book then goes on to discuss the 'political potential' of welfare organizations 'from below', those organized within African, and to a lesser extent coloured, communities in the Western Cape. Here, the author begins to deconstruct (or expand) the meanings of 'political', reflecting women's agency in taking control of their own lives (surely a profoundly political act):

> As Alan Cobley [back in 1997] has contended, although many voluntary organizations may have appeared apolitical, they nevertheless promoted 'pride, self-reliance and self-determination in the black community against the efforts of whites to marginalize, impoverish and subordinate them (p. 120).

Scanlon writes: *'manyanos* have often provided a platform for the empowerment of African women'(p. 126). Our question would be: how are *manyanos* themselves already political, already empowering?

In surveying 'religious and voluntary associations' of working class women - stokvels, manyanos and burial societies - Scanlon cites Julia Wells' comment that 'women were drawn to issues that affected them as mothers, essentially because this was the only role allowed them by men' (p. 125). As Nomboniso Gasa makes clear, there is much contention around the meanings of motherhood in relation to African feminism. In any case this reference ignores the point that Scanlon herself has made, that men wanted, but did not have, control over women in the Western Cape - and for many, motherhood was not tied to patriarchal domination, as the Western Cape was home to many single women with children, women who were not under the control of husbands, fathers, and/or homestead elders, whether male or female. It seems questionable to state as a general principle that 'women could thus become involved in associations where activities such as saving money were seen as an adjunct to their family responsibilities, and therefore remained within the 'private' domain'(p.l25). Scanlon does, however, acknowledge that: 'At the same time, since the reality of apartheid meant that many households were female-headed, voluntary activity was also a means of providing for emergencies ... [and] a support network that would otherwise be lacking' (p. 125). This may have been rather more important than the 'domestically-appropriate' motivation.

Although again the focus is African women, coloured women appear as members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Wellington (p. 126) and the Afrikaans version of stokvel, known as *gooi-gooi* (p. 127). No distinction, however, is drawn between coloured and African women's specific motivations and contexts - we know that they were not subject to influx control, but what did the CLPP mean for coloured women of different classes? In this study as a whole we have a far clearer sense of African and white women, than of coloured women. Their experiences were, by definition as members of this apartheid category, different from African women in the Western Cape, but differences are elided:

> Both coloured and African women founded and ran their own movements to help them survive the many pressures they encountered in the urban environment. ... Class and gender, as well as race ... shaped the formation of local movements. These associations, including those that promoted ostensibly domestic concerns, can be seen as forming an aspect of a defensive tradition in coloured and African urban areas, one characterized by notions of self-sufficiency. While the protection and the presentation of the family frequently provided the underlying

> theme of these organizations, they *nevertheless* empowered women in many ways. Although not articulating a 'feminist consciousness in the modern Western sense', many women 'fought for the right to be housewives and mothers as sanctioned in Western gender ideology with the same intensity as feminists would later struggle for women's equality (p.128).[27]

The use of the qualifier 'nevertheless' reflects a denial that familial concerns are political or empowering (surely a historical question?). The 'western feminism' analogy seems inappropriate: surely we are concerned with the political nature of women's lives, not with the arid outdated question of whether they 'qualify' as 'feminist' or not. While this chapter comes close to rethinking the political, in the book generally, perhaps due to publishing constraints, there is too little in-depth analysis of the tantalizing, and crucial, complicating intersections of class, gender, age (or generation) and race that shaped the construction of the movements to which the author refers.

The second half of *Representations and Reality* contains portraits of activists, divided into pairs, paired by race. Specific women are selected to represent women within their 'race/class' category as defined under apartheid; throughout, apartheid concepts continue to shape academic discourse. Chapters 6-8 present biographical portraits of women active in the period under review, but these narratives cover the entire lives of those women, through much of the twentieth century, and make important points about activism from the 1920s through the 1980s (in some cases through the end of apartheid). These chapters come closest to fulfilling the promise of the introduction, and of the title, although much more could have been said in terms of 'representation and reality' in the personal narratives - and narratives of persons - of these three chapters. The women showcased here are Ray Alexander and Eulalie Stott (representing 'white'); Dora Tamana and Mildred Ramakaba Lesiea ('African'); and Elizabeth van der Heyden and Elizabeth Abrahams ('coloured'). Their lives were not all confined to Cape Town, so at last we are given a glimpse of the lives of women outside the capital. The short comparative commentaries that follow the biographical portraits raise important analytical points, but the discussion is always too brief and superficial. We wanted to read much more in terms of the analysis of personal narrative, issues around self/representation and perceptions of 'reality'.

Due to space constraints, we cannot discuss the author's representation of each woman featured here, but in terms of the relationships between 'representation' and 'reality', a brief comment on the author's analytical narrative of Ray Alexander may be appropriate, as she represented her self and politics in many different contexts over her life. Some of her stories became iconic (and predictable), as perhaps did those topics she refused to discuss, but in some cases she changed her story. The different faces Alexander presented to the world provide a gift for anyone concerned with the issues reflected in the book's title.

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27 Scanlon quotes A. Cobley, *The Rules of the Game: Struggles in Black Recreation and Social Welfare Policy in South Africa* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1997), 90. The emphasis is added.

Of the six portraits, Ray Alexander's story is perhaps the most familiar. Scanlon mentions the (posthumous) publication of her autobiography, but does not cite it in this chapter; however, she does cite four separate series of interview transcripts. Alexander told her life story and stated her opinions on very many different occasions. On each occasion, she consciously represented her own life and views to her audience, and was quoted selectively. She has been cited in numerous secondary texts, and finally had the opportunity to tell her own story in the final decade of her life. Given the title of this book, this would have been an excellent opportunity to reflect on Alexander's self-representation as it changed over time and over the different interview contexts. To analyse the methodology favoured by Scanlon herself. Alexander was always intently aware of her audience; she shaped her stories to make specific points. The contexts in which she made particular utterances might usefully be discussed, as well as discourses with which Alexander engages.

One example must suffice. In relation to the post-apartheid era, Scanlon writes, not surprisingly, that Stott was unable to adjust to the new circumstances, while Alexander turned down the opportunity to stand for the new democratically elected parliament in order to allow younger people to take their place (p. 161). This is indeed her 'official' reason, but in compiling her autobiography, near the end of her life, Alexander writes:

> We participated fully in the meetings of the ANC in preparation for the elections. Both Jack [Simons] and I were nominated, but it was going to be left to the individuals to decide whether they would accept their nomination. ... Jack refused right away, but ... I accepted. ... Jack said to me "The day you go away to Parliament is the day I die." ... I therefore decided not to stand - I didn't want to be the cause of Jack's death.[28]

Alexander's numerous narratives, then, would have provided a wonderful opportunity for Scanlon to reflect on the intersections between 'representation and reality'.[29]

In her conclusion, Scanlon reflects in meaningful ways on the processes of memory, narrative, and self-representation, referring to one of the stock-in-trade dualities of 1980s and 90s historiography, inherent vs derived ideology, (p.226) What remains lacking is a deep analysis of the role of Scanlon herself in shaping these narratives, as well as those of the many other interviewers; as well as the differences between self-representation in interviews and in published memoirs (such

28 Ray Alexander Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004), 350.

29 As Scanlon notes, somewhat disingenuously, 'Women from different political movements seem to have constructed different narratives of the past. Those like Elizabeth Abrahams maintain a continuing certitude in their cause, their methods and the sacrifices made... By way of contrast... van der Heyden's narrative reflects the sense she has of her secondary status in relation to the more recognized stories of the Congress movement... This divergence in recollections is in large part due to the interaction of historical context and narrative form' (p.201). So much is self-evident; for us, a more interesting question is whether the men in the Unity Movement whose contributions, like those of van der Heyden, have been forgotten, tell similarly bleak stories. What difference did gender make?

as Sindiwe Magona's, cited often in this book without analysis). The title of the book demands this kind of reflection and analysis.

Representation and Reality is in some ways two different projects. In our view, the historiography would have been better served had Scanlon written two books; one on African women in the Western Cape under apartheid and another focusing specifically on personal narratives, representations (self- and Scanlon's) of 'conscientised' women in the Western Cape. Half of the book is outside the author's self-imposed temporal limits, as the portraits cover the entire life chronology of each woman. They remain within the scope of the book because they all gained (or retained) public prominence in the 1950s or 60s. For women classified 'coloured' in particular, who are poorly served in the first half of the book, such a project would perhaps have given them more space and time for elaboration. However, Scanlon has made an important contribution to the historiography of the Western Cape, and to recovering the importance of women in anti-apartheid politics in this region. Similarly, she has underlined clearly the critical importance of looking at lives holistically; of course men's private lives were as implicated in their public choices as were women, and gender analysis that explores private lives is equally crucial for men. This work remains to be done, but we agree with Christopher Saunders that *Representation and Reality: Portraits of Women's Lives in the Western Cape 1948-1976* 'should be read by anyone interested in our recent past' (back cover).

Given Helen Scanlon's focus on women's responses to the Pass Laws, it is surprising that she is absent from Nomboniso Gasa's edited collection, *Women in South African History: ' Basus"iimbokodo, Bawel"imilamhol They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers.* This volume is pathbreaking in being the first collection of historical essays on South African women to be edited by a black South African woman. It brings with it the promise of showcasing the latest writings by post-apartheid feminists, rethinking women's 'place and location' in South African history from the writers' locations in the making of that history ('we are a part of that' (p.vii)). The blurb on the back cover informs the reader that:

> fifteen authors revisit the task of writing South Africa's history from an overtly feminist perspective, giving readers an opportunity to understand and reflect on debates about women's power and location in new and fresh ways ... the authors interrogate issues, take them apart and turn things upside down.

We expected, from this, to read innovative and previously unpublished work by black feminist writers. The project, 'commissioned and funded by the South African National Department of Arts and Culture'[30], was intended as a follow-up to *Women Marching into the 21st century,* published by the HSRC in 2000 (p.vii).

30 Copyright page

Conceptualised as a project focused solely on the 1956 women's march against the imposition of passes on women, it was intended to be published in time for the 50th anniversary of that march. The project, however, was broadened to include the entire period or South African history, and despite much effort was unable to see publication for Women's Day, 2006 (pp.x-xi).

As a volume that originated outside academia, it was intended to include a range of approaches to 'women in South African history':

> In looking at women in different periods, and covering a range of themes, the contributors have attempted to show the interconnectedness of social, economic, cultural and historical aspects and how these mediate the history of women's place and location in South Africa (p.vii).

The volume was designed to be diverse methodologically (p.vii), 'trans-disciplinary as opposed to multidisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary' (p.xxxvi). This may refer to the inclusion of the work and perspectives of both scholars and those outside the academy. Its imperative is political in the sense of being envisaged as a celebratory governmental initiative and it is edited from the perspective of a 'political activist', a woman who has, metaphorically, 'broken boulders and crossed rivers' in her own life (p.454). Although this is not explicit, the book may hope to bring together women, or researchers on women, not only to present feminist scholarship, but also to address silences and other barriers between feminists inside and outside the academy - or at least to continue the conversations and discussions alluded to by Lewis above. As Gasa notes:

A trans-disciplinary collection brings together different traditions and modes of writing. There are chapters that encourage greater self-reflexivity [these readers consider this to be critical to feminist analysis, no matter what the subject matter], and probe the location of the contributor in relation to the subject matter. In this collection, the intention has been to write of women's place in South African history and we are part of that. The purpose is to focus the gaze not only on the 'other', but also to reflect on the position of the writer *where necessary or deemed important by the individual contributor* (p.vii, emphasis added).

Given the assurance of fresh and challenging voices, we were somewhat surprised to find that the writers *(mostly* women, and *mostly* South African) are also *mostly* (to adhere to apartheid's racial categories) white - and mostly academic veterans, rather than new voices. The 'first wave' of historians and sociologists (not all feminists) within the academy writing of women and/or gender in South African history in the 1980s and early 1990s is represented here by Helen Bradford, Elizabeth van Heyningen, Luli Callinicos, Iris Berger, Jacklyn Cock, Pat Gibbs, and Sheila Meintjes. Those whose doctoral theses date from the late 1990s into the current millennium include Yvette Abrahams, Pumla Gqola, Jennifer Weir and, most recently, Raymond Suttner (the lone male). Nthabiseng Motsemme 'is currently completing her PhD' (p.455). Nomboniso Gasa is similarly 'pursuing postgraduate research'. Janet Cherry, a university graduate, is now 'an independent researcher and feminist activist', while Caroline Kihato graduated from the

University of Nairobi and is currently a policy analyst at the Development Bank of South Africa (p.455).

Authors were given enormous freedom in every aspect of their contributions, and while this is clearly a strength in some ways, it also lent a certain haphazard and rushed aspect to the volume. Some chapters are polished, others less so. Even within disciplines (notably history) the volume lacks coherence stylistically. More importantly, there seems to have been no agreement to avoid sweeping generalizations or commitment to what we consider a fundamental protocol of history and other disciplines: to provide the reader with evidence to assess a writer's arguments. Some authors support their statements with evidence, while others do not. This was particularly problematic in historiographical critiques which did not explain and support their positions. We were struck specifically by criticism of 'academic feminists' and of a 'dominant feminist ethos' - with at times no indication of *which* feminists, and why, or *which* ethos. There is an apparent scapegoating of two specific historians, Julia Wells and Cheryl Walker, whose work in the 1980s - influenced by contemporary concerns - laid much of the groundwork of the histories of women's militancy in South Africa, and, ironically of this very volume.

Although an undefined 'dominant feminist ethos' was rejected, '[c]ontributors agreed to use a feminist analysis instead of the apparently more acceptable gender analysis as a common point of departure in their work.' (p.vii) Perhaps claiming to use a feminist analysis was a political statement aimed at rehabilitating or reclaiming the term 'feminism' from those who might view it as 'an embarrassing western philosophy', but this was not made clear.[31] Perhaps space constraints meant that there was limited room to address these questions. The book would have been enriched by clarification of the distinction between feminist and gender analysis; to whom was 'gender analysis' more acceptable than 'feminist analysis' and what did this mean? These terms are nowhere defined and this statement begs a number of questions, not least the meanings of the feminist analysis, particularly in the light of local debates around feminism and African women's history.[32] These reviewers are left wondering: which feminist approaches? Why was this decided? Crucially, we asked, what is common and different in each individual contributors' 'feminist' approach? In what ways can each be defined as feminist? Some discussion of these questions would have added value to the book, especially as the preface implies that gender analysis *was* key: 'The intention was to examine the ways in which gender intersects with race, culture, class and other forms of identity and location in South African history' (p.vii).

However,

> Conscious of the complex debates and the limitations of the gender equality discourse for our purposes, we opted for a feminist and woman-centered approach. This ... is borne out of an understanding

31 A. Aidoo in M. Modupe Kolawole, 'Transcending incongruities: Rethinking feminisms and the dynamics of identity in Africa,' *Agenda* Vol. 54 2002, 93.

32 See for example Lewis, 'Feminism and the radical imagination', 18-31.

> of the limitations of the gender constructionist theories, especially in the African context where difference is mediated by a number of other power relations and multiple identities (p.viii).

All identities are socially and historically constructed, and one of the key tenets of gender analysis is the intersectionality of 'power relations and multiple identities'. As Lewis has noted, 'it is no longer possible to get away with exploring gender relations without simultaneously examining the numerous other identities to which they are linked as well as the associated complexities around how to transform them'.[33] What we understood, then, was that the book would 'gaze' (p.viii) at women rather than men (the project is 'woman-centered'), and that neither gender identities nor gender dynamics would be explored.

The subtitle of this volume, *Basus"iimbokodo, Bawel"imilambol They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers* suggests an emphasis on strong, militant women - a collection of praises to women. For the editor, 'emancipation' (rather than 'liberation') is a central concern of women, and of this book:

> Emancipation is a deliberate choice, it is a thread that connects the chapters, generations and subjects. It is the primary objective that drove so many women to adopt the positions that they did .... They all wanted emancipation (p.xv).

Of course 'emancipation' is contextual, and its meaning changes over time. A discussion of these changing meanings and contexts would have clarified the connections between chapters as well as enriched the volume.[34] Another envisaged 'connecting thread' is that between the past and the present, and many authors do try to make these connections overt. Pumla Gqola's chapter 'Like three tongues in one mouth' - tracing the elusive lives of slave women in (slavocratic) South Africa - importantly discusses the enormous significance of slave memories in current constructions of identity among slave descendants in South Africa today. On the other hand, Iris Berger points to discontinuities, as feminists in the 1980s had no recollection of their 'foremothers' militant feminist demands in earlier eras (p. 185). In linking past and present, the editor takes care to remind us that the writers themselves are part of the historical process. This is for us the most exciting aspect of this project, but perhaps the broad scope allowed authors meant that this relationship was not fully or consistently explored. We would have liked to see more made of the editor's recognition that the process of writing the histories of women is itself part of women's struggles played out over centuries. Writing of her own process, the editor evokes if not the pains of birth, then those of danger, of risk, of heart and soul wrenching, of venturing into places where none have gone before; of removing boulders and crossing white waters:

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33 Lewis, 'Feminism and the radical imagination', 20.

34 The most obvious example of the disconnection is Elizabeth van Heyningen's chapter on women in the South African war concentration camps (Chapter 4: 'Women and gender in the South African War, 1899-1902').

> A woman writer ... needs a thick skin, for she does not know when and how it may crack, and if it does she had better have some sisters around to wipe the blood ... What is not in these pages is the silence, powerful when chosen but utterly defeating when imposed. It is a silencing silence, the kind that hits you between your eyes and kicks you in the hollow of your stomach ... This silence is fearsome. It is a pointed and powerful speech of disapproval (p.ix).

Yet this silence is 'not in these pages', so the writers, perhaps, are free to speak; but the struggles that consumed Gasa in editing this volume suggests otherwise.

> [Yvonne] Vera ... wrote "I know the risk a woman takes in the sheer effort of writing, placing herself beyond accepted margins, abandoning the securities of less daunting, much more approved paths." And it is this risk that we have taken in this volume, some contributors more than others (p.ix).

Further,

> *Almost all* the contributors are South African and *some* are feminists ... ours is a fragile sisterhood, one that must be nursed at all costs ... We are the history we write, the contradictions we eloquently speak of. At times this journey was so slippery I could feel myself sliding ... I thank the women who built a strong sisterly circle around me. These are the women who listened to my sometimes incoherent ramblings, and held my rage so that it did not fall on the ground and shatter. I have been humbled by their principled stance ... that they, the women who had so much to lose, were prepared to sacrifice an opportunity of being part of this collection in defence of their principles. These women took the risk ... not only of writing for this collection, but also in interrogating the silences and breaking them when it mattered most, despite the risks to their own careers. They abandoned the "securities of less daunting and more approved paths" and broke the silence. And then we were free to speak when it mattered (pp.ix-x, our emphasis).

From our positions as feminist historians outside of the process of creating this book, it seems that, on the whole, the intensity evoked here is not reflected in most of the chapters themselves. If the women spoken of above risked their careers in writing for this collection, we could see no evidence of it in most chapters. Contrary to our expectation of new writers and innovative research, most of the contributors are not black and most are veterans representing the 'first wave' of South African feminist history, having published key texts in the 1980s. Most of these white women contributors have rock-solid academic reputations and careers established over decades. The vast majority of writers, whether employed under apartheid or after, will not risk their jobs over this volume. In our view only

one chapter is potentially risky for the writer herself: Yvette Abraham's reflective 'research diary' underlines her struggles with the very notion of a brown woman being part of the 'white establishment' from the margins of academia, where she was located as a part-time teacher and doctoral student. Her chapter presents an open challenge to institutions to acknowledge their racist practices (which were inscribed in courses Abrahams had to teach as a part-time tutor).

The volume offers a South African history conceived of as beginning with the colonial era, although the first section is titled 'Women in the pre-colonial and pre-Union periods'. Women subjects range from 'chiefly women' in the Zulu polity in the nineteenth century, through slave women, Nongqawuse, women in the South African war, militant women in the anti-pass movements of the twentieth century and in the nationalist movements (including 'the underground'), women who did not choose militancy, 'negotiating the rural and urban' in the mid-twentieth century, women in labour movements in different eras, women protesting against the particularities of apartheid, including the loss of their houses, other women in peace movements, women in urban townships from the 1970s and - into the current era - women migrants in Johannesburg, women negotiating HIV/AIDS, and one writer who reflects deeply on herself as both historian and subject in (and as) relation to Sarah Bartmann. Many of the women subjects who appear here will be familiar to readers of this journal (particularly to the end of apartheid), although in the best cases, their specific incarnation may not be.

Given the very wide range of feminist South Africanist historians who have researched women in South African history, we wondered what criteria of inclusion and exclusion were applied. For example, as noted above, it is difficult to understand the exclusion of Helen Scanlon's work, whose research focuses on both a core topic - women's anti-pass resistance and protest - and on multiple women whose lives reflect this book's subtitle.[35] In terms of specifically South African scholarship, the title suggests representivity of the state of both the historiography and the history of women in South Africa and yet many of the chapters engage in various ways with a literature that is decades old, and themselves reflect the historiography of the 1980s and early 1990s. But at the same time many of the 1980s feminist academics are excluded. In a book that was conceptualised partly in relation to the work of Julia Wells and Cheryl Walker, we were disappointed that they were not invited to rethink their earlier interpretations.[36] That would have been an extremely powerful demonstration of Gasa's important point about the ways in which writers are themselves part of the historical process. Other key veterans, established feminist historians who are totally or almost absent (in texts as well as in authorship) include Belinda Bozzoli, Debbie Gaitskell and Anne Mager.

According to the editor:

> The power of the chapters assembled here lies in the fearless and fierce manner in which *some* authors go into the subjects, *sometimes* ques-

35 It is clear that Scanlon's work was familiar to one writer at least (p. 153, note 1).

36 Fester, 'Merely mothers' also engages critically with Wells.

tioning the conventional tools. *Some* defy the limits posed by these tools and academic canons. In this way, the very historical event and subject is interrogated and put through various forms of examination and engagement' (p.xvi, our emphasis).

For the editor, the key issue seems to be not the subject matter per se, but the radical approaches of 'some' of the authors. As historians, we were not sure what to make of claims like 'we chose not to be polite; We chose contributors who interrogate issues, take them apart, turn things upside down *where necessary,* and subject them to critical evaluation' (p.xiv, our emphasis). But only 'some' of the authors do that. Surely critical evaluation is essential for all? The power of the volume must ultimately be assessed in terms of the arguments and evidence presented.

We believe that the volume would have been enriched by an introduction similar to Scanlon's. While Gasa's introduction does contains brief summaries of each chapter, there is no analysis of the historiographical, methodological and theoretical concerns that have shaped the chapters. Such an approach would have been invaluable to readers less familiar with the local debates around feminism and feminist theory, methodology and historiography. Such an introduction could have served to contextualize each chapter in the broader literature, permitted an opportunity to demonstrate innovation and risk, and allowed for a critical discussion of the different methodologies employed in the book.

Retaining a traditional chronology, themes were selected 'in part from an attempt to provide an overview of women in South African history', and 'to provide a *coherent chronological* presentation to make it easier for the reader to use this volume' (p.xiv, emphasis in original). The book, then, is arranged broadly chronologically, 'taking readers on a journey through the major themes of South African history, from pre-colonial and pre-Union periods, through the struggles of the apartheid era to the present time' (back cover). As with Scanlon's book, there is no attempt at a paradigmatic shift, at rethinking the periodisation of South African history, a critical task for feminist historians. Like Scanlon's work, the long shadow of colonization and apartheid provides the agenda and the terms of analysis. Apartheid categories of race are nowhere interrogated.

Gasa states, 'a serious attempt was made to comprehensively cover major aspects of South African history' (p.xix), as defined by androcentric historiography. Nevertheless, the book is divided into four parts: 'Women in pre-colonial and pre-Union periods'; 'Women in early to mid-twentieth century South Africa'; 'War: armed and mass struggles as gendered experiences' (a title that seems to recognise gender analysis and that covers the apartheid period from the 1960s); and 'The 1990s and beyond: new identities, new victories, new struggles'. We would have welcomed a rethinking of this chronology and appreciated any challenge to what androcentric historians have defined as the significant moments and processes of South African history. As Gasa recognizes, there are obviously 'historical and thematic gaps' in this collection (p.xix). ANC-dominated history is pervasive. There is nothing on the Black Consciousness Movement or the Pan Africanist Movement (for Raymond Suttner, 'underground' refers only to MK, not to APLA). However,

from our perspective this is a different order of things from excluding feminist histories of sexuality, or challenging heteronormativity rather than tending to reinforce it, as many of the chapters do. Weir's analysis of 'chiefly women' in the Zulu polity is one example and Suttner's discussion of women in armed struggle another.[37] A risky, innovative project would challenge both the gender category of 'woman' itself, and the usefulness of retaining apartheid categories and imperatives in addition to the given chronology of significant events. It would rethink struggle and historical significance, 'the underground' or 'the political', to foreground the domestic. It would have been more 'risky' and innovative to rethink entirely the periodisation of southern African history from women's perspectives - if only to see whether this can be done for 'women' at all.

We agree with Gasa that there is an urgent need to 'revisit our paradigms' (p.xix), but few authors do this and the accepted chronology reflects this lost opportunity to take seriously the need to envision our history from women's perspectives. These might not automatically follow the established chronological imperative. Given the writers included in this volume, we would have liked to see the structure itself reflect on the state of women's history and the literature around it. One section might have focused on veteran feminist historians and their brief might have been to revisit and 'turn upside down' their own earlier writing and thinking and the paradigms in which they were located. Bradford does this in an exemplary manner. Another section might have presented innovative, self-reflexive writing from authors whose contributions date to the post-apartheid era and whose personal histories 'are part of that'. Gasa might have written of the history of, say, the detention of South African women from her perspective as one who was detained (her writing is strongest when she writes of women in prison (pp. 139 ff)). Suttner could usefully have reflected on women's narratives of their experiences in the ANC in exile from *his* point of view as a former white male leader. Never mind a focus on the feminist impulses of Chris Hani, together with photograph of Hani-with-baby (p.252): how did Suttner himself engage with issues around militarized women? How do his experiences then relate to his inclusion in this volume now? This kind of self-reflexive contextualization of personal histories would have been truly innovative. The connections between past and present in the analysis of memory would be appropriate here too and the innovations in feminist historiography should be showcased. Pumla Gqola's chapter is an excellent model of what can be achieved by taking women seriously.

This collection, drawn together in haste, chasing a deadline of Women's Day 2006 (several authors comment on time constraints), is uneven. Deliberately eclectic, these essays nevertheless do not, on the whole, fulfill the promise of a book that reviewer Sokari Erkine claims is 'a radical departure from the traditional history texts in that it uses a feminist analysis', stating also that it 'goes far beyond the many well known events and periods by feminizing those events and periods

37 J. Weir, 'Chiefly women and women's leadership in pre-colonial southern Africa' (Chapter I); R. Suttner 'Women in the ANC-led underground' (Chapter 9).

where women's participation has never been acknowledged.'[38] It is not clear what Erkine means by 'feminizing', but this characterization is inaccurate. Women's participation in South African history *has* been acknowledged, from slave women to prophets, from Sarah Bartmann to Nongqawuse, from women in the anti-pass movement to women in the South African war or in the trade union movement, not to mention MK. However, the strength of *some* of these chapters is not that they break silences and reveal women where none were seen before, but they re-visit previous work (in the best cases, their own) and rethink older methodologies. Certainly there is innovation here, and for some a radical departure from some of the conventional tools of historical analysis, but to suggest that this book is the first to break the silences on women in South African history is simply not true. It ignores a wealth of historical writing on women - and feminist historiography - since the 1980s, only a small portion of which is reflected here. What this book does attempt that is indeed a radical departure, is, as Erkine recognizes, not only to demonstrate (or at least point to) continuities - as well as discontinuities - between past and present, but also to remind readers that the writers too (or at least all but one of them), are 'women in South African history'. This recognition is crucial, because it provides the fulcrum about which the project pivots. It helps to explain the editor's outrage at certain 1980s and early 1990s feminist historians whose questions are felt to be inappropriate, indeed offensive to the editor herself, as a subject of the history of national liberation. For the editor, a key issue is what she sees as a redundant debate about the relationship between nationalist and women's emancipatory (not to say feminist) struggles, a debate which was not relevant to her own memory of struggle. Whereas feminists of the 1980s were concerned to explore the question of whether women's liberation was subsumed within, or sidelined by the struggle for national liberation, Gasa's own experience seems to be that these debates are purely academic and were not meaningful to the African women who struggled against apartheid (Her 'so what' question (p.215)). The personal politics of Gasa's own historical struggles may help to explain why she targets Cheryl Walker and Julia Wells, who have researched and written of women's militancy, but does not take issue with the positions put forward by some of the other authors in this volume, which may appear to sideline black women and ignore their agency: that black women in the South African war had no voice (van Heyningen); that white women spearheaded the struggle for women's rights within the trade union movement (Berger). Gasa's key concern is to make the point that 'African women, contrary to dominant claims in feminist historiography, were neither silent nor cowered [sic] by either the state or their male counterparts in the nationalist movement' (p. 150).

A critical debate hovers around the edges of this collection: if we truly are part of the history we write, what does that mean for the history we (re)write? In a number of the chapters, including Suttner on the ANC underground (specifically MK in fact), Gasa on women in the nationalist struggle, Kihato on migrant women and Motsemme on women in urban KZN townships, we know that each writer has

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3S http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/books/40950. retrieved August 25. 2007.

a personal-political story to tell, but none seem willing to do so. Motsemme hints at her own experience; Kihato tells us that she is a migrant, but neither actually reveal their own stories and historicise them. The only writer to do this is Yvette Abrahams, who writes in a fearless manner of her personal experiences within a white and male dominated academy - and skillfully demonstrates how her own story cannot be extricated from that of her ancestor, Sarah Bartmann. Her chapter most fully fulfils what we suspect might have been the vision behind this volume, a vision that was clouded, perhaps, by the complete freedom awarded authors or by time or other constraints. In the end what we as readers have to do is to pick our way across the rivers, searching for stepping stones among the reeds, seeking direction among the 'straw women' of old dusty 1980s debates to find a way forward. And as Gasa reiterates, this work does not claim to be the final word. It is a signpost and a moment, in the history of South African women; it should generate conversation. One imperative emerges from this volume very clearly: further discussion and debate is desperately needed on the precise, historicized and contemporary meanings of feminisms in the South African context and on the particularities and commonalities of (South) African feminists and feminisms in continental perspective. In different ways, both this volume and Scanlon's represent important contributions and challenges to our understandings not only of women's lives in South African history, but also to the ways in which feminist historians are and should acknowledge that we are, 'a part of that'.