

**And Wrote My Story Anyway: Black South African Women's Novels as Feminism.**

Barbara Boswell.

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The driving question behind Barbara Boswell's remarkable book is: what can we learn from Black women's writing about the work of theorisation and praxis towards a just social order? Boswell reads Black South African women's writing as artistic and political projects that pose provocative questions about freedom and the imagining of alternative worlds, by theorising the nation and Black women's place in it. This matters all the more when we remember that in addition to exploiting their re/productive labour, South Africa's colonial-apartheid machinery also excluded women from cultural production. By examining the work of ten Black women writers—Miriam Tlali, Lauretta Ngcobo, Sindiwe Magona, Zoë Wicomb, Agnes Sam, Farida Karodia, Zukiswa Wanner, Yvette Christiansë, Rayda Jacobs and Kagiso Lesego Molepe—Boswell spotlights these writers' "interrogati[on of] the taken-for-granted constitution of the nation-space" at particular historical junctures (3).

Theoretically, Carole Boyce-Davies's (36) notion of Black women's migratory subjectivity—in reference to their constant physical and psychological boundary crossing—is foundational to Boswell's mapping of these women writers' imaginative breaching of perimeters upheld by the collusion between racial capitalism and patriarchy, to limit women's physical and intellectual possibilities. Here then, Boswell reads fiction as a site of theory-making by subjects ordinarily locked out of mainstream platforms of knowledge production.

The book borrows its wonderfully defiant title from award-winning poet, storyteller and playwright Gcina Mhlophe's short story "The Toilet," which explores Black female creativity and the subversion of apartheid attempts to limit women's access to the physical and psychic space necessary for imaginative world-making. Mhlophe's mapping out of "a psychic space for creative imagining and dreaming" (50) through her work; coupled with Bessie Head's courageous writing that "blazed a trail into the future" (xviii), renders their work foundational for subsequent generations of writers explored in this book. Boswell argues that, like Head and Mhlophe, these women's acts of refusal at different points in South African history—through their writing, disruption of accepted narrative frames, contestations of regimes of truth, retrieval of suppressed histories, and above all, seizure

of authorial authority—models more capacious frames of freedom; while crafting powerful theoretical toolkits for the pursuit of such freedoms.

*And Wrote My Story Anyway* can be understood as weaving together three strands of concerns: the spectres of unfreedom that stalk South African registers of belonging at different historical junctures; the promise of artistic experimentation in reconfiguring these histories; and the role of narrative in crafting theoretical tools that lend productive insights into social realities, while countering epistemic injustice. These three strands form dazzling patterns across the book, as Boswell offers fine-toothed explorations of different generations of Black women's writing. In chapter one, she pairs Miriam Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1975) with Lauretta Ncgobo's *And they Didn't Die* (1990) as rejections of apartheid's 'separate but equal' logics by emphasising Black women's dispossession; while defying state attempts to block their creative agency through censorship, banning, imprisonment and harassment (61). Here, Katherine McKittrick's and Clyde Woods's work on oppositional Black geographies provides a generative framework for exploring Black responses to geographies of exclusion.

Chapter two turns to Farida Karodia's and Agnes Sam's commentary on South African Indian girlhood in *Daughters of the Twilight* (1986) and "Jesus is Indian" (1989) respectively, building on a growing corpus of scholarship on girlhood as a conventionally neglected segment of gendered life cycles, despite its generative capacity as a vantage point from which to examine the development of female subjectivities in landscapes of multiple discursive perimeters. Karodia's and Sam's work is key to understanding the processes of gendering of Indian women subjects at the intersection of colonial, apartheid and patriarchal power structures. Indentured labour, which replaced slavery, was subsequently replaced by migrant labour, as Agnes Sam notes. This observation underscores the bond that ties together the different categories of Black South African subjectivities produced at the crucible of what Cedric Robinson (3) has termed 'racial capitalism'.

Turning to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a nation-building project, chapter four reads Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998) and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000)—both set between 1990 and the 1994 elections—by asking: "how did the practices of, and the discourses generated by, the TRC as a nation-building project situate women in this new nation?" (115). Boswell demonstrates how the two novels exemplify a resistant Black feminist critique of the emerging nationalism of democratic South

Africa that "threatened to deny women unqualified citizenship rights by refusing to acknowledge the full range of abuses black women experienced under apartheid" (116). The chapter builds on extensive critiques of the TRC processes' privileging of heroic male narratives of abuse and resistance, reducing women to witnesses of men's suffering. Importantly, women's experiences of sexual violence did not feature in the TRC's definitions of human rights abuses; casting a heavy shroud of silence over women's sexual abuse. Boswell demonstrates how Wicomb's *David's Story* carves out space for the acknowledgement of women MK combatants' experiences of rape and sexual violence by male combatants; effectively fleshing out the highly abbreviated, one-sentence acknowledgement of women's abuses in exile in the TRC report. For its part, Magona's novel counters the production of nationalism centred on the heroic male revolutionary by reconfiguring motherhood to demonstrate how these constructions of nationalism in the new South Africa are built on the silenced wounds borne by Black women's bodies and psyches.

Chapter five pivots on Ashraf Rushdy's theorisation of the neo-slave narrative in the US context to examine Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006) and Rayda Jacobs' *The Slave Book* (1998) as imaginative renderings of histories of slavery in the Cape from Black women's subjectivity, symbolically restoring these figures in South African imaginaries. The two novels confront historiographic silences and denials of "the prominence of slavery as an economic and cultural force that has shaped the present" in South Africa (152). Set in the period between the outlawing of the British oceanic slave trade in 1808 and the enactment of full emancipation in the Cape in 1838, both novels retrieve enslaved people's subjectivities while placing the spotlight on the slavocratic economy's dependence on the extraction and exploitation of Black women's reproductive labour (147). These novels demonstrate the normalisation of rape and sexual violence in slavocratic South African society; a form of violence that persists to date in contemporary South African violence against women.

These toxic masculinities form the focus of chapter six, which turns to Zukiswa Wanner's *Men of the South* (2010) and Kagiso Molope's *This Book Betrays my Brother* (2012) as provocative critiques of the incomplete South African revolution, despite the widely celebrated constitution which enshrines gender equality and LGBTIQ rights. Wanner and Molope's novels grapple with what Pumla Dineo Gqola (64) has termed 'spectacular masculinities' in South Africa,

while pointing to alternate masculinities. In the closing chapter, Boswell establishes that Black South African women's writing deploys fictional imagination to theorise Black women's lives while offering a method for Black feminist critique. Across these women writers' work are repeated motifs of the destruction of families at the altar of capitalist extraction, as well as the abjection of Black female bodies subjected to sexual violence by white and Black men alike across a temporal canvas that covers a century. Effectively, freedom emerges as a repeatedly postponed aspiration across South African history, especially for women, whose lives are haunted by the spectre of sexual and femicidal violence at each historical turn, despite provisional triumphs over oppression. But these women, and by extension, Boswell, reject cynical surrender to hopelessness. Instead, Boswell develops the concept of creative revisioning, in reference to these women writers' deployment of creative agency to analyse historically-specific gendered experiences while also imagining alternative forms of consciousness and counternarratives that renegotiate the boundaries of the possible. In the end, these writers model an intersectional feminist ethic that is attentive to multiple levers of oppression, while retaining a deep conviction that alternative worlds marked by complete justice and freedom are possible. *And Wrote My Story Anyway* is a remarkable addition to not only feminist literary scholarship, but to literary studies at large; beyond South African letters.

#### Work Cited

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