

Book Review

Bridger, Emily. *Young Women against Apartheid: Gender, Youth and South Africa's Liberation Struggle*. Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, James Currey, 2021. 242 pp.

Emily Bridger's book, *Young Women against Apartheid: Gender, Youth and South Africa's Liberation Struggle* (2021), is a timely history that uses ethnography to chart out the life stories of women activists who joined the anti-apartheid movements in the 1980s in South Africa. It traces the journey of young activists and students who joined organisations such as the United Democratic Front (UDF), Congress of South African Students (COSAS) or South African Youth Congress (SAYCO), or who simply remained as unaffiliated individuals. The book deals with the underexplored involvement of girl comrades, who have been subsumed in the larger masculinist narrative of the National Liberation struggle. In doing so, it brings to the fore the following questions: what life was like for African girls under Apartheid, why some chose to join the liberation struggle, and how did they navigate their political activism as both individuals and as collectives. Alongside it also reveals the underpinnings of making an "unconventional

choice" to join the student movement and take up arms.

Bridger's work lies in the intersection of two kinds of African women's histories, one of motherhood and wives exemplified in recent works by Emily Burrill, Rachel Jean Batiste, and Lorelle Semley, and the other of children explored by Jereme Seekings, Alcinda Honwana, and Filip de Boeck.¹ Women's involvement in the National struggle has predominantly been seen as an extension of their roles as mothers and wives, with their political agency glossed over by their identity of motherhood. Thus, gender history in Africa in its overwhelming focus on motherhood as women's main public political identity has parallelly silenced the histories of younger women, such as students, trade union activists, or soldiers. Similarly, African histories of childhood and youth are slower to develop and exclusively focus on the youth as political actors. Thus, outside the "resistance paradigm" ordinary women, and non-partisan youth re-

1. Emily Burrill, *States of Marriage: Gender, Justice and Rights of Colonial Mali* (Ohio University Press, 2015); Rachel Jean-Baptiste, *Conjugal Rights: Marriage, Sexuality, and Urban Life in Colonial Libreville, Gabon*, New African History Series (Ohio University Press, 2014); Lorelle Semley, "Public Motherhood in West Africa as Theory and Practice," *Gender and History* 24, no. 4 (2012): 600–616; Jereme Seekings, "Beyond Heroes and Villains: The Rediscovery of the Ordinary in the Study of Childhood and Adolescence in South Africa," *Social Dynamics* 32, no. 1 (2006): 1–20; Alcinda Honwana and Filip de Boeck, eds., *Makers & Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005).



main obscured. Bridger claims that, *Women against Apartheid* shifts its focus towards histories of girlhood, an underexplored area, and argues that there remains “persistent gaps in this history (13). While occupying this liminal space, the book addresses the delicate question of “triple marginalisation”, on account of race, gender, and age and tries to counter such marginalisation and provocatively asks, “where were the girls?” Furthermore, the book is equally concerned with how these girls (now middle-aged women) reflect on and recall their time as activists, eventually how they reconstruct their pasts and finally insert themselves into a historical narrative from which they have been systematically excluded. It becomes clearer that the motivation of writing this account lies in the author’s own feminist conviction of rendering voice to the black girls who have been silenced in practices of record keeping, leaving persistent paucities in our historical understandings of race, youth, and gender (21). In doing so, she explores the theme of intersectionality that remains essential to any feminist history project.

In constructing this diligent narrative, Bridger performs her role as a gender historian by creating an alternative rich archive of women’s voices based on testimonies. She alerts us at the onset that the use of oral sources is not merely to establish a “literal recollection of the past”, but rather that they are valuable for the “subjective meaning of history”

they provide (19). Bridger’s methodology is inspired by Alessandro Portelli’s approach of oral history, that deviates from the motivation of uncovering “facts” and further conflates our understandings of “historical truth”, it rather observes what is remembered, misrememberings, secrets and so on.² To grasp the gender dynamics within the National Liberation movement, the book utilizes interviews with both male comrades and women. This approach allows for an exploration of the interactions between these two groups while also facilitating a simultaneous examination and comparison of their respective experiences. The narrative of the book follows an approach of storytelling that relies on in-depth conversations with the interviewees, mining out histories that lie within. The interviewees were mostly residents of the Soweto township during the 1980s–1990s.³ She formally interviewed forty-nine people: twenty-eight female comrades, twenty male comrades, and one woman who grew up in various pockets of Soweto during the 1980s but did not join the struggle.

The stories of these young activists travel through several masculine spaces of the South African township, such as the street, the meeting, the school, within the family, and the prison. Each chapter in the book explores these individual sites and demonstrates how different township spaces in Soweto offered girls varied opportunities to challenge both the Apartheid state and underlying patriar-

2. Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991).

3. Soweto also known as Southwestern Townships is an erstwhile black township in Johannesburg which became the seat of the liberation movement against the Apartheid. Bridger intentionally limits the study to this township to analyse and survey the various township spaces, where the girl comrades negotiated their identity.

chal structures. Simultaneously, it highlights the restrictions girls' activism faced in these spaces, and how female comrades creatively constructed several gender identities in different locations to try and overcome these challenges. The final chapter of the book oscillates back to the site of "the interview", shifting the focus from the past to the present moment, and helps the reader understand how these women reflect upon their years of activism and political engagement. Moving on to the chapters, they demonstrate that the agency that female comrades accorded to themselves in their narratives did not always align with how men described the roles they played (or supposedly did not play) during the struggle. The first chapter charts out the history of "African Girlhood" in the Apartheid state and reveals how the young lives of the township residents came to be increasingly shaped by violence and conflict during this period, that in a way catapulted this generation towards political action. It then explores how gender identities intersected with generational ones for township youth, making girls' experiences of adolescence. The second chapter titled "The School: Becoming of the Female Comrade" shows that the location of the school becomes a space of initiation, where young female students joined student organisations and participated in township uprisings. The school became the backyard, which was garnering future comrades for the liberation struggle in a

sense. The third chapter titled "The Home: Negotiating Family, Girlhood, and Politics" narrates how the girls' initiation into politics changed interpersonal dynamics at home, especially with their parents, families, friends, and neighbours. The chapter enquires how girls and young women's overlapping identities as activists, daughters, and labourers within the home and how these varied experiences perhaps intersected and clashed. The fourth chapter titled "The Meeting: Contesting Gender and Creating a Movement" reveals the inconsistencies between theory and practice, and highlights the patriarchal nature of township societies and the gendered workings of political organisations. One of the remarkable observations of this chapter is that "female comrades' tendency to remain quiet in meetings is also a reflection of the gendered constraints that limited their political participation and made it difficult for them to engage in the more intellectual spheres of the struggle" (110). The chapter also highlights that meetings were also not exactly "safe spaces" for girls, devoid of sexual oppression.⁴

The next chapter titled "The Street: Gendering Collective Action and Political Violence" narrates how "street-based activism has been integral to self-constructions of the female comrade" (124). This chapter argues that the streets were inherently a masculine and violent space in the 1980s, and through the processes such as demonstration, protest and po-

4. Bridger accounts previous notable works on youth activism during these years presents political meetings in the exact opposite way, as sites of violence and sexual coercion for girls. In rural areas such as the Lowveld, comrades promoted a pro-natal campaign to "build soldiers" and replace fallen comrades by impregnating local girls. Girls were often dragged out of their homes and forced to attend comrade meetings or all-night vigils, during which they were often coerced into having unprotected sex.

litical violence, female comrades were “reclaiming the space” that they have been generally excluded or victimised in.⁵ By engaging in political violence and confrontation, they challenged the dominant gendered ideologies and claimed new meanings of freedom and empowerment. Finally, “The Prison Cell: Gender, Trauma, and Resistance” examines the site of the prison, where along with detention women comrades experienced gendered forms of torture and sexual violence. It further discusses the comrades’ experiences of arrest, abuse, and torture. Both male and female comrades were pursued by the security forces, and if found were detained for periods ranging from two weeks to over six months. Within Apartheid’s carceral spaces, Bridger notes that the experiences were consistent with gendered violence encompassing acts of sexual harassment, torture, and rape. Nevertheless, oral testimonies of detention recount more than just brutality and ill treatment, as many women also focus on their strategies of resistance in detention, feelings of camaraderie, or how their political identity was strengthened by knowing the threat they posed to the apartheid state. The book also creatively plots a meaningful and redemptive narrative that transforms the prison space from a site of trauma to a space of resistance.

The underlying thread that connects these several points of encounter or township spaces is the implicit role of violence that shaped the lives of young people living under apartheid regime. The violence that they experienced in their everyday lives became a motivating factor

for many of these activists to join the liberation movement. Bridger’s careful study of these women’s testimonies highlights how girls’ lives were shaped by the constant threat of sexual violence, the inferiority complexes instilled in them from a young age, and the gendered expectations placed on their behaviour by parents, boys, and township communities. As the book repeatedly demonstrates, these inequalities eventually became a central motivating factor behind girls’ decisions to join the struggle. Furthermore, activism and political violence became innovative tools of resistance through which these young girls countered the confines placed upon them and contested gendered township geographies that confined girls to the home and led them to fight against their subordination and maltreatment. While accounting for the intrinsic relationship between the two (oppression faced at home and subsequently engaging political violence), the book sets out to construct a cultural history of violence and memory.

The unique structuring of the book gives the reader a new perspective on viewing history spatially rather than chronologically. By using memories to reconstruct the past, the narrative defies a seamless chronological flow, as memory is often fractured. Furthermore, the book draws up the multiple meanings of violence as an operative category that defines women’s lives, both in oppressing them and providing them with renewed subjective positions as those engaging in political violence. *Young Women against the Apartheid* can be merited for blurring many opposing categories

5. Female comrades engaged in protest and political violence in the streets—whether this meant throwing stones at police vehicles or punishing residents who contravened the consumer boycott.

of public/private, and oppression and resistance, all along invested in redeeming the voice of the female comrade. However, in the process it ultimately manages to reconstruct the female comrade only as a homogenous category, while it obscures the operatives of class position that might have been an integral part of her political participation. Nevertheless, the book is a remarkable addition to the body of

feminist scholarship and speaks to numerous disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, political theory, and gender studies. One also wonders the many methodological possibilities that Bridger's work opens for us, which will enable us to study history through interactions of memory, space, and gender in various interlinked social contexts.

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