

‘She’s’ who make history: Reviewing the historical treatment of black women by four South African scholars.

by

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(A)s Jane Marcus has observed, “She who writes history makes history’ - and (to this may be added), she whose activities are visible as history has a kind of power that she whose contributions are placed at the margins of history does not. Changing ‘history’, ... depends on having that first kind of power; it comes from speaking somewhere other than from the margins, although speaking from the margins has its uses too.¹

Introduction:

Over the past 25 years or so, the emergence of Women’s History as a field of scholarship in South Africa has evolved from a state of virtual non-existence to the point where it has become a definable - and perhaps even integral - part of the discipline of History as a whole.* The expansion of the field can be attributed in the main to those scholars who deliberately embarked upon a career which centered on making women visible agents in the social, economic and political realms of South Africa’s complex society.

In spite of this progress, however, it could be argued that Women’s History as a specific genre of research and study still receives relatively little attention. Even if attempts have been made to review the field of South African historical writing, none have seriously

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1. J. NEWTON, *Starting Over - Feminism and the Politics of Cultural Critique* (University of Michigan Press, USA, 1984),p.30.

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challenged the dominant interpretations of C. Saunders and K. Smith. Their books, published in the late 1980s, claim to deal with 'major trends' in South African historiography, but make virtually no reference to the role of women (black/white) in South African history.² This, in itself, is surely an indication of the poor state of scholarship in the field.

Those scholars who deliberately embarked upon a career centering on the writing of Women's History, have themselves pointed to the scarcity of published material on the position of women in South Africa in general and black women in particular. Jacklyn Cock, for example, in the introduction to her book *Maids and Madams* stated:

A central tenet of this study is that one cannot arrive at any understanding ... without some analysis of the situation of black women in South Africa today. This is especially important in view of the dearth of published material analysing the position of women in South Africa.³

Before there was any serious treatment of women by professional historians, it was chiefly the disciplines of anthropology and sociology which represented the main academic approach to women in South Africa.⁴ We are reminded here in particular of three pioneering female academics who produced some of the earliest works on South African women. First, Hansi Pollak, who explored the situation of female Afrikaner factory workers in her sociological study "Women in the Witwatersrand Industries". Second, Ellen Hellmann, who examined the lives of the black women beer brewers of the urban slumyards in her sociological survey, "Rooiyard". And third, Monica Wilson, who looked at rural Mpondo wives and daughters in her MA thesis entitled: "The effect of contact with Europeans on the status of Pondo women". While the aforementioned works may well be exceptions, Claire Robertson is quick to point out that most studies conducted on women around this time (the early 1930s) were

mostly in the context of biological reproduction ... embedded in descriptions of

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2. See for example: C. SAUNDERS, *The Making of the South African Past: Major Trends on Race and Class* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1988). In this historiographical work, he pays NO attention to Women's History as a specific field/genre, nor does he make mention of any historians who have contributed to it. In K. SMITH, *The Changing Past: Trends in South African Historical Writing* (Southern Book Publishers, Johannesburg, 1988) a total of five references are made to the role of women in history.
 3. J. COCK, *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1980), p.6.
 4. D. GAITSKALL, Introduction: Special Issue on Women's History, in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 10(1), 1983, pp.1-3.

marriage customs, fertility rituals and witchcraft.⁵

After 1950, there were many women outside academia who produced a number of monographs and articles on women in South Africa.⁶ Up until this time, the appearance of women in the historical record seemed to take the form of incorporating women's actions into a metanarrative - usually nationalistic and male-dominated which showed feminine support of masculine 'struggles'.⁷ Although writing in this vein has been the more prolific, one cannot regard it as being an authentic feminine voice from the past, or as doing justice to the particular concerns, difficulties and perceptions of women.

The purpose of this study therefore is to show that in more recent times, there have been scholars who have paid more attention to *other* themes in their studies of women and in so doing have made an important contribution to the state of Women's History in South Africa. It is, however, by no means a comprehensive study. It does not, for example, look at the historiography concerning white women. (I am aware though that studies of white women in South Africa appear to have lagged behind and need renewed attention).⁸ Nor does it consider *all* the professional academics who have - whether to a greater/lesser extent - integrated Women's History into the wider web of their work. Instead, the focus of the paper falls upon the works of four scholars who have made a substantial contribution to addressing the lacuna that exists regarding the position of black women in South African history. Having said this, however, one cannot really afford to overlook the significant contributions made by two other scholars, namely , Shula Marks and Phil Bonner.

As far as Marks is concerned, she is a figure of such standing that she deserves a study on her own. She has not only exerted a major influence in terms of the publications she has

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5. C. ROBERTSON, "Developing Economic Awareness: Changing Perspectives in Studies of African Women, 1976-1988", in *Feminist Studies*, 13(1)1987, pp.97-136.
 6. P. HETHERINGTON, "Women in South Africa: The Historiography in English", in *Journal of African Historical Studies*, 26(2)1993, p.248. There appears to have been a continuing tradition of producing non-academic works right up until the late 1980s, but as this does not form the focus of the paper, mention will only be made here of two such women outside academia who wrote about women, namely Helen Joseph and Ray Alexander.
 7. See for example D. WALSH, "The Growth of Towns", in M. WILSON and L. THOMPSON (Eds.), *The Oxford History of South Africa*, II (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971), pp.172-273.
 8. Progress has, in more recent times, been made in these circles. See for example E. BRINK, *The Afrikaner Women of the Garment Workers' Union, 1918 - 1939* (MA, University of the Witwatersrand, 1986) and C. LANDMAN, *The Piety of Afrikaans Women: Diaries of Guilt* (Unisa Press, Pretoria, 1994), a publication which examines the ego-texts of 7 religious women within the framework of the socio-political and religious subculture of Dutch-Afrikaans women.

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produced, but also in terms of the number of students who have passed through her hands. Her move into the field of Women's History was marked by the publication of *Not Either An Experimental Doll* in the 1980s.⁹ In the introduction to the book, she made her own comment on the link between an earlier work on Natal¹⁰ and this volume. Both seem to have marked a paradigm shift in her work on the whole from structure to agent. The latter is particularly significant not only because it is a book in which men rather than women 'recede into the middle distance', but also because it offers another way into an understanding of the complex South African order. Her works have subsequently focused in the main on the interplay of culture, ideology, politics and gender; and more recently on the rise of professionalism amongst black women - especially nurses.¹¹

Bonner clearly integrates 'women's studies' into the broad spectrum of his work, which deals principally with the theme of urbanisation as experienced by black South Africans.¹² Through such studies, his contribution has indeed been meaningful in terms of making black women more visible in the historical record, but an analysis of his works has not been included in this paper because the focus here is on the work of women scholars.

Something should also be said about the development of the writing of Women's History in South Africa. The emergence of Women's History as a field of scholarship seems to have involved an evolution from feminism to women to gender. Feminist History is primarily committed to the task of making women visible in the historical record. Gender History on the other hand is a much wider field, in that it includes the concern to write women and their perspectives, experiences and concerns into history but also considers the relations existing among and between the sexes and the social creation of identities and relationships. Women's History by implication includes the former and flows into the latter.

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9. S. MARKS (Ed.), *Not Either An Experimental Doll: The Separate Worlds of Three South African Women* (Killie Campbell African Library, Durban and University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1987).
 10. S. MARKS, *Ambiguities of Dependence: State, Class and Nationalism in Early Twentieth Century Natal* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1986).
 11. See Marks' deeply original, pioneering research on the history of nursing in South Africa, *Divided Sisterhood: Race, Class and Gender in the South African Nursing Profession*, (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1994).
 12. See for example his essay: "'Desirable and Undesirable Basotho Women?' Liquor, Prostitution and the Migration of Basotho Women to the Rand, 1920-1945", in C. WALKER (Ed.): *Women and Gender in South Africa to 1945*, pp.221-250. Also "African Urbanisation on the Rand between the 1930s and 1960s: its Social Character and Political Consequences", in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21(1)1995, pp.115-129.

It must be pointed out that, in comparison with the rest of the African continent¹³ as well as in the Western world, Women's History began much later in South Africa. As late as the 1970s, there appeared to be no real development in the writing of academic Women's History. Bozzoli, for one, attributed this in part to there being an

absence of a significant South African feminist movement.¹⁴

Hetherington adds that "the survival... of the apartheid regime, and of the dominant culture that is not receptive to the expression of ideas"¹⁵ might also have attributed to inhibiting the writing of Women's History.

Also, in spite of the historiography of South Africa undergoing a transformation - radical revision¹⁶ - since the 1970s as a result of the work of neo-marxist historians¹⁷ "feminist re-interpretations of conventional wisdoms"¹⁸ had as yet not been woven into history. This is perhaps because of the depersonalising influence of Marxism and its preoccupation with class at the expense of other categories, including gender.

Gradually, by the 1980s however, as historians began to recognise the importance of documenting the

continual and complex interaction of rural and urban social forms and struggles which (were) central to the making of class and community in both contexts,¹⁹

more attention began to be paid to class struggles *and* the historical complexity of political processes. In so doing much more attention was paid to human agency, (See discussion on Bozzoli, ahead) and in turn to the role of women - particularly black women - in history.

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13. As Hetherington points out, in the rest of Africa, the first stirrings of writings on the history of African women occurred from the 1960s, due in part to the growing African Nationalism and the achievement of independence by African States. See "Women in South Africa: The Historiography in English", in *The Journal of African Historical Studies*, 26(2)1993, p.254.
 14. B. BOZZOLI, "Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies", in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 9(2)1983, pp.140-171.
 15. P. HETHERINGTON, "Women in South Africa: The Historiography in English", in *Journal of African Historical Studies* 26(2)1993, p.247.
 16. See B. BOZZOLI, "Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies", in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 9(2)1983, p.139.
 17. These historians undermined the earlier leadership of the liberal interpretations of the South African past, with its emphasis on race relations.
 18. B. BOZZOLI, "Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies", in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 9(2)1983, p.139.
 19. B. BOZZOLI and P. DELIUS, "Radical History in South African Society", in *Radical History Review*, 46(7)1990, pp.13-35.

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In the discussion which follows, the prominent works of Belinda Bozzoli, Jacklyn Cock, Deborah Gaitskell and Cheryl Walker will be examined. The principal themes that have been researched and the theoretical approaches used to research and write about them, will also be identified.

Belinda Bozzoli

Although a sociologist by training, a review of both her writing and editorial work reveals that Belinda Bozzoli has played an undeniably significant role in the writing of South African history. Furthermore, the lead she took in 1978 in organising the first of a series of History Workshops held at the University of the Witwatersrand, and subsequently taking on the task of editing the wide cross section of work by others in the first three volumes of History Workshop Papers,²⁰ is yet another indication of why her inclusion in this discussion is so important.

Like many of her contemporaries, she too was deeply influenced by the new radicalism of the 1970s.²¹ But Bozzoli's own influence began to be most strongly felt in the early 1980s when she gradually moved into the field of feminist theory and history. In her own introductory essay in the third volume of the History Workshop for example, Bozzoli revealed her commitment to both the continuing debate about theory and the importance of writing the history of women into the complex picture of South African society.²²

By far the most important statement to be made about feminist historians and the problems they are forced to confront in the South African studies context, however, was in her article: "Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies". This article appeared in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* in 1983 which had, since it began publication in 1974, published only one article on the history of women in South Africa before Bozzoli's.²³ Thus proving to be the first substantial survey of the recent developments in Women's

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20. B. BOZZOLI (Ed.), *Labour, Townships and Protest: Studies in the Social History of the Witwatersrand* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1979); B. BOZZOLI (Ed.): *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal: Capitalist Penetration and Popular Resistance* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983); B. BOZZOLI (Ed.): *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987).
 21. See for example her article: "The Origins, Development and Ideology of Local Manufacturing in South Africa", in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 1(2)1974. Also see the article she wrote with P. DELIUS, "Radical History in South African Society", in *Radical History Review*, 46(7)1990, which provides an overview of the radicalist thrust on South African studies over the past 20 years.
 22. See B. BOZZOLI (Ed.): *Class, Community and Conflict*, pp. xii-xx.
 23. D. GAITSKALL, "Christian Compounds for Girls: Church Hostels for African Women in Johannesburg, 1907-1970", in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 6(1)1979, pp. 44-69.

History in South Africa this article had as its stated purpose the suggestion (albeit tentatively) of developing an alternative approach to the explanation of gender relations in South Africa - one that drew on a rather different body of literature from that which had prevailed up to that time. Although it would still remain firmly within the Marxist tradition, it would be based on the more feminist notion of 'struggle'.²⁴

Part of Bozzoli's reason for suggesting such an approach stemmed from her observation that in spite of the radicalisation of South African history during the course of the previous decade, most Marxist writers/scholars appeared to lack an awareness of gender issues. These writers tended to provide a material explanation for female oppression, placing their primary emphasis on the relationship between that oppression and the capitalist mode of production - thereby attempting to show the 'functionality' of female oppression for the capitalist system. The anti-historical and economic bias of such a functionalist tendency, however, becomes all the more apparent when one sees how, in the case of the domestic system, these writers directed their analysis towards the family as the reproductive unit in society and in so doing obscured the gender struggles taking place within the family.²⁵

Bozzoli therefore saw the need for a "revolution in the consciousness of writers on South Africa", for minds to be expanded in order to take account of the importance of domestic struggle and thus enhance their understanding of "this complex society (and) the consciousness of the people within it".²⁶

It could, in light of this, be argued that Bozzoli - as early as 1983 - foreshadowed, or perhaps even provided the intended impetus for the recent move on the part of many feminist (and indeed others who write Women's History) historians away from an earlier emphasis on the workplace and protest movements to a consideration of family structure and ideology in which the family itself is deconstructed in order to consider the experiences of women as being different from not only those of children and men, but also the differences between women themselves.²⁷

In addition to her editorial work and journal publications, one cannot ignore the new dimensions given to studies on women's and gender history by Bozzoli in her book,

24. B. BOZZOLI, "Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies", in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 9(2)1983 p.144.

25. *Ibid.*, pp.141-146.

26. *Ibid.*, p.171.

27. I acknowledge that my conclusions here may be erroneous or distorted; however there is evidence that this kind of deconstruction regarding the family was undertaken after the appearance of Bozzoli's article. See for example: M. KINGSMAN, " 'Beasts of Burden': The Subordination of Southern Tswana Women ca. 1800-1840", in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 10(1)1983, PP.39-54; J. GUY, "Gender Oppression in South Africa's Pre-capitalist Societies", in C. WALKER (Ed.), *Women and Gender in South Africa to 1945*, pp.33-47.

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Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa 1900-1983,²⁸ which stands as a substantial corrective to the dearth of materials available on the experiences of black women in South Africa.

Despite Bozzoli's modest claims regarding the aims of the book, it is a study which sets out to fulfill a number of ambitious aims. These range from a presentation of the life stories of 22 black South African women (born between approximately 1900 and 1914) by focusing on the broad processes and events that shaped their lives as women, to the more theoretical aims of defending a particular kind of oral history writing against the excesses of more positivistic sociological theory and method. Furthermore, it is a book which presents an alternative way of engaging with the structure - agency debate. Bozzoli's alternative is to emphasise the status of black women as actors capable of deciding their own future and intending to escape from, or at least limit, the expectations placed upon them by structures such as the 'patriarchal order'.²⁹

Each of the chapters deals with a specific phase in the lives of these women, and is carefully contextualised in order to place the deeply personal accounts provided by each of them within these wider processes. However, Bozzoli insists that it is

not a study of broad patterns of political and social power, where experience is merely illustrative of wider points; of how interviews can help us understand 'what really happened'.³⁰

It will have failed if read as such. Rather, it should be read as

an exploration of one of the more intimate private domains within which power is fought over, and consciousness born.³¹

It is these comments which in fact take us to the heart of the text: the attempt to delineate a domain of life which cannot be reduced to structural patterns but in which the dignity of the subject - of those passed over by history - can be asserted. In this way, Bozzoli opposes Marxist studies which tended to neglect the differences between and individuality of women, and in turn deny them a voice as individuals in their own right.

28. (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1991). I would like to draw attention here to the role given to Mmantho Nkotsoe, a researcher engaged by the Oral Documentation Project, in this book. Her essential contribution is recognised not only in the introduction, but also in the authorial assistance attributed to her on the cover of the text. I highlight the point as I see this acknowledgment acting as a powerful intervention in the domain of research politics.

29. See B. BOZZOLI with M. NKOTSOE, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa 1900-1983*, (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1991), pp.3 and 7.

30. *Ibid.*, pp.3 and 7.

31. *Ibid.*

'She's' who make history

The part Belinda Bozzoli has played in writing the history of black women in South Africa, as I see it, can be taken as exemplary of the wider aims put forward in *Women of Phokeng*: she has made:

a small contribution towards creating that most illusive of all things - a humane and democratic society, in which all are respected for who and what they are, and in which 'liberation' refers to the freeing of subjectivity as much as to the altering of structure.³²

Even if it has been exercised in the domain of the politics of research and writing.

Jacklyn Cock

For historians with an interest in the history of black women in South Africa, sources concerned with the experiences of these women in the labour force/workplace appear to be quite prolific.³³ The work of domestic workers is perhaps the most readily examined. One academic who has explored the theme of domestic service in South Africa more extensively than most, is Jacklyn Cock. She has produced a number of articles on this theme from 1979 and to the present.³⁴

Like Belinda Bozzoli, Jacklyn Cock is also a sociologist at the University of the Witwatersrand. Also, like Bozzoli, she too merits inclusion in this discussion based upon her own writings having made an important contribution to the historiography of black women in South Africa, particularly in terms of why they are the most exploited group in this society.

Possibly her best known text is *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation*.³⁵ In this study, Cock uses a combination of sociological analysis and

32. *Ibid.*, p.15.

33. In addition to the works of scholars discussed in this paper, see also for example: I. BERGER, "Sources of Class Consciousness: South African Women in Recent Labour Struggles", in *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 16(1)1983; I. BERGER, "Solidarity Fragmented: Garment Workers of the Transvaal, 1930-1960, in S. MARKS and S. TRAPIDO (Eds.): *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in 20th Century South Africa* (Longman, London, 1987), pp.124-155.

34. J. COCK, "Domesticity and Domestication: A Note on the Articulation of Sexual Ideology and the Initial Incorporation of Black Women into Wage Labour", in *African Perspectives*, 13,1979, pp.16-26; J. COCK: "Domestic Servants in the Political Economy", in *African Perspective*, 15,1980, pp.??; J. COCK (et al): "Childcare and Working Mothers", in *African Perspective*, 26,1985, pp.29-60; and J. COCK, "Trapped Workers: Constraints and Constrictions Experienced by Black Women in Contemporary South Africa", in *Women's Studies International Forum*, 10(2)1987, pp.133-140.

35. (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1980).

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historical reconstruction to explain the position of some 800 000 black women in domestic service in South Africa. More black women work in domestic service than in almost any other occupational category, but up until the publication of *Maids and Madams* in the 1980s no comprehensive study of this topic had been undertaken.³⁶ Thus, Cock's text is a pioneering study which attempts to fill this gap, but it also serves as a potentially good vehicle for theorising the position of both black and white women under capitalism as well as for making some analysis of the transition process from pre-capitalist to capitalist society. Her main focus is, however, largely on the 'ultra-exploitation / -exploitability' of black women on account of their race, class and sex, and the ideology of these women under capitalism. The separate sections she devotes to theoretical considerations also provide one with insight into how gender analysis might proceed. Although Cock commits herself to a Marxist analysis, because she believes it enables one

to deal with (the) problem of mystification and avoid the limitations of both idealism and empiricism,³⁷

she appears to adopt an Althusserian approach in her special emphasis on the autonomy of superstructural forms.³⁸

In addition - and perhaps of greatest significance - *Maids and Madams* challenges what Cock refers to as 'conventional feminist analysis'. This she makes clear in the following way: although both maids and madams are victims of discrimination in South African society - "discrimination which maintains their subordinate and dependent positions" - their experiences of this dependence are very different. The employment of domestic servants offers white madams "mechanisms of escape from their dependence by employing

36. Before the publication of *Maids and Madams*, no investigation of domestic workers in the Eastern Cape had previously been undertaken. By 1980, only two comprehensive studies of domestic workers in other areas of South Africa had been carried out: M.G. WHISSON and W.M. WEIL, *Domestic Servants: A Microcosm of the Race Problem* (SAIRR, Johannesburg, 1971); E. PRESTON-WHYTE, "Between Two Worlds: A Study of the Working Life, Social Ties and Interpersonal Relationships of African Women Migrants in Domestic Service in Durban" (Ph.D., University of Natal, 1960). One could also mention here, C. Van Onselen's pioneering effort in "Witches of Suburbia: Domestic Service on the Witwatersrand 1890-1914", presented at the History Workshop in 1978, and later published in *Social and Economic Studies of the Witwatersrand*, Vol. ii (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1982).

37. J. COCK, *Maids and Madams*, p.10.

38. In her introduction to *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal: Capitalist Penetration and Popular Resistance* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983), pp.27 - 28, points out that Althusserian structuralism with its anti-historical bias, is not a particularly appropriate model for South Africa because of Althusser's belief that whenever capitalism was dominant, it succeeded in imposing ideological control over society. But in South Africa, the ruling class had been too weak to impose a common culture on the whole of society.

black women."³⁹

Thus what Cock is essentially challenging is the over simplified notion of 'sisterhood' in feminist theory as well as the idealist history which appears to take no account of the importance of modes of production in determining the class structure and by implication, the patterns of exploitation. However she goes on to add that the exploitability of black women is also due to the powerlessness they suffer in terms of their rights before the law. Thus the claim that exploitation is worse under capitalism than in pre-capitalist society:

In the case of customary law in South Africa there is the expression of an ideological level generated by a pre- capitalist mode of production. This remnant of a pre- capitalist mode is then incorporated into the capitalist mode and reshaped by it. It is the articulation of these distinct levels within the South African social formation that creates the particular disabilities of African women. These disabilities are amplified by the urban setting.⁴⁰

While Cock devotes an entire chapter to the special disabilities black women suffer under the law, she also documents the 'sex bars' in the education system, as first introduced by missionaries, and as it developed over time in South Africa in such a way to perpetuate the ideology of domesticity.⁴¹ This in turn served to relegate black women to typically western female occupations in the Reserves,⁴² but because of their poverty, it did not exclude the possibility of using them as cheap labour, especially as domestic servants. Here, Cock relates changes in superstructure, namely law and education, to the economic base. The implication in her argument, though is that there is some continuity in the ideological constraints which link pre-capitalist and capitalist societies, but the changes occur in a direction that suit the economic needs of South African capitalism.

Jacklyn Cock clearly goes some way towards explaining both how and why black women

39. J. COCK, *Maids and Madams*, p.1.

40. *Ibid.*, p.245

41. It must be pointed out, however, that in terms of following a basic principle of the 'Historical Method', Cock fails to historicise the point that the missionaries' attitudes were not exceptional but typical of 19th and early 20th century attitudes in Europe and the USA. (See *Maids and Madams*, pp.208-306).

42. H. WOLPE, in his article, "Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa...", in *Economy and Society*, 1(4)1972, pp.425-456; provided an important impetus to revealing the function of the gender division of labour associated with the Reserve System. His interpretation has since been taken as the theoretical basis for analysing the role of black women in South African society by many Marxist historians/scholars. In her 1983 article, Bozzoli is however critical of this tendency of Marxists to use 'structure' as a starting point for interpreting the social order as an 'ideological state apparatus'. (See B. BOZZOLI, "Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies" in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 9(2)1983, pp.143-144).

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are the most exploited group in this society. What is important to draw attention to in her argument of this theme, is that it implies that there is some continuity in the ideological constraints that link pre-capitalist and capitalist societies. However, the changes occur in a direction that suit the economic needs of South African capitalism.

Deborah Gaitskell

A third female academic to make a significant contribution to Women's History in South Africa, is Deborah Gaitskell. Unlike Bozzoli and Cock, Gaitskell is an historian, who completed her doctorate in London in 1981.⁴³ This is, however, not the only factor which sets her apart from the other two scholars discussed thus far in this study. Gaitskell - in her analysis of the economic and social position of black women in this society - has paid a great deal of attention to the matrix of women and religion. Undoubtedly a significant point to take note of when reviewing her works, especially since it could be seen as a perpetuation of the idea that women are confined to only the roles of housewife, mother and 'good Christian woman' in society. It will hopefully become clear in the discussion which follows, however, that there are reasons why this view of Gaitskell work should be rejected. Furthermore, Gaitskell's linking of women and religion should not be seen as being an isolatory issue in the context of this study. Her inclusion is primarily motivated by the fact that the major themes which come to the fore in her work as well as the approach she adopts in her analysis bridge this 'potential gap' between herself and the other scholars focused upon here.

Her earliest articles⁴⁴, in addition to taking cognisance of the class dimension, also center on the changes in the superstructure, as black women make the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist society. In her article on the uniformed prayer associations (also referred to as the 'Manyano'/'Isilolo' movements) for example, Gaitskell explains how Christian missionaries tried to encourage the acceptance of an 'imported ideology' about courtship, marriage and the role of the mother within the family which "ran counter to the

43. D. GAITSKELL, "Female Mission Initiatives: Black and white Women in Three Witwatersrand Churches, 1903-1939" (Ph.D., University of London, 1981).

44. See for example D. GAITSKELL, "'Christian Compounds for Girls': Church Hostels for African Women in Johannesburg, 1907 - 1970", in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 6(1)1979, pp.44-69; D. GAITSKELL, "Housewives, Maids or Mothers: Some contradictions of Domesticity for Christian Women in Johannesburg, 1903 - 1939", in *Journal of African History*, 24,1983, pp.241-256; and D. GAITSKELL, (et al), "Class, Race and Gender: Domestic workers in South Africa", in *Review of African Political Economy*, 27/28,1983, pp.86-108.

assumptions of African, particularly Nguni, society".⁴⁵

The Isilolo movement was however, not only instrumental in encouraging 'women to confess their sins as irresponsible mothers of adolescent daughters', it also suggested that the women who participated were lamenting about their increasing powerlessness and helplessness in the face of the economic change brought about by South Africa's Industrial Revolution. As industrialisation, urbanisation and impoverishment transformed people's lives, the daughters internalised new values which were inevitably filled with contradictions that could not be resolved by the church-based movements:

Urban no less than rural, women found themselves compelled to channel their major energies into economic survival. The absence of a family wage from their husbands meant that, even where willing, they were not generally able to devote their days to the pious nurture and sexual guidance of their infant and adolescent children as the Church envisaged.⁴⁶

Like Cock, Gaitskell also wrote a number of articles on the experiences of the black female working class. But before embarking on a discussion of these particular articles, it is important at this point to mention that in late 1983, Gaitskell wrote the introductory article to the *Journal of Southern African Studies*' special issue on the writing of women in South Africa. This particular publication was prompted by an awareness of "the proliferation of new research in this area".⁴⁷ In the introduction, Gaitskell provides what can be considered a second analysis of the literature on women in South Africa (Bozzoli's 1983 article being the first), which was at first the preserve of scholars in the field of sociology and anthropology. Although Gaitskell saw most of this literature as being limited, she did acknowledge that it provided a rich social record which could be used and reinterpreted by historians, who right up until the 1950s appeared not "to have incorporated women into their analysis even at the most rudimentary level of making them

45. D. GAITSKELL, " 'Wailing for Purity': Prayer Unions, African Mothers and Adolescent daughters 1912-1940", in S. MARKS and R. RATHBONE (Eds.), *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness, 1870-1930* (Longman, London, 1982), p.338. It could be pointed out that in this article, Gaitskell does not deal with the significance of the prayer union's value - and especially their uniforms - in identity formation. But criticising her for this seems a little unfair as the rise of attention paid to identity only got off the ground in the last 10 years.

46. D. GAITSKELL, "Wailing for Purity...", p.332. See also her essay: "Devout Domesticity: A Century of African Women's Christianity in South Africa", in C. WALKER (Ed.), *Women and Gender in South Africa to 1945*, pp.251-272. It looks briefly at African women's responses to the coming of Christianity and some of the ways in which domesticity was enmeshed with conversion in the late 19th century in rural South Africa.

47. D. GAITSKELL, "Introduction: Special Issue on Women's History", p.1. *Historia*, 44(1), May 1999, pp. 64-83.

visible".⁴⁸ Gaitskell hoped that this special issue would provide some stimulus and direction for historians as to the value of the insights that had been offered by the growth in academic circles of 'women's studies', by suggesting new methodologies and styles of research within an interdisciplinary approach that broke away from old subject compartmentalisations.⁴⁹

We return now to an examination of Gaitskell's work on the black female working class. 1982 also saw the appearance of two articles by Gaitskell, which focused fairly specifically on the issue of domestic labour in Johannesburg. Although both explore the tensions and contradictions in the ideology of the black female working class and the construction of their consciousness within the repressive social order of South African society, one focused primarily on the inculcation of the ideology of domesticity.⁵⁰

The significance of this particular article is that it foreshadowed the question about whether black women workers - even domestic workers - were as helpless as had previously been suggested i.e. whether or not they were still only semi-proletarianised.⁵¹ It goes on to suggest that many black women are fully responsible for family survival and not therefore dependent on men. The implication here then is that the ideology of domesticity, with its attitudes of dependence, is not necessarily dominant in South Africa. Gaitskell is therefore pointing to a need for more exploration of the 'superstructural forms' (for want of a better way of phrasing it) that have developed in the very harsh conditions created by South African capitalism.

The second article, written in collaboration with Judy Kimble, Moira Maconachie and Elaine Unterhalter,⁵² confronts the problem of analysis which the experience of domestic labour, and the South African example in particular, seemed to pose. The theoretical problem, as they identified it, is one which is ultimately connected with the fact that domestic labour "is not produced in the Marxist sense," nor do most white women, who employ servants, themselves become productive units in the outside workforce.⁵³ Although the article does not

Ibid., p.5.

49. *Ibid.*, p.2. While Gaitskell was clearly aware of the need for such changes, it remains questionable as to whether she applied any major methodological changes herself.
50. D. GAITSKALL, "Housewives, Maids or Mothers: Some Contradictions of Domesticity for Christian Women in Johannesburg, 1903-1939", in *Journal of African History*, 24, 1983, pp.241-256.
51. *Ibid.*, pp.254-256. I. Berger, for example, addresses this question in her article: "Sources of Class Consciousness".
52. D. GAITSKALL, (et al): "Class, Race and Gender: Domestic Workers in South Africa", in *Review of African Political Economy*, 27/28, 1983, pp.86-108.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 92. This is in a sense a contradiction with J. Cock's conclusion that 'the employment of maids freed madams ... to undertake paid employment ... - AND ENGAGE IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH.' (See *Maids and Madams*, p.1).

really resolve anything in terms of its conclusion: that domestic labour needs to be theorised as a "product of the complex operation of race, class and gender over time"⁵⁴ it does reveal that its authors were not only working with theory to illuminate their empirical work but also that they were working back from their empirical findings to a reconstruction of theory.

A review of Gaitskell's work demonstrates that she endeavored to show how amongst other issues, labour, economic dispossession and western - missionary Christianity impacted upon the lives of black South African women. Her concern was however not only to give black women a voice in the historical record, but also to identify possible ways (perhaps not as successfully as she might have intended) of theorising these experiences.

Cherryl Walker

We turn now to the fourth and final academic to be discussed in this paper. Like Gaitskell, she too is a trained historian and as with many of the earlier feminist historians who set out to write Women's History, much of Cherryl Walker's work exemplifies a materialist approach, one that is based on an understanding of class positions and of the connection between class and ideology. Her works include: a book on the suffrage movement in South Africa⁵⁵ and one on the fate of both men and women caught up in the application of laws designed to separate all racial groups.⁵⁶ Neither work, although significant in terms of the contribution they make to Women's History as a whole, will be examined here because they do not focus exclusively on the experiences of black South African women. This paper, after all, looks at the specific contributions that have been made by academics to the writing of the history of black women in South Africa during the 20th century.

For the aforementioned reason, a discussion of the following book has been included: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, published in 1982. Although a work which provides some background to the political and economic activities of white South African women, it also focuses on the protests of black women against patterns of exploitation under capitalism. Walker does not see, as part of her purpose, in this work, the need to offer an explanation of how the position of black women changed in the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist society; or for that matter how the new roles created for black women under the Reserve System (namely those of reproduction, production and consumption) were linked and in turn functional for South African capitalism. There is, however, a very significant point to emerge from this book, namely the fact that unlike most feminist historians who set out to write the history of black women in South Africa, Walker was not attempting to write a

54. *Ibid.*, p.107.

55. C. WALKER, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in South Africa* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1988).

56. L. PLATSKY and C. WALKER: *The Surplus People: Forced Removals in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1979).

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“compensatory history” (or as Bozzoli labeled it: “rectifactory history”).⁵⁷ In fact, she made her position on this issue quite clear in the preface to her book:

One of the premises underlying the book is that the study of women needs to be broadened to incorporate the female world as a legitimate area of research. Such a step will deepen our understanding not only of the position of women - but of the workings of the total society ... this does not mean that one can delineate ‘a women’s history’ that forms a separate study from the history of society in general. Women do not form an isolated and homogeneous category that can be studied apart from society as a whole, any more than men do.⁵⁸

Thus, Walker attempts to draw attention to the fact that sex (sic) is not the main determinant of women’s position in society - even though she does believe that a sex-based division of labour preceded a class-based one. Once again, however, she clarifies her position by claiming that:

under capitalism, this sex-based contradiction is both overshadowed and transformed by the dominant contradictions between the means of production and workers. Women are distributed throughout the class spectrum and it is thus, these different class positions, rather than shared sex, that finally determines their basic and varied political allegiances.⁵⁹

Walker has, in addition to writing books and articles - which focus in the main on the resistance of black women to oppression and the system of apartheid - also edited a collection of essays.⁶⁰ The book spans the years from the early 19th century to 1945, a period during which the economic, social and political life in South Africa underwent profound changes. Her concern here is with how these changes impinged upon the lives of women in general, and black women in particular. She writes about the importance of studying the shift in South Africa from pre-capitalist forms of gender oppression to those characteristic of the colonial state under settler capitalism, and the collision between the two.

As we have seen, emphasis on the connections between shifts in the mode of production, and changes in ideology tend to be characteristic of the historiography on women in South Africa. But what Walker looks toward in this book, is the possibility of broadening the programme of investigation by basing it on a sound theoretical understanding of the importance of gender

57. See B. BOZZOLI, “Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies“, in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 9(2)1983, p.141. Here, she refers to it as ‘rectifying the imbalance in history by recovering the hidden history of women’.

58. C. WALKER, *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (Onyx Press, London, 1982).

59. *Ibid.*, p.1.

60. C. WALKER (Ed.), *Women and Gender in South Africa to 1945*, (David Philip, Cape Town, 1990). In her introduction Walker points out that this book is a somewhat miscellaneous collection and represents work in progress in various areas rather than being a systematic project. The result therefore is a presentation of widely divergent aims and methods.

relations. But as she also points out:

before one can construct a more sophisticated theory of gender, one needs to have a better understanding of men and women's experience in society and cross-culturally.⁶¹

Her own essay in this collection: "Gender and the development of the Migrant Labour System: 1850-1930",⁶² puts forward the argument that the organisation of gender in African society was important in shaping the Migrant Labour System and is relevant to an understanding of this context. Unfortunately, her own contribution to the book, essentially ends up showing that simple awareness of the issue is not enough to resolve it. One cannot help wondering then, whether the oppressive silence within the field of black women's history does remain abysmal?

A further issue of concern which emerges from the collection as a whole, is the fact that the contributors are all white, while most of the essays deal with the experiences of black women. Walker is aware of the criticisms that have been leveled at the role of white historians as interpreters of black experience.⁶³ In spite of this she asserts that theory should permit a transcendence of colour. Besides which, if historians were permitted to write only out of their own experience, would they not all be writing autobiography?

Conclusion

Only a few decades ago, Women's History in South Africa was a severely limited field of research and study. And, while the focus of this paper has been on the works of four scholars who have made Black South African women the central 'subjects' of their research, I have hopefully demonstrated just how far we have come in the field as a whole.

A survey of the literature produced by Bozzoli, Cock, Gaitskell and Walker seems to suggest the following: Firstly, that despite the very real and lasting contribution a radical methodology has made to South African historiography; they have in the course of their careers frequently reflected on the interplay between their theoretical approach and empirical work. In this regard, Bozzoli appears to have done so more than the others, and in turn opened up a whole new world of possibilities for exploring other themes as far as the development and application of theory on Women's History is concerned. Secondly, that the two dominant themes to emerge from their inquiry are: a portrayal of Black women as oppressed victims of a special kind of capitalism buttressed by the state *and* a celebration of the resistance

61. *Ibid.*, p.4.

62. *Ibid.*, pp.168-196.

63. Here she refers to an article by D. NKULULEKO, "The Right to Self-determination in Research: Azania and Azanian Women", in C. QUNTA (Ed.): *Women in Southern Africa* (Skotaville, Johannesburg, 1987) pp.88-106. Nkululeko argues that subjects of historical knowledge are the ones who should be carrying out the research and writing about themselves, since they have the most intimate knowledge of their experience.

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by these women against such oppression.

Yet, Bozzoli, Cock, Gaitskell and Walker have not isolated their histories on Black women to only the political input these women have made in resistance activities. This is, I believe, what sets them apart from those writers who have exploited the 'traditional struggles perspective' in their works when focusing upon or making reference to Black women in the past. Bozzoli, Cock, Gaitskell and Walker have extended their examinations to the domestic and psychological spheres of the feminine domain and emphasised not only the particular material and economic concerns and difficulties of Black women in South Africa, but also that these women have ambition, pride, a sense of self and wills of their own. In this way, these scholars have in fact recognised that Black women have a domain of their OWN, one consisting of concerns and circumstances that do not simply support the traditionalist masculine domain.

Furthermore, unlike most scholars in capitalist societies who have embarked upon a career of writing Women's History; these academics, being familiar with and indeed influenced by the materialist interpretations that have dominated the history of profession from the 1970s, have developed a radical critique based on Marxist theory. They are however very much aware of the stifling affect that a Marxist stronghold has had on Women's History: "An over concern with the correctness of one's theoretical position ... has, perhaps been one of the most insidious constraints on the development of women's studies in South Africa. At least partly responsible it seems, is the concern for legitimacy in an extremely exacting political environment ..." ⁶⁴ However, as we have already seen, simple awareness is not enough to resolve it and so, much still remains to be done if black women are no longer to be considered as merely anonymous pawns in South African society.

How then, can black women be seen as both part of society and indeed as *people* in their own right? For starters, up to now, too little attention has been given to the relationships and interaction between groups of women and even between individuals and groups. One possible way of addressing this, might be to consider how a so called 'generation gap' has come to manifest itself among black women as a result of changes within this society over time. This would open up a whole new field of conflict and/or consensus over values, status and even the creation/formation of 'identity'.

A further possible alternative might be for scholars to not only concentrate on the position of women in male-dominated society and their interaction with *other* groups, but instead, consider the very different forms of female oppression that come from the structural mechanisms (the legal system, capitalist economy and so on) that perpetuate the unequal relationships between men and women, by looking in greater detail at their personal and group responses to this. Such an approach might in turn be able to accommodate issues that stretch beyond the divisions of race and class to show that relations of dominance and subordination are not simply the result of class and reclaim defined divisions, but also from inequalities in power between men and women in the social order on the whole as well as within the family itself. This could in turn

64. C. WALKER (Ed.), *Women and Gender in South Africa to 1945*, p.3.

'She's' who make history

point to how the tangled relationships of the three pivotal categories of race, class AND gender have fractured South Africa's complex society. Black women would therefore not merely be inserted into the wider context of general history, but indeed become an integral part of it.

In spite of being able to identify areas of possible weakness or neglect in the work of Bozzoli, Cock, Gaitskell and Walker, it cannot be denied that they have made an important contribution to the field of Black Women's History in South Africa. They have recognised the female domain as separately constituted from the male-dominated or general domain and equally deserving of attention. The value of their work therefore lies not only in its contents, but also because they have frequently reflected on how to theorise the issues of their concern. It is because of this that their influence must surely stretch beyond the sphere of Women's History into the wider context of South African history.

Opsomming

'Sye' wat geskiedenis maak: 'n Oorsig van die wyse waarop vier Suid-Afrikaanse skrywers swart vroue in hul werk behandel.

Hierdie studie bevat 'n oorsig van die werke van vier kontemporêre Suid-Afrikaanse akademië wat op 'n betekenisvolle wyse tot die ontwikkeling van kennis en insig in die veld van vroue geskiedenis (feministiese geskiedenis) in Suid-Afrika bygedra het. Die ontwikkeling in die veld, die afgelope 25 jaar, kan toegeskryf word aan die werke van hierdie akademië wat gereageer het op die oproep om vroue, veral swartes, meer sigbaar in die historiese konteks te maak. Die opstel ondersoek die hoofemas wat deur Belinda Bozzoli, Jacklyn Cock, Debbie Gaitskell en Cheryl Walker ondersoek is. Op hierdie manier, is dit duidelik dat die invloed van hierdie akademië 'n groter trekkrag het as bloot die sfeer van feministiese geskiedenis. Dit kan as 'n bydrae tot die korpus kennis oor Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis in die geheel beskou word.