

*The art of life in South Africa*

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“Our Africans should never be composed of nurses, doctors, lawyers and ministers, but artist also” (p. 217).

Dan Magaziner’s second book, *The art of life in South Africa* is a sublime, well-considered and solid contribution to the history of KwaZulu-Natal and to the history of the education of black art teachers in South Africa. It is rendered

in beautiful literary prose, which masterfully foregrounds the historical voices that take centre stage in the book. These voices are brought forth by a sharp, skilful scholarly mind that is wise enough to be humble and allow historical voices to “school-us” in 2017.

In the prologue, Magaziner states that the book is a study of art education in South Africa under segregation and apartheid. Magaziner contends that the book considers the community of artists and educators specifically in Indaleni, outside Richmond in what is today KwaZulu-Natal. “It is a story of a community that nurtured its own ideals and practices and promoted nothing less than a new way of being in the world” (p. xv). Even though Ndaleni was not an art school in the strictest sense, it was one of a few places where black South Africans could study and develop their art (p. 4).

The prologue maps the shifts and dissonances in pedagogical imperatives in the 1920s with contentions over the discourses of the education of black children, as some argued for the prominence of manual work in education. Students were poor, and manual work offered them the chance to make some money. Students also spent fewer than five years at school and some thought that those few years ought to be spent giving students practical skills for the rest of their lives.

By the mid-1920s, the number of African schools that were offering manual work had increased from 73% to 86%. It was argued that carpentry, woodwork, basketry and sewing by children in school, would be the foundation of the future African society’s economy in their villages and native reserves – rehearsal of apartheid (p. xxv). By the 1930s though, the market for African industrial work seemed to have dried up. Regional inspector Dent proposed a shift in the purpose of handwork away from “inculcating industry to aesthetic appreciation” (p. xxvi).

Chapter one introduces us to Ndaleni which was a specialist art and craft teachers’ school, ran by South Africa’s Bantu Education between the 1950s and early 1980s (p. 3). During its operation nearly a thousand students did the art and craft course, which initially ran for two years before being shortened to just one year. The course qualified its graduates (most were already practicing teachers) to teach the department’s art and crafts syllabus, which was a mandatory subject for black South Africans in government-funded schools (p. 3).

The course was paid for by government bursaries and upon completion, a pay increase was offered and in return for the bursary, Ndaleni graduates would have to teach art in Bantu Education schools. Arts and culture featured in the apartheid governments efforts to preserve the absolute distinction between African and European education in the lead-up to the Bantu Education Act of 1953 (p. 3).

Magaziner indicates that Ndaleni offers “difficult data” as life under apartheid was not a single experience, as life is multiple and contradictory (p. 5). “Ndaleni generates difficult data precisely because it opens a window into the closed room of the past – through its archives, we can see the faces looking at us, blind to the world of knowledge and hindsight that we inhabit” (p. 6). This is a similar argument that Jacob Dlamini makes in *Native Nostalgia* of the multiplicity of apartheid experiences for those that lived through it – as some chose to live under and besides apartheid. Magaziner illustrates this with an interesting historiographical concept of, “history in chords” as he argues that “people live their lives multiply, at times striking one note – that of protest, perhaps and at times striking others - laughter, sorrow, satisfaction...there are always other notes, other ways of experiencing – and therefore capturing time” (p. 9).

The book also focuses on art as a creative practise conditioned by what was possible then and there (p. 14). The artist creates by not merely inhabiting convention and context but also moving within it. Context is both “opportunity and restraint”, by “working and using the opportunity [the artist] becomes conscious of some of its limits [and] pushes against one or several of them. According to [the artists’] character and historical situation, the result of his pushing varies from a barely discernible variation of a convention...to a more fully original discovery, a break-through” (p. 14). The art students understood art as beauty not shut off the world and they had the faithful conviction that the world is worth beautifying (p. 16). By conditioning themselves to the rules and regulations of the art school community, Ndaleni art students insulated themselves from the tremors afflicting their society (p. 20).

Through a select few black artists such as Moses Tladi who is regarded as South Africa’s first celebrated black artist, chapter two looks at the issue of “native genius” and that the black community, as is the case in any other community, had its few and select geniuses (p. 26). By WWII primitivist discourse was an established element of art education (p. 39). It was an established fade to discover African artists, providing them with little tuition so as to not destroy their

originality (p. 39). With the approach of the 1930s politicians and pedagogues having observed the carrying out of manual work in mission schools, developed new justifications that crafts were what Africans did (p. 43).

Chapter three introduces John Gossert who conceptualised Ndaleni as a specialist art teacher's course, he believed that art was also "education in the profoundest sense of the word as it trained people to think, to create, to be, and be better members of a community" (p. 54). Gossert as a primitivist like other white South Africans worried about the loss of "black South Africa's cultural tradition and fretted about whether the institutional training of African artists risked seeding a dangerous cultural schizophrenia" (p. 54).

Canadian art educator Arthur Lismer in the 1930s submitted a recommendation report to the Natal Provincial government foregrounding the importance of art education to African students. Over the next few years, the Natal government began to implement Lismer's recommendations characterised by a combination of primitivism and progressive ideas about the work of art (p. 75). Thus, South Africa needed more specialist art teachers.

Chapter four examines the multiplicity of students that journeyed to Ndaleni from around the country to undertake the specialist art teacher's course. It is a significant important chapter, examining the theme of journey's that students took to get to Ndaleni; the journey of art education pedagogy; the journey of learning and the journey of leaving Ndaleni to find employment. It also illustrates the journey of the head teachers such Ann Harrison, Ewan Atkin, Peter Bell and Lorna Peirson and their various educational pedagogies. The chapter characterises Ndaleni as a place of convergence and intersections making this chapter a crown jewel of the book.

Chapter five examines the process of learning and the ever present problem of material want for the art student's art work. By the early 1970s the campus was a "living museum" of the students work, a public art gallery (p. 128). Students were further taught art philosophy; art as an ultimate experience. The school prospectus called for students to develop their sense of aesthetic discrimination, thus the work of the self-began with learning to see (p. 145). Trips to Pietermaritzburg, Durban, and Drakensburg Mountains to gather art material, to engage with and critic art and nature, formed part of the educational journey at Indaleni. Some aspects of the trip aimed to prepare/condition students to the realities of Bantu Education they would face upon completion and the constant reality of material want.

Chapter six, titled “Apartheid,” examines the students lived experiences with the system of apartheid and the school’s closure and relocation in 1982. The reality of apartheid South Africa that came after the time at the idyllic Ndalen art school was devastating. The numerous compromises and adaptations that students undertook included taking the government bursary, which, in turn, meant working for the government upon completion (p. 206). “Apartheid was navigating Bantu education and Bantustan bureaucracies for wages and materials; it was a school with fifteen teachers and more than one thousand students” (p. 206).

Getting employment was a struggle and once employed in the Bantu Education system, the graduates struggled with translating philosophy into pedagogy and this is meticulously captured in correspondences with Ndalen graduates. The Group Areas Act, ethnic grouping and ideologies of separate but equal development acted as hurdles to students’ securing employment (p. 223).

Chapter seven, titled “Artists,” examines Ndalen graduates that identified themselves as artists and explores notions of art. Not all graduates became art teachers or artists; some became department store window dressers and sign-designers. “Ndalen art school trained hundreds of students, who negotiated discipline and opportunity and did what they could to make their way through apartheid” (p. 243). To their understanding, “artists were those who made the most of bad situations, repurposing tired, wasted materials to create and to speak. Black South African political, intellectual and social life was strewn with rubble. “Rubble was what there was, so these South Africans built with it” (p. 244).

The epilogue titled, “The art of the past” examines the life of a select few art pieces that the Harmon Foundation in New York procured from Ndalen and their classification as part of contemporary South African art and Ndalen’s place in contemporary art history literature (p. 272). Currently, Ndalen is a cluster of schools, for the deaf and a secondary school and unfortunately, most of the students have no idea who created the monumental art works around their school.

Magaziner has produced a marvellously impactful book, taking the concept of “history in cords” and producing a book which is *legato* in its flow but each note that he strikes is given due consideration for its contribution to the aural assemblage of a single cord.

Author of *Double Negative* Ivan Vladislavic writes “Sometimes photographs annihilate memory; they swallow the available light and cast everything around them into shadow...” Magaziner in *The art of life in South Africa* includes photographs that are powerfully paired with literary proeses, which yield forth the life of journeys’ that Ndaleni once symbolised.

Magaziner’s *The art of life in South Africa* is a magnificent contribution to South Africa’s art history education and gives the reader a glimpse of a school, its educators and its students enacting the idea that people everywhere are creative beings, capable of making manifest their unique visions of the world.