

Frances Baard's and Helen Joseph's struggle against apartheid, 1950–1963: A comparative analysis

Estella Musiiwa*

Introduction

Women's history as a discipline that focuses on women's experiences began in the 1960s while gender history, which pays attention to social construction of male and female social roles and social identities, assumed prominence during the 1980s, and became a feature of importance in African history from the beginning of the 1980s. During the same period, feminism and history "enmeshed with the nascent field of women's history providing a new forum for feminist investigations of the past".¹ Feminists used "gender" to refer to "the social organization of the relationship between the sexes",² with a view to highlight differences between women and women and ultimately bring to light women's oppression. Since the 1980s, "African gender studies, especially in the southern region, are now even more focused on historical and critical political analysis".³

The quest to ascertain men's domination called for cross-cultural and trans-historical comparisons, hence the birth of comparative women's history during the 1980s. In response to the National Women's Studies Association's call for universal women's knowledge an editorial in *Signs* "challenged feminists to check our search for commonalities among all women in the world, past and present".⁴ Regarding the validity of comparative women's history, Anne Cova posits that: "we ask different and often new questions that would not have emerged in single case studies. This is especially true with respect to women's history which has, since its inception, managed to render the invisible, visible."⁵ However, historians of comparative women's history in general are wary of the problems inherent in comparative women's narratives. Cova notes that: "The comparative historian is confronted with the danger of not considering all nuances, and of making inappropriate generalizations."⁶ Notwithstanding this, the unique value of comparative women's political history lies in the fact that it allows for an appreciation of general commonalities and distinct traits across cultures. Whereas scholarship has acknowledged the importance of comparing women's experiences across cultures, a comparative analysis of narratives through which women reflect on their experiences is yet to be done. Cova makes an implicit statement to that effect: "globalisation requires us to develop new perspectives in comparative women's history in order to increase our understanding of the past, and to rewrite comparative history to include women."⁷ Cova's call for new perspectives invokes a comparative analysis that goes beyond a mere narration of women's experiences to include an analysis of their perception of those

* Estella Musiiwa is a lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Swaziland. She teaches a course on Gender and Society in Africa at the post-graduate level. She has published several articles on both African and white women in Africa.

1. J. M. Bennett, "Feminism and History", *Gender and History*, 1, 3, 1989, p 251.

2. J.W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis", *The American Historical Review*, 91, 5, 1986, p 1053.

3. A. Adamako Ampofo et al., "Women's and Gender Studies in English-Speaking Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of Research in Social Sciences", *Gender and Society*, 18, 6, 2004, p 686.

4. S. Geiger, "Women's Life Histories: Method and Content", *Signs*, 11, 2, 1986, pp 334–351.

5. A. Cova, "The Promises of Comparative Women's History", in A. Cova (ed.), *Comparative Women's History: New Approaches* (Columbia University Press, Boulder and New York, 2006), p 34.

6. Cova, "The Promises of Comparative Women's History", p 36.

7. Cova, "The Promises of Comparative Women's History", p 2.

experiences. In the light of this observation, this article intends to narrow down to a comparative analysis of the ways in which women perceive their experiences of the same phenomena, but from different methodological perspectives.

The attempt to reconstruct history “from the bottom up” and the varieties of radical history that document social conflict from the point of view of the oppressed, has accorded personal narratives a strong impetus and has placed them in the forefront of women’s history.⁸ As noted by Kathryn Anderson et al.: “Oral History is a basic tool in our efforts to incorporate the previously overlooked lives, activities and feelings of women into our understanding of the past and present.”⁹ Beginning in the late 1980s, some of the scholars of African women’s history depended on life histories to recapture women’s voices because, according to Susan Geiger, “First, written records, whether colonial or African, are overwhelmingly androcentric ... With a few notable exceptions such documentation ignores women unless they cause trouble or constitute a problem.”¹⁰ Since then, women’s life histories have constituted an important source of information. As Jean Davison notes, “African women’s narratives provide a unique opportunity to grasp the concrete dalliness of their lives in the process of change”.¹¹ In fact, Akosua Adomako Ampofo et al. note that: “The use of various forms of historical methods, such as oral history and autobiographical and biographical studies, helped redefine conventional understandings of various historical events and processes.”¹² Given the prominence of qualitative research, life histories and autobiographies shed light on both the introspective and retrospective course of a life over time, and they provide room to interpret life in its historical and cultural contexts. While it is true that an understanding of the “insider” (emic) view is particularly important and a much needed corrective to the “outsider” (etic) approaches to theory, the use of autobiographies and life histories, which centre on the construction of selfhood, raises important methodological and epistemological issues in comparative women’s political history. It is against this backdrop that the article seeks to appreciate the similarities and differences in women’s perception and representation of their experiences of the same phenomenon.

This article centres on two political narratives, a South African woman’s autobiography and a South African woman’s life history. Both were published in 1986 and are used to decipher the levels at which women’s perceptions of their experiences of the struggle against apartheid can be compared. The article focuses on the period between 1950, when the Defiance Campaign began, to 1961, when the African National Congress (ANC) was banned. *My Spirit is Not Banned* is a life history co-authored by Frances Baard, the narrator, and Barbie Schreiner, the editor.¹³ Frances Baard was an African woman educated up to Standard Six, who had two years of teacher training. She taught for two years after which she worked as a domestic servant. Later, when Baard

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8. Anthropologists have used life history as a source of information since the 1920s. For details on the origins and uses of life histories see L.C. Watson, “Understanding Life History as a Subjective Document: Hermeneutical and Phenomenological Perspectives”, *Ethics*, 4, 1, 1976, pp 95–131.
 9. K. Anderson et al., “Beginning where we Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History”, *The Oral History Review*, 15, 1, 1987, p 104.
 10. S. Geiger, “Women in Nationalist Struggle: TANU Activists in Dar es Salaam”, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 20, 1, 1987, p 3.
 11. J. Davison, *Voices from Mutira: Change in the Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women, 1910–1995* (Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1996), p 21.
 12. Adamako Ampofo et al, “Women’s and Gender Studies”, p 688.
 13. F. Baard and B. Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned: As Told by Frances Baard to Barbie Schreiner* (Zimbabwe Publishing House, Harare, 1986). The source used in this article is the online version, available at <http://v1.sahistory.org.za/pages/library-resources/onlinebooks/baard/resources.htm> accessed 2 February 2012.

was working in a factory, Ray Alexander, a prominent trade unionist, appointed her as a trade union leader. Now politicised, Frances became a co-founder of the ANC Women's League in 1956.

As the title implies, *Side by Side: The Autobiography of Helen Joseph* is Helen Joseph's autobiography.¹⁴ She was a white, middle-class liberal woman, who fought against apartheid on behalf of Africans. She was exposed to the evils of apartheid when she became a social worker, but was initiated into the struggle against apartheid by Solly Sachs, a Jewish trade unionist. Baard and Joseph fought together, side by side. For Baard, it was on the basis of personal experiences of apartheid but for Joseph, it was on the basis of what she felt were apartheid injustices against Africans and people of colour.

The two narratives were written specifically to highlight these women's, and other people's experiences of the struggle against apartheid. According to Baard, "1959 was declared Anti-Pass Year by the ANC in honour of the women because we fought so bravely against the passes. They said 'Malibongwe Makosikaz!' – 'Let the women be praised!'"¹⁵ Schreiner, the researcher, is more explicit: "This book does not only tell her story. It tells part of our history. It is a story that needs to be heard."¹⁶ She then explains why the story must be heard: "The 1958 ANC conference opened with a bright red banner, 'Malibongwe Makhosikaz!' ('Let the women be praised')." Why the role of women was appreciated was explicit in the 1955 ANC National Executive Committee report:

The women have been active in those major issues that most keenly affect them: Bantu Education, the threat of passes for women, the home, the children and the family. They have administered to us all a lesson on how the people's daily needs can become the kernel of a united protest campaign so that even those not previously active in political affairs, feel compelled to join in.¹⁷

In essence, the banner and the ANC report foreground women's issues as the driving force behind the struggle against apartheid.

Likewise, Helen Joseph's autobiography was written with a specific audience in mind. However, Joseph tends to differ with Baard in the sense that she perceives the anti-pass campaign from a transcendent unity of events, and more so, tends to be modest on the significance of this epoch in the trend of events that characterised the struggle for independence. As she notes:

That was on 9 August 1956. Today, nearly thirty years later, it is celebrated as National Women's Day, both here in South Africa amongst those who carry on the struggle for freedom and in other lands where the liberation movement, led by the African National Congress, is known and honoured.¹⁸

While Baard attaches glamorous significance to the incident and presents it as a turning point in the history of South Africa's liberation struggle, Joseph tends to be modest about its importance and notes:

14. H. Joseph, *Side by Side: The Autobiography of Helen Joseph* (Zed Books, London, 1986). The online version used here is <http://v1.sahistory.org.za/pages/library-resources/onlinebooks/side-by-side/part-one-chapter.htm> accessed 5 February 2012.

15. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, Part 2.

16. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, "Introduction".

17. As cited in Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, "Introduction".

18. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 10, "Trail by Detention".

How it came to pass that we made our protest that day at the Union Buildings – the most hallowed seat of white government – is a small part, but nevertheless a part of the history of our country, South Africa.¹⁹

Both narratives carry a mandate to fill a historical gap by telling a suppressed truth. As Schreiner explains, “The Nationalist [sic] government has attempted to suppress the truth and keep from us the real story of the people’s struggle for liberation. I hope that this book goes some way towards filling the gap.”²⁰ This truth that was deliberately repressed and was not captured in official documents, can be retrieved from women’s personal narratives. As Kathryn Anderson contends: “When women speak for themselves, they reveal hidden realities: new experiences and new perspectives emerge that challenge the ‘truths’ of official accounts ...”²¹ For Baard and Joseph, it is a truth that underscores women’s perception of their experiences of the struggle against apartheid; the truth that the women’s anti-pass protest did not effect the phasing off of the pass law, but significantly realigned the policy and trajectory of the ANC. Not only does this truth emphasise the role of women, but it also redefines what finally came to constitute politics and how the political platform became gendered into both male and female.

Baard’s and Joseph’s narratives map out the trajectory of their experiences of the struggle against apartheid between the 1950s and the 1960s, yet they are marked with episodes of differences in unity. The first major difference is methodological, where Baard narrates her experiences of the struggle against apartheid to Schreiner, while Joseph writes an autobiographical recollection of her experiences of the same anti-apartheid struggle. The second issue is epistemological – to ascertain how the two women perceived their experiences of the struggle against apartheid.

Methodological implications

Definition

L.C. Watson and M.B. Watson-Franke define personal narratives as

a generic category including any expressive production of the individual that can be used to throw light on *his view of himself*, his life situation, or the state of the world as *he understands it*, at some particular point in time, or over the passage of time.²²

Although they are retrospective personal accounts, life histories and autobiographies constitute different biographical genres. Watson and Watson-Franke define life history as, “any retrospective account by the individual of his/ her life in whole or part, in written or oral form, *that has been elicited or prompted by another person*”.²³ The whole life course is seen from the point of view of the person as she is currently trying to make sense of her relationship to past events, and the experience is usually recorded in the first person.²⁴ Though elicited by the researcher in the case of Baard’s testimony, the

19. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 1, “Twenty Thousand we March”.

20. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, “Introduction”.

21. Anderson et al, “Beginning where we Are”, p 104.

22. L.C. Watson and M.B. Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories: An Autobiographical Inquiry* (Rutgers, New Jersey, 1985), p 2 (emphasis original).

23. Watson and Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories*, p 2 (emphasis original).

24. Some scholars have used both the first person and the third person. See S. Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955–1965* (Heinemann, Portsmouth,

distinguishing feature is that a life history is a joint production between the narrator and the researcher, both of whose subjective views shape the body of knowledge ultimately produced.²⁵ While a life history is elicited by an outsider, an autobiography, as in Joseph's case, is "a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his [or her] own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality".²⁶ Such differences raise significant methodological implications in comparative political women's history. With reference to biographical writing in general, Christopher Merrett notes that it is "rescuing the forgotten, the exiled and the marginalized from the repression and consequent obscurity of the past".²⁷ Similarly, Margo V. Perkins notes that "activists use life-writing as an important tool for advancing political struggle".²⁸

The use of personal narratives in women's political history is a subjective methodology underscored by the centrality of subjective consciousness through which the individual articulates her world. Geiger makes a valid claim that although personal narratives have been criticized as subjective, the value of this methodology actually lies in its subjectivity.²⁹ A life history and an autobiography are tied together through use of the subjective pronoun "I", but they are characterised by marked structural differences. The fact that there is a distinction between the "I" who is "spoken of" in a life history recorded in retrospect as a cumulative product, and the "I" who speaks of itself in an autobiography recorded in retrospect as a cumulative product, has a bearing on the kind of knowledge produced and ultimately, on the way historians of comparative political women's history try to draw links and commonalities among women.

The process of writing a life history and an autobiography

The process of creating a life history not only entails a contested terrain of power and authority, but also constitutes a double voice text; a terrain of complementary roles between the narrator and the researcher. Sherna Gluck notes the uniqueness of life history as a methodology: "The autobiographical oral history, however, is rather a strange hybrid ... Based on face-to-face interaction, during which the source can be both questioned and evaluated, it becomes more than the sound of one voice."³⁰ Unlike a life history, an autobiography constitutes a single voice text that hinges on the author's initiative and self-selection of the form of the narrative.

The double voice in life history differs from the single voice in an autobiography in that it is marked by power relations. Creating a life history is a result of different processes in which both the researcher and the life historian exercise a considerable degree of power and authority. Therefore, it follows that the key to successful life history

1997); and B. Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983*, (Heinemann, London, 1991).

25. There are rare cases in which the narrator takes the initiative to elicit a life history account.
26. As cited in G. Griffin, "What is (Not) Remembered: The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas", in T.L. Broughton and L.R. Anderson (eds), *Women's Lives/Women's Times: New Essays on Auto/Biography* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1997), p 143.
27. C. Merrett, "Reclaiming our Past: Biographical Writing in South Africa", *Innovation*, 8, 1994, p 39.
28. M.V. Perkins, *Autobiography and Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2000), p xii.
29. Geiger, "Women's Life Histories: Method and Content", pp 337-338.
30. S. Gluck, "What's so Special about Women? Women's Oral History?", *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 2, 2, 1977, p 6.

taking is good rapport. More often than not, the researcher takes the initiative to establish a relationship with the narrator, and at times this involves the establishment of fictive kinships.

Although the narrator and the researcher establish rapport, the act of telling the story temporarily shifts power to the narrator. What the narrator says depends largely on what the narrator remembers or wishes to talk about. The narrator has the power to select, recollect, and restructure her interpretations of the past. Schreiner admits that the story,

based on hours of interviews and discussions, is told in the words of Frances Baard herself. It is one person's view, the story of a woman deeply and sincerely involved in the daily events of a nation's struggle for freedom.³¹

However, as Gluck notes, "The perspective of the interviewer cannot help but influence, even subtly, the content of the material – particularly what the interviewee will judge as important."³² For instance, Schreiner thanks Baard "for her patience with my endless questions".³³ In short, the nature of the questions posed by the researcher instigate the direction of the story. In comparison, Helen Joseph seems to respond to anonymous questions from a perceived audience about women's role in anti-apartheid activism. She is limited to presenting the story of the anti-apartheid struggle as she herself understands it.

For the life historian and autobiographer, telling is marked by historical context and shaped by available cultural modes. Watson and Watson-Franke note that the details of economics, politics, family structure and general ideological orientation allow us to comprehend the meaning of events and experiences that a personal narrative describes.³⁴ Gluck notes that:

the life of the interviewer is reconstructed within a broader social context – a context not ordinarily provided by the self-recorded memoirist. An understanding of this context guides the interviewer in deciding which spontaneous material should be elaborated on more fully.³⁵

With reference to women, Belinda Bozzoli notes that "women make their own narratives (and life histories) but they do so under conditions not of their own choosing. Both individual agency and structure must be considered".³⁶

Editing of the narratives tends to determine what gets to be finally textualised. The subordinate role of the collector shifts during the time of editing a life history. The editor exercises substantial power over the narrator because she records, transcribes, and translates the interviews. The editor has the power to determine what to leave out in order to come up with a story. Researchers/editors also wield the power to choose subtitles and organise information into chapters, and have final authority in the formation and publication of a narrative while an autobiographer edits her own work. In both cases the writer has the historical advantage and final say in the process of "selective recall" for what is, and what is not included in the text, and the form the written text

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31. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is not Banned*, "Introduction".
 32. Gluck, "What's so Special about Women?", p 6.
 33. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, "Introduction".
 34. Watson and Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories*, p 4.
 35. Gluck, "What's so Special about Women?", p 6.
 36. Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng*, p 5.

takes. Here the researcher does a history of herself and establishes the power of the scholar. For instance, *My Spirit is Not Banned* has been arranged in chronological order. Schreiner notes, “Frances Baard’s involvement spans three diverse yet complimentary fronts: the trade unions, the ANC and the Federation of South African Women”.³⁷ In short, the telling is appropriated by the writing, as the narrator is rendered the object of the written text. In contrast, Helen Joseph wields the autonomy to write her story and chooses to start with the 1956 anti-pass campaign and the white women’s Black Sash Movement, before she tells us of her personal life. In so doing, she places emphasis on what she wants the audience to hear, namely women’s agency in the struggle against apartheid.

The use and non-use of interjections, repetitions and non-verbal cues in a life history and an autobiography tends to create difference on where each of the women places emphasis on the same phenomenon. According to Gluck:

Besides subtle nuances in the content of the interview and voice inflections – which are captured on tape – there are non-verbal gestures which only the sensitive interviewer (or – if the interview is being filmed or video taped – the sensitive photographer) will observe. These non-verbal cues reveal the emotional tone of the interview and should be carefully noted afterwards; they will be part of the record used by both the interviewee and others to evaluate the validity and reliability of the material recorded.³⁸

Frances Baard’s life history is marked with numerous instances of interjections, direct words and exclamations which are totally absent from Helen Joseph’s autobiography. Baard’s emotional narrative tends to be more vivid such that one can easily empathise with her and her counterparts, including Joseph, with whom she shared some of the experiences of imprisonment.

Epistemological implications

A philosophical approach facilitates an appreciation of the meanings that historical individuals attach to their lived experiences. “Philosophy of History” is subject to multiple interpretations but for purposes of this article the term will be defined as reflection on “the nature of historical knowledge”.³⁹ To understand an individual’s behaviour within a particular phenomenon, one has to appreciate the ways in which that particular individual experienced and perceived the phenomenon. This article focuses on three philosophical ways of looking at a life history and an autobiography to elucidate the implications of using different kinds of personal narratives in comparative women’s political history.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is preoccupied not so much with historical events as with linguistic meanings and actions of individuals in a given situation. In historical research, philosophical hermeneutics deals not so much with historical inquiry, as it were, but rather with “the dependence of historical inquiry on the historical condition that

37. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, “Introduction”.

38. Gluck, “What’s so Special About Women?”, p 6.

39. “Philosophy of History”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/history/>, accessed 7 March 2012, p 1.

characterizes human existence".⁴⁰ It seeks to bring to the fore the relationship between a method of inquiry and the conditions that influence people's lived experiences. In the case of this article then, hermeneutics begs the question: What is the relationship between Baard's life history and Joseph's autobiography, and their perception of their experiences of the struggle against apartheid? To be more explicit: What kind of knowledge do a life history and an autobiography bring to the fore if they depend on people's perception and interpretation of their lived experiences? For example, the 1956 anti-pass campaigns constitute an important women dominated epoch in the struggle against apartheid, but how do Helen Joseph and Frances Baard perceive and present their experiences of the struggle against apartheid? The question of women's representation of the ways in which they perceive and interpret the experiences of their struggle against apartheid underlies the hermeneutic aspect of this article.

With regard to methods of historical inquiry, hermeneutics posits two basic tenets. The first is that a life history and an autobiography are influenced by subjectivity. However, the life history poses a significant epistemological issue in hermeneutics. Central to hermeneutics in life histories is the existence of *different subjective worlds* that dwell on the use of predetermined questions or ideas. As Gelya Frank notes: "unlike the autobiography, with which it is frequently grouped, the life history is a collaboration involving the consciousness of the investigator as well as the subject."⁴¹ The subject in a life history has to contend not only with her subjective views, but also with the interviewer who also has her own subjective views about the world. This is well illustrated in the introductory chapter to Baard's life history when Barbie Schreiner, the researcher, becomes the feminist spokesperson who ascribes a Western oriented identity on Baard. She explains: "This book tells the story of Frances Baard, a *black* South African woman who was a trade unionist ...".⁴² In that process, she shows that any kind of methodological inquiry informed by theoretical pre-understanding imposes an alien set of meanings (categories such as gender, race or class) on individuals, and in so doing fails to bring the subject's own truth of herself. Baard does not seem to contest the ascription, "black", but rather proudly re-inscribes and crystallises "blackness" on herself and people of her own race.

The second tenet of hermeneutics is that as a philosophical discipline, it brings into focus the personal narrative as a text or discourse to be interpreted. In other words, a life history or an autobiography is not a *historical* text in its own right, but "it is a text or document"⁴³ that communicates self-ascribed information about a particular phenomenon. With reference to Baard's life history, Schreiner says that "this book does not only tell *her* story. It tells part of our history".⁴⁴ Similarly Joseph attests that her autobiography, while recounting her own story, is "even more" a history of the South African struggle against racist minority rule.⁴⁵ If the life history or the autobiography is not the history, what is the text intended to communicate? The text portrays women's perception of their experiences as witnesses and constructors of historical legacies that inform the trajectory of South Africans' struggle for independence. However, this approach gives primacy to the interpretive process that intervenes between the interpreter and that which is to be interpreted, where an understanding of an event or

40. P. Ricoeur, "History and Hermeneutics", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 73, 19, 1976, p 683.

41. G. Frank, "Finding the Common Denominator: A Phenomenological Critique of Life History Method", *Ethos*, 7, 1, 1979, p 70.

42. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, "Introduction" (emphasis added).

43. Frank, "Finding the Common Denominator", p 70.

44. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, "Introduction" (emphasis added).

45. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 10, "Trial by Detention".

phenomenon cannot be divorced from the whole of which it forms part. Ricour makes the valid claim that: "The first step consists in recognizing that the self-ascription of experience is not an originary, sovereign act which constitutes the field of experience. It is always preceded by an experience of belonging-to, ...".⁴⁶ Therefore, in reading a life history and an autobiography, it is important for us to know the larger socio-cultural context in which such narratives are created. Both Baard and Joseph give contextual settings to their narratives.

Existentialism

Why Baard and Joseph became political activists is best explained from an existentialist perspective. Existentialism "is a philosophy which holds that the individual is defined or defines himself solely through the free choices he makes."⁴⁷ However, the choices are made within the boundaries of external conditions that influence such choices. As Ricour notes, "I am first thrown into situations I have not chosen, because I am affected by things I do not create, and because I can undertake to orient myself in these situations and project my ownmost possibilities into them".⁴⁸ In other words, structure mediates agency, thereby shaping the knowledge that is ultimately produced. While Baard and Joseph tend to display a certain degree of subjective autonomy, they interrogate and contextualise the whole idea of a conscious autonomous choice by identifying instances where choices were made for them by other people. Referring to her participation in politics, Baard says:

Then she picked some people from the workers to help her organize the other workers, and she picked me. I started organizing since that time! Before then I didn't know anything about trade unions except what I read in the paper about unions like that of Kadalie. Then, when Ray came to Port Elizabeth, was the first time for me to organize a trade union.⁴⁹

Similarly, Helen Joseph highlights a choice that was externally motivated. She says:

I thought about the past ten years and what my life had become, different indeed from anything that I had ever imagined. I had slipped easily, almost unconsciously, into this new political life, which absorbed so much of all my days and nights. I had not made a deliberate choice. Bonhoeffer, the famous German pastor, executed in a Nazi gaol, had said, "I know what I have chosen." That was not true of me. I had not been aware of any specific choice ... Coming to South Africa had been fortuitous, the result of a riding accident.⁵⁰

Joseph goes further and demonstrates her transition from a conscious subjective autonomous choice to an externally motivated (etic) choice, which translates into a conscious autonomous (emic) choice, made within the circumstances in which she finds herself. She notes:

My air force career was more of an *actual choice*, and obviously my late political development had begun during my war service. The community service, which followed it, had pushed me further along a road, which I still did not recognise as any particular road.

46. Ricour, "History and Hermeneutics", p 686.

47. F.A. Olafson, "Existentialism, Marxism, and Historical Justification", *Ethics*, 65, 2, 1955, p 126.

48. Ricour, "History and Hermeneutics", p 686.

49. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, Part 2, "The Trade Unions".

50. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 15, "House Arrest".

Yet it was one, an important one for me, and in the 1950s my feet were firmly on the road of political struggle, never to leave it again.⁵¹

Later she says: "Yet, since I had chosen the road of public political action, I could not hope to escape ... police attention."⁵² In this regard Baard's and Joseph's autonomous choices illustrate the ways in which the individual's unique life-plan revolves around the conditions that made the individual's choice possible. For both women, existentialism becomes a relevant commentary on the nature of the individual autonomy, an issue that calls for an interrogation of the whole notion of "choice" and, ultimately that of human freedom to choose. In this respect, the subjective autonomy postulated in Baard's life history and Joseph's autobiography, facilitates a comparative appreciation of women's experiences at the level of their interpretation of "choice".

Phenomenology

Phenomenology provides a viable entry into Baard's and Joseph's experiences of their struggle against apartheid. Phenomenology, that is, an interpretive-descriptive analysis of experience which focuses on the link between experience and consciousness, focuses on people's perceptions of their experiences. It is their subjective interpretation of events or phenomena, rather than a mere narration of those events. People who were struggling against apartheid presented their own perception of hegemony. According to Bozzoli: "Hegemony is, after all, a process, a 'moving equilibrium', in which spaces are created, fought for, and won by those at the bottom from those at the top".⁵³ Baard and Joseph interpret hegemony at two levels. First, they challenge apartheid as a hegemonic political system. Baard says: I "still want this country to be like the Freedom Charter says. South Africa belongs to the people who are staying here. It belongs to them, and there is nobody who can claim it as his own."⁵⁴ Baard seems to be preoccupied not so much with skin colour as with the system in operation. Joseph, although she is a privileged white middle-class enfranchised woman, presents her own perception of hegemony. She is explicit:

I accepted that the Medical Aid Society work was to some extent constructive and not merely palliative, but it still did not help my growing feeling that it was the system itself, the colour bar, that had to be attacked.⁵⁵

She perceives the suffering of the Africans and other races as having been couched in terms of skin colour; race.

Second, both Baard and Joseph challenge the traditional patriarchal forms of hegemony by participating in women's movements such as the Federation of South African Women and the ANC Women's League. As Baard explains:

But some of the women couldn't come to the meetings. Sometimes you would be talking to a woman, telling her about the organization, and then she would say, "My husband doesn't want me to go to the meetings ...". You know what men are – some of them didn't understand what was happening and they would refuse for their wives to go. They

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51. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 15, "House Arrest" (emphasis added).
 52. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 6, "Hear us!"
 53. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 6, "Hear us!"
 54. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, Part 4.
 55. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 4, "Becoming an Activist".

would say: "Well, you must look after your children, look after your house. I have no time for what you are trying to do."⁵⁶

Similarly, Joseph notes: "We represent and we speak on behalf of thousands of women – women who could not be with us. But all over this country, at this moment, women are watching and thinking of us. Their hearts are with us."⁵⁷ The two narratives' major contribution has not been the retrieval of women's experiences *per se*, but the ability to read and play out the complexity of women's sentiments and consciousness, thereby blurring boundaries at the level of women's consciousness and interpretation of their experiences of different forms of hegemony.

However, there are notable differences in the manner Baard and Joseph conceptualise hegemony. For Baard, it was a complete revolution. For Joseph, an initial demand for liberal reforms rather than a complete revolution. As she explained at length:

At the Federation Conference we discussed the suggested demands very carefully and only two were dropped. One was the section calling for better conditions in the "reserves", the parts of South Africa set aside for occupation by Africans, the 13 per cent of the land for 85 per cent of the people. I was still ignorant of much that mattered to the African people and had not appreciated that the demand would be for a just redistribution of the land, not better reserves. I had accepted, as I accepted so much else, the factual existence of the reserves and demanded, therefore, amelioration of what ought not to be.

The other demand, which was rejected was also my contribution – for better birth control clinics. This was my social work approach and drew lively protest from both men and women. (There were always a few men at our women's conferences, probably out of curiosity.) No one must tamper with the right to bear children, no matter what the social or health consequences. I know that especially in urban areas, health education has brought a somewhat different approach now to birth control, but at that time there were strong political overtones, a suspicion that the "system" sought to reduce the numbers of African people, while encouraging an increase in the white birthrate.⁵⁸

Joseph had been fighting side by side with Africans but from a completely different perspective of a freedom that was couched in liberal reforms until such time that her submissions were turned down. She undergoes a moment of self-metamorphosis where her perception of freedom transforms to that of a complete revolution.

Both women perceived unity and difference in their struggle against apartheid. For example, the 1952 Defiance Campaign is presented as an all encompassing activity. Women and men were both involved. According to Baard: "Everyone decided that we were not going to obey the laws which the government had made because if no one obeyed these laws then they would have to take them away."⁵⁹ Baard and Joseph conceptualise and present the 1956 anti-pass campaign march as a women's issue. However, Baard sees a difference in the women's march when she says: "What a sight, so quiet, and so much colour, many women in green, gold and black, and the Indian women in their bright saris!"⁶⁰ Joseph straddles between her perception of racial unity in a women's demonstration against the pass laws, and difference in that unity. She notes:

56. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, Part 2, "The ANC and the Women's League".

57. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1. Chapter I. "Twenty thousand strong we marched".

58. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 5, "South Africa Belongs to All who Live in It".

59. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, Part 2, "The Defiance Campaign".

60. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, Part 2, "The Fight against Passes Continues".

They had marched, that 20 000, pressed solidly together ... I could see nothing but women following us, thousands of women marching, carrying letters of defiant protest against unjust laws, against the hated pass system, against passes for African women.”⁶¹

She perceives the category “women” as transcending racial boundaries, but she is quite aware that what brings women of all races together is not a unified experience of the pass laws but “sisterhood”. As she clarifies: “We who are not African women know how our sisters suffer. ... we come as women united in our purpose to save the African women from the degradation of passes.”⁶² The concept of male and female political unity overshadows Joseph’s narrative. “I looked at those many faces until they became only one face, the face of the suffering black people of South Africa.”⁶³ She does not refer to women only but she conflates women of all races into a symbol of a unified anti-apartheid force of all Africans, regardless of gender.

Both Joseph and Baard perceive the anti-pass struggle as both a male and female cause. Joseph notes, “this is what the pass laws have brought to African men – punishment and misery, not for a crime, but for the lack of a pass”.⁶⁴ Baard presents a similar interpretation of apartheid but goes beyond Joseph in emphasising women’s initiative. She notes:

Also the men knew what the passes meant; they knew what it was like to carry a pass, and they thought that maybe: the women could do something so that there were no more passes for anyone, not even the men.⁶⁵

Baard goes further in gendering the effects of the pass system on women. She clarifies: “We decided that – shjoo! – if we women had to do the same thing it will be terrible for us and for our families, so we better fight now.”⁶⁶ By attaching meaning to the effects of the pass system on African women, Baard equates the pass system with total family disintegration in a culture where women are associated with family custodianship. In this case phenomenology offers a typical example of the ways in which two different methods, i.e. a life history and an autobiography, can facilitate a comparative analysis of women’s experiences if considered from a phenomenological perspective.

Although they both were imprisoned, Helen Joseph and Frances Baard experienced jail differently. For Baard, the time was long: “So I was convicted for five years, and I went to jail for five years.”⁶⁷ Joseph went to jail for a few months. Baard restricts her jail narrative to African women’s experiences only, and does not mention anything about preferential treatment. Unlike Baard, Joseph is very outspoken about the nitty gritty of differences in the way white and African prisoners were treated. The white skin which defines her middle- class superiority turns out to be a curse for Joseph. She attaches meaning to preferential treatment by consistently making reference to her skin colour: “As we climbed out, Lillian [Ngoyi] burst out bitterly, ‘You are better off with your pink skin!’ It was true. Her words have remained with me and there was

61. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Chapter 1, “Twenty Thousand Strong we March”.

62. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Chapter 1, “Twenty Thousand Strong we March”.

63. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Chapter 1, “Twenty Thousand Strong we March”.

64. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Chapter 1, “Twenty Thousand Strong we March”.

65. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, Part 2, “The Fight against Passes Continues”.

66. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, Part 2, “The Fight against Passes Continues”.

67. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, Part 3, “Jail”.

nothing I could say or do.”⁶⁸ Once again, she apologetically blames it all on her skin colour. As she scornfully clarifies:

It was as Lilian had said: my pink skin brought me a bed, sheets, blankets. The mattress was revolting, urine stained, but Lilian slept on a mat on the floor with only blankets. My food was better. I had a sanitary bucket with a lid. She had an open bucket covered with a cloth. *I learnt to hate my pink skin* but I could not change it nor expiate it.⁶⁹

Once again she curses racial preferential treatment when she reflects:

Our privileged position as whites, even in gaol, was brought home to me more than ever by these amazing arrangements for our living quarters during detention. I knew that nothing like this would be provided for black detainees. It had to be accepted because there was no way to reject it. It was yet another example of the unjust racial disparity, which was to haunt me throughout my life, especially when it touched me as personally as it did then. I had to go to court every day to meet my friends, my fellow accused, knowing that my conditions in gaol were so much better than theirs. Lilian had indeed spelt it out – I was better off with my pink skin.⁷⁰

Joseph loathes her pink skin because she perceives it as a barrier between her and the people with whom she feels she should be. As she later clarifies, “I was now where I belonged, with the oppressed people, moving into the next stage of the struggle for peace, justice and freedom”.⁷¹

Preferential treatment based on racial differences extended to other forms of prisoner treatment. There were differences in the time of imprisonment. For Baard it was five years, but for Joseph it was for a few months. Banishment and house arrest were experienced differently. Baard was banished from Port Elizabeth and she did not see her children for ten years. Joseph was placed under house arrest. She notes:

I had been promoted to the privileged class as I could be out of my house for twelve hours on every weekday. Sonia Bunting, Jack Hodgson, Moses Kotane, all good friends, had to remain in their homes without ever going out, for five years, nearly 2 000 days.⁷²

Joseph perceives preferential treatment of white and African women in terms of the pervasive racial ideology deeply embedded in the system of apartheid. Differences in skin colour became the basis of differences in prison treatment for women who were supposedly fighting side by side.

Among other things, phenomenology engages desire. This approach is one level at which women's political history can be compared using a life history and an autobiography. Baard engages this approach in her interpretation of her experiences as a political activist. The title of her life history, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, points to the existence of an internal longing for what Baard was not allowed to have, but was determined to fight for even if that entailed physical banishment. Baard says: “I can't give up because the spirit is still there. I can't help it, even if I wanted to give up. Although I can't do everything physically, the spirit still wants what I have always wanted.”⁷³ When she was told that the ANC had been banned, Baard responded: “But my spirit is not

68. Joseph, *Side by Side*. Part 1, Chapter 10, “Trial by Detention”.

69. Joseph, *Side by Side*. Part 1, Chapter 10, “Trial by Detention” (emphasis added).

70. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 10, “Trial by Detention”.

71. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 6, “Hear us!”

72. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 11, “Witness for Freedom”.

73. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, Part 4.

banned. I still say that I want freedom in my lifetime. I don't care if the African National Congress is banned or what-what, *my spirit is not banned*.⁷⁴ In contrast, Helen Joseph does not express her experiences in terms of a longing desire.

Gender, race and class

Baard and Joseph are not blind to gender issues because they make reference to both women and men. Baard's epilogue is strongly in favour of the cooperative action of women and men. She emphasises:

We women have pledged from the outset that we are going to work side-by-side with our men, until freedom is obtained. I wish our women could stand together now as they have been standing together for a long time with their men. They must be militant like the men. We know that there is no freedom, which can be for the men without the women ... They mustn't leave everything to the men.⁷⁵

For Joseph, the gendered approach to the struggle becomes the title of her autobiography, *Side by Side*.

While there are numerous instances of women and men fighting together against apartheid, such as the national Defiance Campaign of 1950; the anti-pass campaigns of 1956; and the potato boycott of 1959, there were instances where race mediated gender. For instance, even though Joseph was fighting against the colour bar, she still finds race/colour pervading the anti-apartheid sect of the white liberals. She explains:

There had, in fact, been considerable division of opinion on whether the Congress of Democrats should have a multiracial membership or not, but the ANC had been adamant on this point. The Congress of Democrats must be white. As whites we could be equal partners in the Congress but we would not be welcome to compete with the other congresses for membership. Several people at the conference pressed for multiracial membership, but the ANC viewpoint finally prevailed. The South African Congress of Democrats, the COD, as it became known, was formed with a white membership, to be the white wing of the Congress Alliance.⁷⁶

Joseph does not explain why the ANC would not allow Africans to be part of the South African Congress of Democrats, but if she was not part of the ANC she took consolation from the fact that she was a member of an organisation that "identified itself with the struggle for freedom and justice, ... even if it was not itself multiracial in composition".⁷⁷

The fluidity and complexity of categories such as "gender, race and class", is best captured by Baard. She notes that:

There were such a lot of things happening at that time, and some very good things too. In 1955 a very great thing happened. We organized the Congress of the People at Kliptown. Ooh! What a wonderful thing was there! All over the country people organized to come to that congress, and all the groups worked together to organize it and make it truly national, so that everyone was represented there. Everyone was invited to come. Even SACTU sent delegates too, though they weren't a member of the Congress Alliance yet. SACTU only

74. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, Part 3, "Jail".

75. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, Part 4.

76. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 4, "Becoming an Activist".

77. Joseph, *Side by Side*, Part 1, Chapter 4, "Becoming an Activist".

joined the Congress Alliance later. At that time it was only the ANC, the Coloured Congress, the Indian Congress and the Congress of Democrats.⁷⁸

But she tends to challenge this fluidity when she interprets the colour of the ANC flag:

It looked so good, all these women in uniforms, green, yellow and black, the same as the ANC flag. Black for us, the black people of the country, green for the green pastures, and yellow (it was not actually yellow; it was gold) for the gold underneath. And we would sing too. Hawu! We were so proud in those uniforms.⁷⁹

If black on the flag symbolised the black people of the country, how did Baard perceive people of other races with whom she fought against apartheid? Baard's racist stance, as expressed in her pride over the ANC flag, invokes an investigation into changes in ways Baard and Joseph conceptualised unity among all South Africans, and diversity in that unity. What were the other races fighting for if the colour of the flag does not represent them?

Conclusion

The foregoing has been an attempt to evaluate the pros and cons of using personal narratives as a methodological approach in writing comparative women's history. Personal narratives give important insight into the complexity of reality and the contradictory ways in which women have conceptualised and coped with historical changes. Their major contribution has not been the retrieval of women's experiences, but the ability to read and play out the complexity of women's sentiments and consciousness. Use of personal narratives in comparing women's experiences across gender, race and class is not without problems. The subjective 'I' carries different connotations in life histories, autobiographies and diaries, culminating in the production of what one might call "situated knowledge". If knowledge is situated in people's diverse perceptions of their social locations, subjective narratives of women's experiences retrieved from different forms of personal narratives have a bearing on comparisons that can be drawn on women's historical experiences. Nevertheless, such problems do not render personal narratives a useless methodology in comparative women's history. African women's life histories and autobiographies do not seem to show much difference in their use of phenomenology.

Abstract

Women's personal narratives constitute the core of historical inquiry in women's history even though the category "woman" has been contested and redefined at different levels in different cultures. The article purports to provide a general overview of prospects and problems of autobiographies and life histories as a methodology of writing comparative women's political history. The article argues that the differences in the 'I' that is spoken of as a retrospective product in life histories, and the 'I' that speaks for itself as a retrospective cumulative experience in autobiographies, has a bearing on the kind of knowledge that scholars produce on comparative women's political history. It is significant to note that while it is possible to blur boundaries and draw comparisons on women's experiences, the nature of the knowledge produced by using different personal narratives has a bearing on the levels at which similarities of such experiences are drawn.

78. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, Part 2, "The Congress of the People".

79. Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, "Introduction".

Keywords: life histories; autobiographies; gender; women methodology; Helen Joseph; Frances Baard; apartheid.

Opsomming

Frances Baard en Helen Joseph se stryd teen apartheid, 1950–1963: 'n Vergelykende analise

Die persoonlike narratiewe van vroue vorm die kern van historiese ondersoek in vroue geskiedenis. Dit is die geval ondanks die feit dat die kategorie “vroue” gekontesteer en gherdefinieer is op verskillende vlakke in verskillende kulture. Die artikel gee 'n algemene oorsig van die moontlikhede en probleme van autobiografieë en lewensgeskiedenis as 'n metodologie by die skryf van vergelykende politieke geskiedenis van vroue. Hier word geargumenteer dat die verskille in die “ek” waarvan daar gepraat word as 'n retroperspektiewe produk van lewensgeskiedenis, en die “ek” wat namens die self praat as 'n retroperspektiewe kumulatiewe ondervinding in autobiografieë 'n invloed het op die tipe kennis wat skrywers produseer in vergelykende politieke geskiedenis van vroue. Dit is noodsaaklik om kennis te neem van die feit dat alhoewel dit moontlik is om die grense te versag en vergelykings te tref rakende die ervarings van vroue, die aard van die kennis wat geproduseer word deur die gebruik van verskillende persoonlike narratiewe 'n invloed het op die vlak waar sulke ooreenstemmende ervarings plaasvind.

Sleutelwoorde: lewensgeskiedenis; autobiografieë; gender; vroue metodologie; Helen Joseph; Frances Baard; apartheid.