

# **A World of Their Own**



**A HISTORY  
OF SOUTH  
AFRICAN  
WOMEN'S  
EDUCATION**

**Meghan  
Healy-Clancy**

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## A History of South African Women's Education

Meghan Healy-Clancy

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## A World of Their Own

Reconsiderations in  
Southern African History

*Richard Elphick, Editor*

## On Terminology and Orthography

Racial terminology presents manifold problems when writing after – and when attempting to write ourselves *out of* – apartheid. While some scholars have tried to minimise their use of such terminology as a protest against its persistent racialising logic, I use the terms ‘African’, ‘black’ and ‘white’ in order to analyse most fully a nation whose past was shaped by these social categories and which (like the United States) has plainly not become ‘post-racial’ after the dismantling of legal regimes of racial inequality. I employ the term ‘African’ to refer to those South Africans classified as ‘Native’ or ‘Bantu’ by colonial and apartheid officials. When I use the term ‘black’, I refer to all South Africans historically classified as ‘Non-European’ or ‘Non-White’ – including those classified as ‘African’, ‘Coloured’, ‘Asiatic’ or ‘Indian’. When applied to South Africans, the term ‘white’ refers to those historically classified as ‘European’ or ‘White’. I refer to ‘black Americans’ and ‘African Americans’ interchangeably. I also refer to ‘white Americans’ on occasion, but because the vast majority of the missionaries herein were white, this is less often specified.

Orthography presents problems that are less political than logistical. IsiZulu orthography changed over the period that this study covers, meaning that the names of certain individuals have been variously spelt over the course of their lives in published and archival materials. I have used the spelling that individuals used themselves in personal correspondence or publications as adults.

## Abbreviations

AME	African Methodist Episcopal
ANC	African National Congress
HSRP	Historic Schools Restoration Project
ICU	Industrial and Commercial Workers Union
ISOGA	Inanda Seminary Old Girls Association
LMS	London Missionary Society
MEDUNSA	Medical University of Southern Africa
SANNC	South African Native National Congress
SASO	South African Students' Organisation
UCBWM	United Church Board for World Ministries
UCCSA	United Congregational Church of Southern Africa
UCT	University of Cape Town
UDF	United Democratic Front

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## Introduction

Inanda Seminary stands some fifteen miles north of Durban, Kwa-Zulu-Natal, its verdant campus separated from the township around it by a long driveway and an electric fence. Amidst whitewashed buildings and jacarandas, neatly attired schoolgirls file between classrooms, the doors to which almost invariably remain unlocked. On the 140th anniversary of the high school's 1869 founding under the auspices of the American Zulu Mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, these students greeted alumnae who call themselves 'Old Girls' and who include some of South Africa's most prominent women. Among these alumnae was the then deputy president Baleka Mbete, class of 1968, who highlighted her alma mater's role in the struggle that had culminated in the 1994 victory of her party, the African National Congress. 'Thinking back to the 140 years of this seminary's existence is like walking through the heritage route of the liberation struggle that brought us our freedom in 1994,' Mbete declared, as it was out of Inanda that so many activist women had come.<sup>1</sup>

These linkages between mission schooling, nationalist struggle and post-colonial leadership may seem familiar to scholars of anti-colonialism elsewhere. Like educated elites throughout much of Africa in the late nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, mission-educated Africans in South Africa found that the skills and expectations they had forged in the classroom clashed radically with the constraints facing them outside, and many articulated their grievances in nationalist movements. Yet while their counterparts in west and east Africa would achieve national sovereignty in the 1950s and 1960s, educated elite South Africans encountered the elaboration of apartheid. And as the apartheid state introduced the Bantu



Education Act of 1953, it closed or took over almost all mission schools. As elites elsewhere attempted to deploy schooling for nation building, black South Africans found their political organisations banned and their children mostly consigned to inferior state schools, where youth forged the visions that culminated in the Soweto schools boycotts of 1976 and the protests and reforms that followed. Thus what Mbete called the ‘heritage route of the liberation struggle’ was in fact a more winding road.

This book follows the winding road through Inanda’s past to reveal a tradition of educated black women’s social leadership that predated and has survived apartheid. This tradition has been almost wholly neglected in the historiography, despite a profusion of studies that have elaborated an intersecting tradition of educated black men’s political leadership in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Understanding this enduring women’s tradition enables reconsiderations of not only ‘the liberation struggle’ of which Mbete spoke but also a longer history of gendered struggles. In these latter struggles—with black and white men, with white women, and amongst themselves—black women have claimed schools as sites at which to develop, through idioms of ‘social service’, a moral authority that could transcend the limitations of a racialised patriarchy.

Through the first social history of Inanda Seminary,<sup>3</sup> this book offers the first exploration of the expansion of black women’s education in South Africa—across the *longue durée* of colonialism, segregation, and apartheid. This study shows how schools have been women’s spaces since the nineteenth-century expansion of mission education, which provided nearly all schooling available to Africans before apartheid. By the early twentieth century, over half of all African students in South Africa were female. Yet strikingly, it was only during apartheid that women began to meet or exceed the educational achievements of men at all levels. This study examines why black women’s educational opportunities expanded in this period of racial oppression, and to what ends. It explains the expansion of African women’s schooling as an outcome of what I term a ‘politics of social reproduction’, building upon a nuanced conception of social reproduction as ‘the gendered processes by which workers and children survive and are reproduced’.<sup>4</sup>