ASR Forum on Women and Gender in Africa: Part 2

COMMENTARY

Graphic Novel Histories: Women's Organized Resistance to Slum Clearance in Crossroads, South Africa, 1975–2015

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Keywords: Forced removals; African history; women; gender; apartheid; Crossroads; Cape Town; South Africa; graphic novels; comics; cartoons

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The *Crossroads* series, first published by Cape Town's Isotrope Comics in 2014, is a six-part comic book series that tells a history of African women's organized resistance to forced removals and their ongoing struggles for housing in Cape Town.[1] The women protested their living conditions at the peak of apartheid, and again in 1998. In 2015 there were still more than 460,000 families on the city's housing lists, waiting for access to decent shelter. Based on my Ph.D. dissertation, and in partnership with the local artists André Trantraal and Nathan Trantraal (known as the Trantraal Brothers) and Ashley Marais, I have developed a graphic or cartoon history drawn from dialogue with women who continue to organize for their right to obtain housing (see figure 1).[2]

The history draws on sixty life narratives of so-called "squatter" women in Crossroads, the longest surviving African informal settlement under apartheid in Cape Town. The first case follows African women leaders in the 1970s and their many strategies for resisting the migrant labor system and its forced removals. Returning to the city illegally, they turned the building of shacks into a highly visible political protest using posters, plays, pickets, direct action, media campaigns, alliance building, and vigils (see figure 2). Their efforts received international attention, including an appeal on the part of twenty-two members of the United States Congress for an end to the demolition of Crossroads in Cape Town.[3]

Although the women's campaign had unprecedented and history-changing victories in the 1970s, its gains were pushed back through a reconfiguration of power and politics, as reforms aimed at "orderly urbanization" and exclusive, commoditized, low-cost housing were introduced, and state-sponsored vigilantes (*witdoeke*) set the camp on fire and chased out seventy thousand squatters in 1986. Twenty years later, in 1998, in the same place and facing some of the same powerful male figures, the Women's Power Group brought together three hundred women from across deep divisions of the traumatic previous decade. They staged a four-month sit-in at the City Council's Housing Offices demanding government accountability for undelivered housing and public services. That demonstration was one of the first and most prolonged of what are now daily service delivery protests. Yet these women's actions are predominantly oversimplified by South African media and disconnected from the complicated legacies of apartheid that continue to plague Cape Town.

In both the 1970s and 1990s Crossroads women's protests were organized collectively, beyond party politics and separately from men, to confront state power with demands for the distribution of resources for basic survival (see figure 3). Yet these moments of women-only organizing were rarely connected to one another in public debate, and the representation of those protests has remained controversial. The *Crossroads* graphic history series aims to challenge the reproduction of masculinist and nationalist history by questioning the dominant struggle narratives of South Africa's past. The conventional history freeze-frames Crossroads women as heroes

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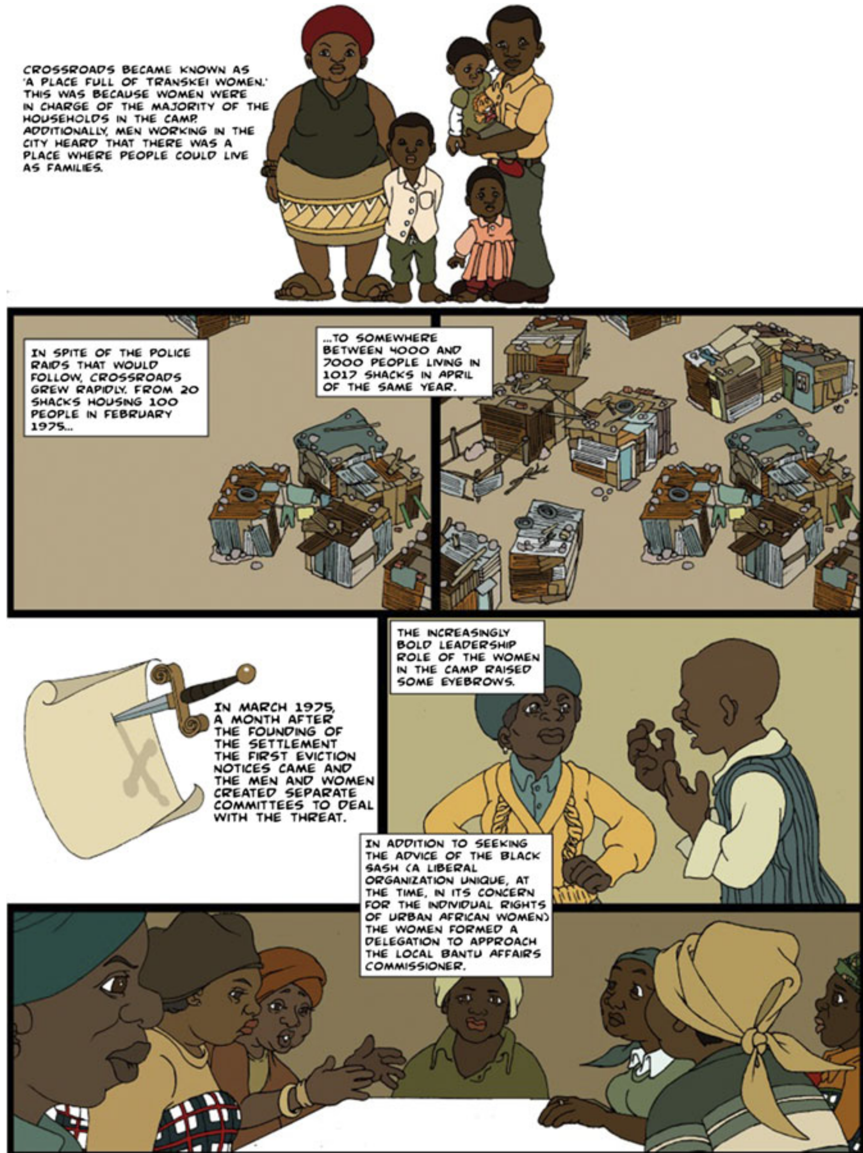
Figure 1. The images here illustrate the establishment, growth, and initial responses to eviction notices in Crossroads in 1975.



Source: Benson, Trantraal, Trantraal, and Marais (2014a:6)

of the past and disconnects them from current contestations with authority, which are framed as the work of impatient troublemakers at best and as naive pawns of territorial shack-lord violence at worst. Histories of the Crossroads women's movements are therefore important windows into the gendered and generational dynamics of migration, militarization,

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Figure 2. Following a police raid on September 14, 1978, in which 450 residents were beaten and arrested and one man was shot and killed, the Women's Committee marched on to the Langa courthouse.

Source: Benson, Trantraal, Trantraal, and Marais (2014b:11)

displacement, and poverty, and the central role of women in apartheid resistance, slum clearance resistance, and the ongoing struggles for the city and its history.[4]

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Figure 3. Raids and arrests in Crossroads escalated in brutality and intensity and women responded with mass action in 1978.

Source: Benson, Trantraal, Trantraal, and Marais (2014a:11)

Rooted in a thorough and thoughtfully presented chronology, the *Crossroads* series draws on and incorporates original archival press, posters, photography, documentary clips, and drawings representing various themes,

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people, and positions to represent the daily life of the township and the deep significance of its struggles for the rest of the city. The series also presents a multilayered conversation between the present and the past, between violence and poetry, and between development and displacement in twenty-first century Cape Town. The objective of this project is to produce a beautiful, captivating, accessible narrative about the forgotten and in many ways uncomfortable history of Cape Town that can be used as an educational tool and for engaging in debates about where we came from and where we are going (see figure 4).[5] The project was motivated by the belief that knowing history is essential for digesting the complexity and continuities of the recent past, and that such knowledge can support organizing for social change.

The artists responsible for designing and illustrating the project are André and Nathan Trantraal, who outsourced some of the drawings for their designs to their longtime associate Ashley Marais. The Trantraal Brothers are political cartoonists best known for their weekly strips in the *Cape Times*, the *Rapport* newspaper, and their comic book *Coloureds* (2010) about children living in Bishop Lavis, the township where they grew up.[6] When I first saw their work I was reminded of the style of Aaron McGruder in *The Boondocks*, and I was captivated by thoughts of these sharp-thinking, talented artists who could interlock humanity, politics, and humor.[7] The Trantraals' ironic perspective, and their ability to expose both beauty and absurdity, comes through in their drawings and poetry (see Trantraal Brothers & Marais 2008; Trantraal Brothers 2010; N. Trantraal 2013). So I approached them with the extended Crossroads story. We quickly connected over a shared appreciation of the work of Joe Sacco (2001, 2003, 2005) and Chester Brown (2006), and embarked on a series of book-lending exchanges and conversations focused on what this project could look like. While much of the Trantraals' work to date draws on autobiography, it has been decisively fictionalized, and this initiated an ongoing discussion around the art of storytelling. To what extent was I willing to sort through the details and the facts of a five-hundred-page dissertation in order to convey powerful truths and present a captivating story? André warned that artistic beauty can be overshadowed by too many words on a page, and Nathan said bluntly, "There is no way we are doing an educational pamphlet."[8]

What had convinced me that we could find a medium that satisfied both the artists and the historian was Ilan Stavans and Lalo Alcaraz's *Latino U.S.A.: A Cartoon History* (2012), a book that was described by Stavans in the book's promotional material as a lifelong attempt to combine serious literature and responsible history "with the inherently theatrical and humorous nature of the comics."[9] It does so by introducing a cast of archetypal characters—a skeleton, a pirate, a toucan, and others—who then debate and talk above the background panels that chronicle the history of Latinos in the U.S. over a five-hundred-year period. This approach resonated with my motivation to turn the Crossroads history into an accessible book that could expose what happened to women activists in Crossroads as

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Figure 4. In response to continued raids, women in Crossroads created and performed a theatrical production called *Imfuduso* (isiXhosa for Exodus) that toured the country between 1979 and 1981 publicizing their ongoing struggle to resist demolition of the camp and their deportation to the Bantustans.

Source: Benson, Trantraal, Trantraal, and Marais (2015:13)

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well as what happened to their iconic history. Their lives beyond the spotlight, the issues of shack-dwelling and access to basic human needs that they politicized, and official versions of their histories have all taken divergent trajectories over the past forty years. Political art seemed like an ideal way to weave together the details and significance of this story in a way that speaks to both direct descendents of this struggle and to people currently facing crises of urban segregation, substandard housing, and unaffordable privatized basic services in Cape Town and beyond.[10]

This aspect of presenting an interaction between the past and present was central to the project, in part because after writing my dissertation I continued to draw heavily on the Crossroads history in courses I ran with community-based activists in social movements and labor unions while working as a researcher and educator at the International Labour Research and Information Group, a labor service organization initiated by the University of Cape Town in the 1980s to do outreach research and education work in support of emerging black trade unions .[11] I found that participants responded with enthusiasm to the inspiring history of Crossroads, and that it prompted critical debates on current attempts to resist "slum eradication," confront domestic and structural gender-based violence, mobilize for the delivery of basic public services like health, water, education, and housing, and understand the inherited and increasingly brutal norms of neoliberal patriarchy. These conversations highlighted a hunger for histories that could contribute to answering vexing questions about the disappointments of democracy and the unfulfilled expectations of independence, as well as for stories that expose the role of power in the production of history. How do you know what you know? For whom is it true? How does change come about?

In these courses I drew on a range of primary historical sources and was inspired by educators and writers who have made the larger political and economic contexts accessible while offering perspectives that are seldom presented.[12] These resources can be powerful tools for inspiring creativity in thinking about how to intervene in the historical present. They can also spark a sense of outrage over the degree to which students of history are denied access to vital information and perspectives and are often fed, instead, boring sets of dates to memorize. In the introduction to *Firebrands: Portraits from the Americas* (2010), a book of written and illustrated portraits of underappreciated radicals designed for high school–age readers, Taylor Sparrow argues for the need to learn history "like the way you learn to love music, poetry and kissing" lest the world remain "a mystery to you and you'll have to stumble through your days without being able to make any sense of what's happening, or what you could possibly do differently" (2010:iii).

Many political history projects share this view that decisions about what is included and excluded from our history books are not accidental or random, and that new histories need multiple spaces of expression so that they can expose their own construction as well as potentially influence public

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debate. André Trantraal spoke of the role of art and collaboration to create new stories and have them heard:

> It is still an ongoing process for us to challenge and shift stories away from oversimplified township stereotypes to show the more complicated reality. For girls and women in particular these stories are not only inauthentic but also just missing in action. There are so few respectful portrayals that communicate the reality of these kinds of experiences. *Crossroads* is an exciting collaboration because it brings together different kinds of people bringing different skills and knowledge to the table to create a complex representation of how the history of forced removals and segregation is affecting the slow rate of transformation for our city today. Working in conjunction with researchers who bring historical research materials, and shack dwellers and activists who bring their own stories, will allow us to create a powerful and important narrative. The best way to remember things is to be moved by them, and we aim to use art to play this role.[13]

In this process, collaborative art has become one way to tell an important story and to address some dilemmas that have emerged in the writing of African women's histories. The *Crossroads* series attempts to provide a social biography of two collectives of women while at the same time telling the stories of the individual women involved. The subtitle of part 1, *I Live Where I Like*, echoes Steve Biko's famous comment "I write what I like" (Biko 2002) to underscore how history is made and recorded, with the power of collective mobilization playing off the idea of speaking with one's feet, and the related but different aspect of authorizing history. In this way the story grows out of a tradition of scholarship that emerged in the 1970s questioning the absence of women in African historiography and subsequent questioning in the 1990s in regard to authority and authorship of African women's history. The milestones of the story come from the experiences of women in Crossroads and the range of people and events that influenced the outcome of their actions, including the role of the shifting global economy. This process is portrayed in part 2, *Crossroads: I Took Out the Loudhailer* (2014b), in an image of apartheid hardliners and reformers wrestling over the direction of their sinking apartheid ship—a depiction of the state of conflict and possibility that existed in South Africa from the late 1970s to the1990s (see figure 5).

This illustration, which represents the broader context, is followed by an analysis of the impact of women's mobilizing on economic reforms and the process by which women were subsequently written out of that history. The series attempts to juxtapose dominant narratives with the current realities of the lives of the majority in Crossroads. For example, it presents snapshots of people in power engaged in the official proclamation of key historical moments (e.g., in speeches, newspaper reports, and the reports of official commissions), and sets these against the unfolding social history of the camp. Drawing on ideas of gendered chronologies (see, e.g., Geiger, Musisi, & Allman 2002), the series illustrates the ways in which the transition

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Figure 5. Crossroads became symbolic of the failures of apartheid to maintain cities as white spaces in the 1970s, and debates about how to retain or reform apartheid were played out in waves of attack and then negotiation with the camp in 1978.

Source: Benson, Trantraal, Trantraal, and Marais (2014b:7)

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Figure 6. Winnie Nkosi recounts her experiences of forced removals and her role in organizing women in Crossroads from 1975, including being incarcerated by the apartheid police and later spending four days held in a container by *witdoeke* vigilantes in 1986.

Source: Benson, Trantraal, Trantraal, and Marais 2016:21

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from apartheid to majority rule in 1994 was not, in fact, a key turning point in the story. In part 6 (forthcoming) we will hear from Nondumiso Nosisi Mbeka, an activist in 2005 whose circumstances were not dramatically different from those of women in 1975: "I can't say I am ten years in freedom. . . . We are still waiting for 1994" (interview, Sigcawu Primary School, Old Crossroads, February 6, 2006; translated by Nomakhwezi Dlaba). In both subtle and obvious ways, the series reflects on how power, as Mahmood Mamdani (1996) shows, is reproduced and reasserted over time, and illustrates how people were incorporated into the system of apartheid even at the peak of the antiapartheid struggle. For feminist historians concerned with the relationship between dynamics in the present and representations of the past, the series attempts to expose the story that has been concealed by officially sanctioned public narratives and to signal the controversial but necessary politics of re-presentation.[14] In the series we draw on life narratives of older women like Mama Nkosi (see figure 6) who share their recollections of the past in speech bubbles—a clever idea on the part of the Trantraals to convince the historian that we can relay perspectives without footnotes.[15]

The *Crossroads* series thus represents our determination to explain why African women were involved in gender-based organizing in Crossroads in the 1970s and 1990s, what they accomplished, and simultaneously, how the methods of collecting and presenting this history play a fundamental role in shaping the story.[16] With minimal words (although way too many, according to the comic book scenesters), the pictures aim to convey the knots, the contradictions, the dilemmas, the debates, and the seen and unseen elements of the story as it changed over time. It could not just be about recovering voices and telling a story of unsung heroes; it needed to address what Jean Allman calls "sanctioned forgetting" (2009:18) and Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls the construction of "silencing the past" (1995). In these ways the series aims to fulfill the request of veteran activist women in Crossroads to collaborate in capturing their story in a way that would captivate their children and grandchildren who claim "boredom" by the "past"; to reclaim it from problematic dominant narratives; and to move the story away from being significant only to those who lived it.

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Notes

1. Isotrope Comics (www.isotrope.co.za), based in Woodstock, Cape Town, publishes the work of emerging and established comic book artists and authors. Four parts of the *Crossroads* series have been published (2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015), while the fifth and sixth parts (2016) are forthcoming.

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2. There is no common term for these graphic story works of nonfiction. Joe Sacco's work has been called comic nonfiction; see, e.g., Sacco (2005). Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1991) is referred to both as a graphic novel and as a comic book history. Terry Hirst and Davinder Lamba's *The Struggle for Nairobi* (1994) is called a documentary comic book; Gabriel Akol, Santino Athian, Matthew Mabek, and Michael Ngor's *Echoes of the Lost Boys of Sudan* (2004) is published by Non-Fiction Reality Comics. Chester Brown called his *Riel* (2006) a comic strip biography. A. R. Flowers's *I See the Promised Land* (2013), a book of poetry about Martin Luther King Jr. with Patua scroll art illustrations by the Bengali artist Manu Chitrakar, is called a graphic narrative. And Vishwajyoti Ghosh called *This Side, That Side* (2013), his book about the "restorying of partition" in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, an "anthology of graphic narratives." Ilan Stavans describes *Latino U.S.A.* (Stavans & Alcatraz 2000) as a "cartoon history," while Paul Allatson (2006:23) refers to the same work as "a comic that falls into the genre of history."
3. See, for example, *Argus* (newspaper), September 19, 1978, cited in National Union of South African Students (1978:31–32) and *Washington Post* (1978).
4. For an expanded account of the history of Crossroads and its significance, see Cole (1987) and Benson (2009a, 2009b, 2015).
5. For a discussion of how graphic novels have been used in history classrooms, see Decker and Castro (2012). This article also includes a valuable appendix of historically themed graphic novels from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.
6. *Coloureds* was described by the South Africa graphic design website "Between10and5" as "a provocative Afrikaans comic featuring the Hill children, Caitlin and Nigel. The full colour comic is in the form of short stories where Caitlin and Nigel live out daily township life. The graphic novel's unique style of artwork has been described as manga meets Heidi and the language is peppered with township slang." ("The Creative Showcase," *Mail and Guardian*, July 16, 2010). Speaking at the 2008 Cape Town Book Fair, the political cartoonist Zapiro (Jonathan Shapiro) praised the Trantraal's second book, *Stormkaap* (2008) (with Ashley Marais), as "Manga meets Love and Rockets meets Cape Flats. There's been nothing like this combination. A new mix is what comics are all about."
7. *The Boondocks* was a comic strip written and drawn by Aaron McGruder that ran from 1996 to 2006 in more than 250 newspapers across the U.S. The strip was a hilarious and controversial depiction of black American life through the sharp eyes of two boys who had been moved out of southside Chicago to the predominantly white suburbs by their grandfather, a World War II and civil rights veteran, Robert Freeman. Huey wants to be a revolutionary, and his younger brother Riley wants to be a gangsta rapper. Their neighbors are an NAACP member and lawyer, Thomas DuBois, and his white wife, Sarah, who is also a lawyer. Their young daughter Jazmine is insecure about her identity and is often the subject of Huey's antipathy for (and radical history lessons related to) her lack of connection with her African ancestry. The political commentary is played out through humorus dialogue and sharp wit as the characters debate perspectives, dilemnas, and approaches to contemporary American surburban life. The first 800 strips have been collected in McGruder (2003).
8. These challenges of turning historical research into art are not uncommon. See Davis (1987).

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9. See www.amazon.com/Latino-USA-Revised-Edition-Cartoon/dp/0465082505. Other inspirations include Spiegelman (1991); Getz and Clarke (2009); Stassen (2006); Hirst and Lamba (1994); and Ghosh (2013).
10. I drew on this approach to tracking multiple trajectories of events from different perspectives and interweaving the history of histories found in the African social history scholarship. See, e.g., Isaacman (2005); Pohlandt-McCormick (2005).
11. The series will be distributed in Crossroads as well as used in the public school system as a support resource for a mandatory oral history component in the Grade 9 national curriculum, which has been recognized as particularly difficult for parents and teachers to facilitate.
12. Excellent sources include the work of Luli Callinicos (1980, 1987,1993); Frederikse (1982); Taylor (2008); and Flowers (2013). Over a five-year period I presented this material in courses with activists from organizations such as Informal Settlements in Struggle, the Anti-Eviction Campaign, South African Municipal Workers Union, Zille Raine Heights Residents, Sikhula Sonke Women Farmworkers, Blikkiesdorp and Concerned Residents of Delft, Ogoni Solidarity Forum, Whole World Women's Association of Women Refugees, Cape Town Housing Assembly, the Surplus People's Project, Treatment Action Campaign, People's Health Movement, the Boys Town Film Project, and Sounds of the South.
13. André Trantraal, quoted in "I Live Where I Like: Crossroads Continues: A Graphic Novel History of Women's Organised Resistance, Project Proposal," submitted to Pro Helvetia Johannesburg, Ant funding for Distribution of Artworks in the Southern African Region (May 2014).
14. See Mohanty (2003); Nagar and Geiger (2007).
15. For a creative approach to the dilemma of citations in graphic histories, see the endnotes in Brown's *Louis Riel* (2006). For our series there are discussions underway about compiling and posting online extensive references and further reading lists which will be included in our book compilation of the completed *Crossroads* series.
16. For further discussion of the latter topic, see Geiger (1990).

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