The stories told by the seventeen women who contribute to this compelling volume have two things in common. First is the fact that they have all returned to South Africa, the country they regard as ‘home’, after as many as thirty years of being forced to live in another country. Secondly, they had to find within themselves the strength to survive: “Exile is a vast desert” (82) says Baleka Mbete, and “Exile is about finding the resilience to survive anything” (154) says Ellen Pheko.

Otherwise their stories vary greatly, starting with the reasons that they first left South Africa. There are those who chose to leave but suddenly found themselves stateless when their passports were withdrawn; those who fled for their own safety, often having to leave young children behind; those who dutifully followed their husbands into exile; those who had no choice as they
were young children when their parents left; those who were born elsewhere but grew up believing they belonged in South Africa.

And while the dominant note in the stories of return is that the women felt “overjoyed to be home again” (195) there is a great variety within this sentiment. Some had spent their years away longing to return; some had made a rewarding life in a new country and were reluctant to uproot again; some, especially those born abroad, feel that they will never know the unquestioning sense of belonging that ‘home’ can give. Many profess a deep, over-riding bond with the country: “Your first and undying love is for your country” (90) says Baleka Mbete, while others emphasise that their time away provided an unchosen but valuable lesson in individual resourcefulness.

Many of the women who left in the late 1950s or early 1960s will have been near the end of their lives when they recorded their stories, like Thokozile maZulu Chaane whose death inspired the making of this book. We are the fortunate one, and should treasure what has now been preserved, distressing though its details often are. Many women reveal a side of struggle-history that is usually ignored in favour of triumphalism, and many of their details of long separations, loneliness and poverty as well as danger are probably unknown to most readers today.

For example, while it is often acknowledged that those who settled or hovered in neighbouring countries (including Tanzania) were always in danger from agents of the apartheid regime (assassinations, bombings and kidnappings happened in Botswana, Swaziland and Mozambique), it is not often admitted that exiles could equally find their lives threatened by their own kind as in-fighting between and within political groupings went unchecked. What Lauretta Ngcobo calls “the ever-changing African alliances” (126) meant that she and the wives of TT Letlaka and J D Nyaose heard with alarm that there was a conspiracy to kill their husbands once they arrived at a “divided camp” (124) in Zambia on their return from a PAC leaders’ meeting in Tanzania. Fortunately the Zambian police were persuaded to intervene. Rivalries were not always as dramatic, but Gonda Perez records that “tensions among the various BCM (Black Consciousness Movement) groups in Botswana” (137) were serious enough to decide her, her husband Jaya Josie, and two friends who had escaped with them, to steer clear of all of the groups. As a result they found themselves without accommodation or friends. Barbara Bell tells a sad story of disillusionment as promise after promise was not kept by the ANC.
The details of the collection also make up its delights, and there are some that will particularly intrigue readers in KZN. For example, the relations between the many exiles who fled to in Swaziland and the beleaguered government of that country were often strained because it was financially dependent on apartheid South Africa and under pressure not to accommodate political refugees. Rajes Pillay recounts without comment: “Jacob Zuma was sent to Swaziland to try to improve Swazi-ANC relations. He was scorned, with the Swazis categorically stating that they did not know Zuma, but knew Moses Mabhida. They would not talk to anyone else but Mabhida. Zuma left” (182).

On a different note, Mohau and Liepollo Pheko, both daughters of exile, write with great perception of what it has meant to grow up with a belief that South Africa (or an idealized ‘Azania’ as their PAC parents called it) is their ‘home’ but without an experience of belonging in that home. Liepollo concludes that although she has now made a fulfilling life for herself in Gauteng, “I am uneasy with the idea of ‘South Africa’ as my final destination, but remain in transit here on my way to Azania” (161). Mohau suggests that:

If belonging and identity are based on culture, language, heritage and statehood, exile has given me multiple cultures to which I had to adapt in order to belong. I am fluent in a suitcase-full of languages that I had to integrate into my life to fit in …. Being ‘othered’ has added layers of a rich social diversity and cultural multiplicity which has allowed me to enjoy the making of me in many nations, nationhoods and nationalisms …. exile has defined and secured my own positive identity that transcends race, geography, ethnicity, economics and ideology” (165-7).
A many-layered sense of self cannot be comfortable or easy, but perhaps these words have a lot to say to South Africans about the exclusive brand of nationalism they need to relinquish in order successfully to create citizenship for all in the modern world.

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