Meghan Healy-Clancy eruditely grafts the macro and the micro in her book *A World of Their Own: A History of South African Women’s Education*. The book chronicles the history of Inanda Seminary, a small and seemingly obscure private school for black girls that has had and continues to have a profound impact on South Africa.
Simultaneously, her book is an analysis of the manner in which the education of black girls in South Africa shaped the country during the colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid periods. Surprisingly, the book is a seamless fusion of parochial and national histories. Healy-Clancy tells a national history by comparing and contrasting it with the Seminary’s history, thus illuminating both. For this reviewer, it is a mystery how Healy-Clancy can at the same time coherently present a school to be anomalous and representative.

Healy-Clancy articulates how Congregational missionaries serving the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions established Inanda Seminary in 1869 as its flagship secondary educational institution for black girls. The school is the oldest extant high school for black girls in southern Africa. The Seminary cooperated with its sibling school, Adams College, to produce kholwa (‘believing’) partners and families. These families would be the harbingers of western Christian culture and religion to the Zulus and thus ‘native agency’.

Healy-Clancy’s book is not an institutional history; it is a social history. Social history is far more sophisticated than institutional, for it requires a great deal more theory and analysis, and thus research. Healy-Clancy satisfies the academic with a theory laden introduction wherein she introduces ‘social reproduction’. The body of A World of Their Own is pregnant with analysis, but it is written in such a fashion that the analysis is camouflaged within an engaging narrative. In this way, Healy-Clancy attracts and captivates the lay-person, and thus most alumnae. By emphasising theory only in the introduction, she is strategic and merciful to most who might find five chapters of this more dense material soporific. A beloved minister of the Congregational church, the Reverend Joseph Wing once compared underwear and theology: “When you are preaching, you should always have it on, but not in such a way that everyone can see it”. In chapters two through five, Healy-Clancy deftly weaves rich analysis throughout her narrative in such a manner that we ‘can’t see it’. My advice to the reader is work through the introduction; it is more than worth it.

Healy-Clancy utilises a feminist (what UKZN’s Professor Sarojini Nadar refers to as the “F-Word”) hermeneutic lens through which to interpret South Africa’s and Inanda Seminary’s educational history. Outside academia, feminism too often has negative connotations, being perceived as anti-male or militantly pro-female. Healy-Clancy’s feminism has no such crude binaries. Instead, feminism is a tool by which to gain a more accurate understanding of history.
With a social and gendered perspective, Healy-Clancy avoids the ubiquitous and hackneyed analysis of race to the exclusion of all else when examining the history of education in South Africa. Of course, Bantu Education negatively affected South African black education by ‘dumbing it down’ and tribalising it. Unlike its sibling school, Adams College, Inanda Seminary escaped closure following the implementation of apartheid’s Bantu Education in 1957. Why? The apartheid regime realised that its plan to engineer societal segregation could best be implemented primarily through women; women were the key to social reproduction.

Healy-Clancy discovered that during apartheid, education for Blacks became feminised. More women became educated and to higher degrees than men. Why? The architects of apartheid perceived women within a patriarchal society to be politically benign and thus preferable to educate in greater numbers.

In addition to a ‘social’ and ‘gendered’ perspectives, Healy-Clancy also introduces a ‘Marxist-materialist’ perspective. Bringing it all together, she states (and this must be read several times for those of us who do not hold a Harvard PhD):

African women’s historical association with processes of sustaining society opened up space for them to challenge the social order during apartheid. Women were able to advance educationally, not despite racialised patriarchy, but by manipulating the contradictions within it – producing new gendered contradictions that shaped post-apartheid society.

Healy-Clancy explains how the products of Inanda Seminary navigated and altered for themselves that which was pedagogically engineered and thus possessed ‘agency’. Inanda Seminary, then and now, provided a liminal space, in-between oppression and liberation. The book’s conclusion provides the reader with much to ponder following the inevitable “So what?”

What possibilities lie ahead for ‘historic schools’, single-sex schools, boarding schools and Inanda Seminary’s present emphasis on mathematics and science? South Africa currently has one of the highest income disparities in the world; this disparity manifests itself in the provision of education. Is Inanda Seminary a new model, a ‘third tier’ institution, that will help bridge the disparity thus bringing quality ‘elite’ private school results for a comparatively moderate cost? Inanda Seminary has always been a pioneering institution. Will its holistic and gendered education be the key to socially reproduce new post-apartheid female leaders?

Oral history and the archive richly inform Healy-Clancy’s book. Her numerous interviews are available to readers on-line. The endnotes and bibliography represent an astounding one third of the book. All books have shortcomings, this one, though, very few. One criticism is that the endnotes do not refer to the pages from which they come. While reading, I found it difficult to associate the chapter title with the numbered chapter and thus locate the corresponding
endnote. The school’s history trailed off considerably in chapter five (1976-1994); the latter years being covered in passing in just a few paragraphs. This detracted from Healy-Clancy’s book serving as an institutional history and thus a reference. Nonetheless, absolution is deserved, for an institutional history was not Healy-Clancy’s project. Her objective well achieved proved far more sophisticated.