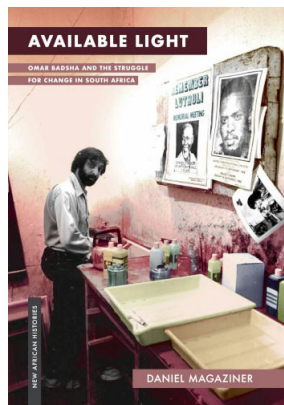




Omar Badsha: an ordinary South African whose struggles and triumphs offer insights into broader social movements—Sean Jacobs reviews *Available Light* by Daniel Magaziner

MARCH 25, 2025 SEAN JACOBS LEAVE A COMMENT

Available Light continues Daniel Magaziner's significant work in shedding light on the lives of Black artists and intellectuals under apartheid, writes Sean Jacobs.



Available Light: Omar Badsha and the Struggle for Change in South Africa

Daniel Magaziner

Jacana Media, 2025

The South African photographer Omar Badsha never learned to use a flash and worked exclusively with available light. His approach to photography mirrored his broader approach to life and politics—a ‘counter-telos’, as historian Daniel Magaziner puts it. Born in 1945, Badsha ‘justifies his life not in reference to sacred texts or religious leaders, but

to ideological foundations—socialism, nonracialism, humanism, democracy—and secular mentors, all of which he often groups under the broad tent of the “struggle”, the term used in South Africa for the long resistance movement against colonialism and apartheid.

Magaziner's book *Available Light: Omar Badsha and the Struggle for Change in South Africa* offers a deep, sympathetic account of Badsha, once described by African American academic and writer Tiffany Willoughby-Herard as ‘a giant of South African documentary photography’. Badsha worked as a trade unionist, photographer and, after the end of apartheid, an online archivist. Born into a working-class Indian Muslim family with



personal ties to the struggle, his adult life intersected with key moments in South Africa's resistance history between 1970 and 1990. His notable photobooks include the iconic *Letter to Farzanah* (1979), *Imijondolo* (1985), and *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart* (1986). In the post-apartheid period, Badsha became a public historian, and founded and built the South African History Online portal.

Despite his role in several major political currents from the late nineteen-sixties through to the early nineteen-nineties, Badsha is not necessarily a household name. As Magaziner notes, he was 'a participant more frequently than he was someone who shaped events', and he was 'a particular sort of participant'. His obsession with collecting, cataloging and archiving objects from his life is central to Magaziner's narrative. The Badsha family, three generations before, arrived in South Africa from India as economic migrants. Badsha's early life, marked by racial violence, his mother's mental illness, his father's temper and the challenges of dyslexia, shaped his later engagement in politics. Politics provided a kind of therapy, whether through the trade union movement of the nineteen-seventies, identifying as Black while keeping the Black Consciousness Movement at bay, or immersion in the politics of non-racialism of the nineteen-eighties.

Since 1994, hundreds of biographies of prominent South Africans have been published. Magaziner argues that Badsha's comparatively low-profile merits attention 'because it is in the ephemera of his "ordinary" South African life that we can see how activism was born at the intersection of desire and need, in the lives of those who maintained it'. The author candidly discusses the challenges of writing about a living subject. His reservations aside, I was struck by the book's engaging pace, superb writing, tight storytelling and exceptional attention to detail. Magaziner's ability to capture so much history and the nuances of people and events in just over 230 pages is truly impressive.

Many familiar figures and organisations from South Africa's collective history, notably from the Black majority, some now largely forgotten, appear throughout the book: AKM Docrat, Harry Gwala (who I had the privilege of seeing in action in person), Mewa Ramgobin, Albertina Sisulu, Nokukhanya Luthuli, David Hemson, Rick Turner, Strini Moodley, John Gomas, the African Peoples' Democratic Union of Southern Africa (APDUSA), the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, the photography collective Afrapix (which Badsha founded), and the Second Carnegie Inquiry (which spawned *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart*) and the ANC's cultural desk (with whom Badsha would develop artistic and political differences, as with Afrapix, after 1990)—to name just a few. With his subject's assistance, Magaziner brings figures like Gomas—whom Badsha photographed in District Six, Cape Town, in 1978—vividly to life. Gomas, born in 1901, was one of the first Black (including Coloured) members of the Communist Party of South Africa. In one of the book's most striking moments, Magaziner describes a visit Badsha made to Gomas's home, where he sat, debilitated by a series of strokes, reading a newspaper by the light that streamed through his window. With his halo of white hair glowing, Gomas seemed 'like a figure out of time'. He passed away soon after, and the government demolished his house and those of his neighbours.

Magaziner has done significant work shedding light on the lives of Black artists and intellectuals under apartheid. His first book focused on the genesis of the Black Consciousness Movement, and his [second explored Black artists and teachers working in Bantu Education schools from the late nineteen-fifties onwards](#). Studying Badsha's life synthesises the themes explored in Magaziner's previous work: art and commitment,



meaning-making and self-making, all within the context of the struggle for change in South Africa's past and the battle over history in South Africa's present.

His current book contributes to the growing body of urban histories that habitually explore Cape Town and Johannesburg, especially the erased cosmopolitan spaces of District Six and Sophiatown. By contrast, *Available Light* puts Durban and urban KwaZulu-Natal at the forefront—not only focusing on the social world of 'the Durban moment' (the 1973 workers' strikes and the beginnings of the Black Consciousness Movement), but also emphasising the city as a space where Zulu and Indian South Africans created a unique variant of South African culture. Central Durban, where Gujarati Muslim Indian South African families like Badsha's lived and made meaning alongside descendants of indentured laborers and 'passenger' Indians, is at the heart of the book.

Badsha's work—including his photography—and his politics emphasise building solidarity among Black groups, particularly between South African Indians and Black Africans. Notably, his first conscious memory is of the January 1949 pogroms in Durban, when Africans and Indians engaged in retaliatory violence. Badsha, only three years old at the time, witnessed this pivotal moment, and it would mark him for life. A theme of solidarity accordingly runs through the book, reflecting Badsha's many friendships and comradeships with figures as diverse as artist Dumile Feni (his earliest and closest friend, who stayed with the Badshas for prolonged periods in the nineteen-sixties), the poet Mafika Gwala and the lawyer Mafika Mbuli, among others.

The book does not shy away from addressing the racial politics of the left during the struggle and delves into Badsha's complex relationships with prominent white leftists. Magaziner describes how several prominent white figures—whether in the art world, journalism, or the trade unions—found Badsha difficult. The white photographer David Goldblatt, who stood in as a representative for documentary photography and who funded and admired some of his work, had a strained view of Badsha, even calling him 'dogmatic' and 'a Marxist sort of communist'.

Badsha shrugged off the criticisms. 'In South Africa', Magaziner writes,

“

Goldblatts no longer lived in the ghetto Badshas did. For all the talk of nonracialism and organisations that were like families, there was no alchemy to remove race from these interactions. Since first he had entered the art world, Badsha had had to deal with whites with their own agendas, in which people like himself were bit players at best, or objects to be manipulated at worst [...] it took quite a leap of faith to think that it was not true with those whites who professed total commitment, while holding onto their passports and access to the comforts that white skins could sometimes afford.

Available Light is thus also a revisionist history of documentary photography in South Africa. It begins with figures like Ernest Cole, Ranjith Kally and Peter Magubane, who represent the photographic traditions that Badsha engaged with first. (He would meet Cole in 1990, right before the latter died in New York City. Badsha had received his first passport then and traveled to Denmark and the United States.)

Badsha's first significant influence as a photographer, however, was his father's brother, Moosa, who worked as a freelance photographer in Durban and was an acquaintance of Kally, the famed *Drum* magazine photographer. While tense at times, the relationship between Badsha and Goldblatt also featured deep respect and mutual admiration. Goldblatt's later support of Badsha's projects was crucial, even though they often clashed over political approaches, particularly regarding the role of apartheid's racial capitalism and Goldblatt's willingness to have his work sponsored by mining corporations.

I couldn't help but draw connections between *Available Light* and Mahmood Mamdani's 2020 book *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*. South Africa is one of Mamdani's case studies. He examines the political turn of the nineteen-seventies, when the Black Consciousness Movement redefined Blackness as a political identity, and the emerging alliance between white leftists and Black trade unionists, which reshaped class politics, influencing broader left politics in the nineteen-eighties. This revisionist reading of South African history seems to resonate with the life and political journey of someone like Badsha, an ordinary South African whose struggles and triumphs offer insights into broader social movements.

On a personal note, I've admired Badsha for years and am proud to call him a friend. I first became aware of his work while studying for a BA in Politics and Afrikaans–Nederlands at the University of Cape Town between 1988 and 1990, when *The Cordoned Heart* was published. His associations include his work at the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) and the Centre for Documentary Photography, part of the Centre for African Studies (described by Magaziner as a 'poorly funded backwater in a very slowly transforming and still very Anglocentric institution'). Badsha's wife, Nasima, ran the academic support programme, which many of my friends utilised. (She is a political figure in her own right, also deserving of a biography.) As I read about the late nineteen-eighties in *Available Light*, I was surprised to learn that our paths didn't cross then. I was in my late teens, and much was happening at UCT. In the early two-thousands, right after I had moved to the United States, I became friends with Badsha's daughter, Farzanah, which is how I came to know him personally. I would check in on him in Cape Town, and he stayed with us in Brooklyn when he later came on his second US tour.

This book holds a special meaning for me because I understand the tremendous effort it took for someone like Badsha to break free from the constraints of apartheid. He is of my parents' generation, and I've seen how apartheid restricted their potential. His ability to carve out the life he did is a testament to his resilience and his many talents, qualities Magaziner's book more than adequately captures.

- ***Sean Jacobs is a professor and director of the graduate program in international affairs at The New School in New York City, United States and founder of Africa Is a Country.***



📁 Academic / Biography & Memoir / International / Non-fiction / Photography / Reviews

/ South Africa / USA

- 📁 Afrapix
- 📁 African Peoples' Democratic Union of Southern Africa
- 📁 AKM Docrat
- 📁 Albertina Sisulu
- 📁 Apartheid
- 📁 Available Light
- 📁 Bantu Education
- 📁 Black Consciousness Movement
- 📁 Book Reviews
- 📁 Chemical Workers Industrial Union
- 📁 Colonialism
- 📁 Communism
- 📁 Daniel Magaziner
- 📁 David Goldblatt
- 📁 David Hemson
- 📁 District Six
- 📁 Drum magazine
- 📁 Dumile Feni
- 📁 Durban
- 📁 Ernest Cole
- 📁 Harry Gwala
- 📁 Imijondolo
- 📁 Indian people
- 📁 John Gomas
- 📁 KwaZulu-Natal
- 📁 Leftism
- 📁 Letter to Farzanah
- 📁 Mafika Gwala
- 📁 Mafika Mbuli
- 📁 Mahmood Mamdani
- 📁 Marxism
- 📁 Mewa Ramgobin
- 📁 Neither Settler nor Native
- 📁 Nokukhanya Luthuli
- 📁 Omar Badsha
- 📁 Peter Magubane
- 📁 Photography
- 📁 Racism
- 📁 Ranjith Kally
- 📁 Reviews
- 📁 Sophiatown
- 📁 South African History Online
- 📁 Strini Moodley
- 📁 The Cordoned Heart
- 📁 The Struggle
- 📁 Tiffany Willoughby-Herard
- 📁 University of Cape Town
- 📁 Whiteness
- 📁 Zulu people

« PREVIOUS POST

NEXT POST »

[Sponsored] New book alert! The Black

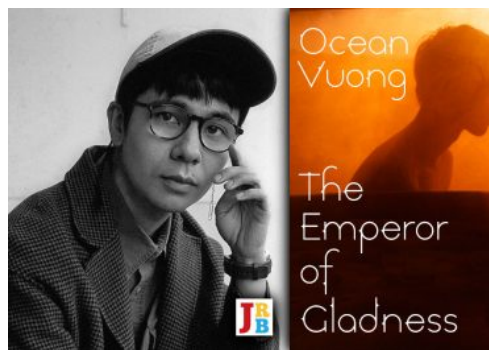
Storytelling as a point of departure for

Atlantic's Triple Burden: Slavery, Colonialism

resistance—Hassana Moosa reviews Isabella and Reparations

Hammad's new novel Enter Ghost

☆ You Might Also Like



The myth of transcendence—Zanta Nkumane reviews Ocean...

📅 August 13, 2025 🗨️ 1 Comment



A book that validates André Blouin's

📅 August 13, 2025 🗨️ No Comment

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *



Comment *

Name *

Email *

Website

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

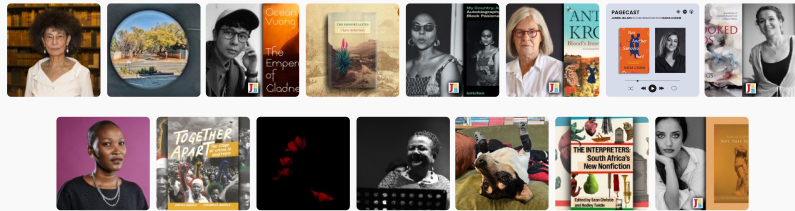
POST COMMENT

SUBSCRIBE TO THE JRB

email address

SUBSCRIBE

NEWS IN PICTURES



FOLLOW US!



ARCHIVES

Select Month ▾

