

BOOK REVIEW

Iain Edwards and Marc Epprecht. *Working Class Homosexuality in South African History: Voices from the Archives*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2020. 257 pp. Index. Bibliography. Archival photographs, maps, and diagrams. \$35.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0796925831.

In *Working Class Homosexuality in South African History*, historians Iain Edwards and Marc Epprecht make rare archival documents and oral histories widely accessible. These primary materials, the bedrock and substance of the book, consist of the proceedings of a confidential inquiry into same-sex activity in South African goldmines and the transcripts of interviews with men recalling their youth in a working class same-sex community in KwaZulu-Natal in the 1950s. This book represents a reversal: the source material *is* the body of work. The footnote *is* the text. The role of the authors is to contextualize this primary material.

One interviewee's declarative statement opens the book: "I am Angel." The significance of this simple statement is situated in a historiographic tradition of oral history drawing on first person narratives by ordinary people. This book contributes to this tradition, which has been advanced in South Africa through the History Workshop seminar and conference series. The first archival section reproduces the written report of the "Confidential Enquiry into Alleged Prevalence of Unnatural Vice Amongst Natives in Mine Compounds of the Witwatersrand." The report is an extraordinary document that can be read from many perspectives, hence the value of its reproduction. At a meta-level, the text is an expose of the power relations at the time. It reveals the mining industry's insatiable need for cheap labor, as well as the tensions around race-based job reservation and how this impacted the intimate lives of the mineworkers under scrutiny. The inquiry represents an elaborate staging, which encourages speculative engagement with the text. It implicitly recognizes, as Dunbar Moodie would later show (T. Dunbar Moodie and Vivienne Ndatshé, *Going for Gold: Men, Mines, and Migration*. University of California Press, 1994), that the mining industry depends on turning a blind eye to same-sex relationships that protect rural domestic arrangements and thereby protect the supply of male labor. The report reads like the script

of a morality play, in which the surface concern with the moral well-being of African labor inadvertently exposes the immorality of the system. Ultimately, it was easier to remove privacy screens and increase surveillance than to dismantle an exploitative system that separated families for long periods of time.

The second archival section presents the story of South Africa's first same-sex city community, the *Izingqingili zaseMkumbane*. What adds a distinct dimension to this oral history is that it was initiated by men wanting to reconnect with each other and to claim a space in post-apartheid South Africa. Their ambition was thwarted by a regional branch of the African National Congress (ANC)—ironically, the same political party that included “sexual orientation” in its own bill of rights, paving the way for its subsequent inclusion in the South African Constitution, a global first. The reproduction of the interviews in this book is a corrective, but only a partial one, as the grassroots project petered out soon after being rebuffed by the ANC, compounded by a fieldworker connected to the network of men rejecting their world as “un-African” and abandoning the project. These contestations contrast with the narratives of both participants and witnesses from the *Izingqingili zaseMkumbane*. It is a remarkable story, hitherto untold and unacknowledged, that unfolds under the shadow of apartheid-era forced removals and the scattering of the residents of Emnyameni.

The material contained in this book challenges the timelines of history, as Edwards points out, representing precursors to white middle-class activism of the late 1960s, the public expression of identity in the first pride marches of the 1990s, and the push for same-sex marriage in the mid-2000s. Here are African working-class antecedents to post-apartheid progress. But there is also another way of looking at this material. In the mines, same-sex relations were a pathway to heterosexual marriage. Angel married Mqenge and cohabited with his wife and children. These relationships, in which there is no clear line between “hetero” and “homo” sexuality, as in Western identity-based models, suggest a different way of organizing sexuality.

Epprecht and Edwards have done a great service by bringing rare archival sources into the public domain. The book speaks to the power of the archive, and to the limits and possibilities of reading and interpreting historical sources. Together they contribute a working-class perspective to “a tapestry of evidence” (26) about the multi-faceted history of same-sex sexuality in South Africa.

Graeme Reid 

Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut
graeme.reid@yale.edu

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Pincheon, Bill Stanford. 2000. "An Ethnography of Silences: Race, (Homo)Sexualities, and a Discourse of Africa." *African Studies Review* 43 (3): 39–58. doi:[10.2307/525068](https://doi.org/10.2307/525068).
- Sigamoney, Veronica, and Marc Epprecht. 2013. "Meanings of Homosexuality, Same-Sex Sexuality, and Africanness in Two South African Townships: An Evidence-Based Approach for Rethinking Same-Sex Prejudice." *African Studies Review* 56 (2): 83–107. doi:[10.1017/asr.2013.43](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.43).