

A Private Interview in the Station Buildings: Queering the Prohibition of Homosexuality during Apartheid.

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“Their favourite victims were the train staff; the guards and stokers and firemen, and the dirtier and rougher looking they were the better, and they would disappear for a private interview somewhere or other in the station buildings”

This paper is taken from research that analyses the (in)visibility of homosexuality in South Africa from the inception of Apartheid policy in the early 1950’s to the present. In this paper I focus on the early 1950’s. It is an important period for analysis because the same Apartheid legislation that was intended to keep black and white people apart was also used to criminalize homosexuality.

The material for this paper comes from the recollections of elderly homosexual men of the antics in and around the Station Bar. In the 1950’s, the Station Bar was a popular venue, in the city in which this study is located, for men who were looking to meet other men. Two important issues emerge from an analysis of the events that took place at this time. The first issue deals with the role of the state in censoring what could be known ‘officially’ and what had to remain unknown, or ‘unofficial’, about the antics at the Station Bar. The second issue is the way in which homosexual men challenged a state ideology that sought to erase them. Homosexual sex in the station buildings complicated the private/public distinction (a distinction that has been used strategically to keep a veil on homosexuality), and was thrilling precisely because the possibility of discovery that sex in a public place presents threatened to make the unofficial (unknown) official (known).

In the conclusion I consider the usefulness of reflecting on the subversive potential that oppressive systems of social regulation present in an era in which the rights of gay men and lesbian women in South Africa, while protected in the constitution and bill of rights, are highly contested.