

# Mirroring Apartheid: The Voices of Lesbian and Gay South Africans

**Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa**

Edited by Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron

Routledge, New York, 1995

376 pages

**The Invisible Ghetto: Lesbian and Gay Writing From South Africa**

Edited Matthew Krouse; Assisted by Kim Berman

Gay Men's Press, US edition, 1995

## Review by Jo-Anne Green

"There it lies, then: the ground on which the District once lived for real; red earth of Table Mountain; empty now; an open mouth, wounded, and — as I say — screaming silently. And I know that even should this ground be built up again, this mouth will be crying beneath the new foundations. In fact, there is something quite final about the fall of District Six... (all that remains are) a few churches and one or two mosques. (And this Cape at which tragedy plays itself out, paradoxically remains the Cape of Good Hope..."

Adam Small

District Six, like Sophiatown and "Fietas" in Johannesburg were dynamic cultural meccas for South African artists of all disciplines, pulsating with life and, not surprisingly, areas where homosexuals of all races cohabited, were visible, and even celebrated. That was before Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, known as the "Architect of Apartheid," commenced the violent erasure of the tangible fabric of District Six by instituting in 1966 the Group Areas Act, designed to erect absolute borders between the races to ensure that whites didn't have to socialize or be educated with blacks and to identify coloreds as more privileged than blacks. Its effect was to extinguish all hope for a multi-faceted South African culture. Ironically, Verwoerd was assassinated that year, the year during which District Six was proclaimed a "whites only" area. By 1968, the apartheid government began a program of demolition and forced removals. Those districts were razed for the simple fact that people of different races co-mingled there; and because these communities were more tolerant of the "other," homosexuality was as much a target as interracial relationships.

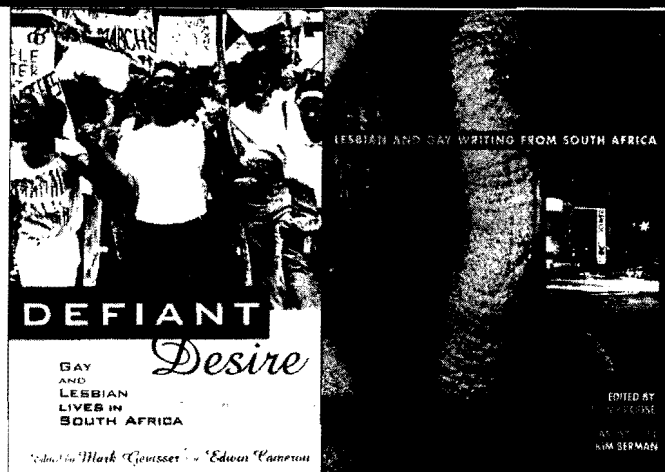
### "Camp" Culture in Popular Culture

The highlight of my grandmother's year was what used to be advertised as the "Coon Carnival" (coon was the pejorative name given to "coloreds") — the "Cape Carnival," a New Year's parade through the heart of Cape Town led by a "moffie" (drag queen), bolstered by the presence of many of her sisters. My only recollection of the parade, ironically, was the appearance of large groups of "Coloreds" marching in black-face.

*Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, a collection of essays edited by Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron, takes up the discussion of the "moffie," now, for the first time, from gay and lesbian viewpoints. The so-called antics of "masquerade" — a term used by government officials to denounce moffie (drag) culture as clandestine and shameful despite its visible and proud culture, are illuminated in four of the essays: "A Drag at Madam Costello's," "Moffies en Manvroue," "Lesbian Gangster," and "The Arista Sisters, September 1984."

### Post Apartheid: Human Rights

Thirty-years later, government denunciations are no longer official policy. South Africans have approved the most inclusive Constitutional Bill of Rights in world history. The "Equality Clause" protects persons from unfair discrimination on the basis of "race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, color, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language, and birth." During the long and violent struggle to end apartheid, South Africans came to recognize that the Declaration of Human Rights should form the foundation of their own Bill of Rights, thereby ensuring that all forms of oppression would be eliminated. Thanks to the pressure from the European community on the African National Congress (ANC) to denounce homophobia and the courageous efforts of black, gay activists like Simon Nkoli, the reconstruction of South Africa under the mythic figure of Nelson Mandela has produced a utopian model towards



which other countries, like Poland, are turning their gaze. However, it would be naive to believe that a clause in a one-hundred-and-forty page document will singularly eliminate the bigoted, patriarchal society that South Africa is. Beliefs, morals, and discriminatory thoughts and emotions remain deeply entrenched in myriad communities, and in both public and private institutions.

### How Apartheid Survives

*The Invisible Ghetto: Lesbian And Gay Writing From South Africa*, edited by Matthew Krouse with assistance from Kim Berman, includes biographies, fiction, poetry and interviews. While the personal portraits in *The Invisible Ghetto* and *Defiant Desire* reveal a somewhat diversified gay experience, the issues most pertinent are those which illuminate the divisiveness that apartheid so successfully fostered. The apartheid hierarchy, because it was racist, sexist, classist, and Calvinist, forced people to live separately, submissively, and secretly. It was the Group Areas Act that ensured racial separation to the extent that spouses were made to live separately from each other and from their children. (Pass laws required all urban residents to be registered, and since many men were unregistered, they could not live with spouses who were domestic workers in the white areas.) Additionally, the rural areas remain ethnically more traditional, therefore more homogenous, and the majority of black South Africans live in poverty. Ironically, these very conditions allowed different groups of people to sustain strong cultural identities, even in existing gay communities.

South African culture is infinitely complex due to the racial, gender, and class hierarchy which apartheid so rigorously enforced. It did not suffice to separate and classify people by color, but also by tone, gender, and geography. *Defiant Desire* and *The Invisible Ghetto* make this complexity abundantly clear both by inclusion and omission. While the editors of the two books have attempted to ensure a diversity both in representation and style — "fact" and "fiction" — what becomes clearer by the page is that one has to analyze multiple macrocosms to be on firm enough ground to relate to the individual experience. The cultural experiences of White, Indian, Colored and Black gays and lesbians are as separate and closeted as apartheid ensured, complicated further by the official outlawing of homosexuality under Apartheid.

Both compilations were originally published in South Africa, the former by Ravan Press and the latter by the Congress of South African Writers. The inter-

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national editions were published by Routledge and The Gay Men's Press respectively. This points to a very important issue. Who is the targeted audience? The fact that The Gay Men's Press re-published *The Invisible Ghetto* reinforces the fact that women are grossly under-represented. Kim Berman's piece, "Challenging the Invisibility," contextualizes the lack of a lesbian presence and also attempts to empower lesbians to come forward and be counted. Mark Gevisser, a journalist and Edwin Cameron, now a Judge bring a more intellectual flavor to *Defiant Desire*, which is not to say that some of the writing doesn't evoke an emotional response. Matthew Krouse and Kim Berman, both artists, bring us a collection of lesbian and gay writing that is informative, educational and intensely moving — metaphor is a powerful tool — and, as an anthology of gay writing, begs the inevitable question: is there a writing aesthetic that is specifically lesbian or gay?

Gevisser's overview in "A Different Fight for Freedom," is a history of South African lesbian and gay organizations from the 1950s to the present. He opens with "Prologue: Linda Ngcobo's funeral," a story recounted in the ambiguous voice of an artist/journalist. "...In the charismatic African style of prayer, (the mourners) chanted and swayed and thumped, moving up to heaven with the force of their faith the body lying in the coffin before them. They sat, a sea of white waves, on chairs in the hall." More than two hundred of Ngcobo's gay and lesbian comrades stood behind them, "some came in jacket and tie. A few in explosive drag. A few more represented that peculiar androgyny of township drag borne of scant resources and much imagination, nodding at gender-inversion with no more than a frilly shirt, a pair of garish earrings, a touch of rouge, a pair of low-heeled pumps, a third-hand wig. Most however wore t-shirts with the GLOW [Gay and Lesbian Organization of the Witwatersrand] logo, a pink triangle framing a raised, clenched fist. For, in the township tradition of a slain freedom-fighter, this was to be a political funeral: an expression of grief that was also a consecration to further the struggle."

To this South African lesbian, Linda Ngcobo's funeral poignantly summarizes 'the whole story,' the multiple issues raised in the book. Gevisser and Cameron have attempted to present myriad individual and collective experiences of South Africa's lesbian and gay community that cannot resist reflecting the division and separation instituted by apartheid. That the chronologies of experience — grouped under the headings "Where we stand," "Making space," "Making noise," and "Making waves" — resound as academic teaching reflects the backgrounds of the editors and the audience the book is intended to reach. *Defiant Desire* is forced to repeat the apartheid pyramid it so tellingly wishes to take to task; yes, there is an alarming lack of lesbian contributors; yes, the book does read as verbal map of the Group Areas Act; and, yes, gay and lesbian lifestyles are persistently heterosexist. An essay about moffie slang, "From Ada to Zelda," raises the issue of male power by the author's statement that virtually the entire vocabulary consists of female names. Like many of the pieces in *Defiant Desire*, it compels us to think more about the desire of 'males' to be 'women' and the issues of self-hatred than that of gender inequality and the hatred of women.

**Gay Visibility**

*The Invisible Ghetto's* "Tinkoncana Etimayini," "The Barracks Are Crying," and "Border Story," and *Defiant Desire's* "Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi"



South African commercial features three drag queens promoting Castrol Formula SLX motor oil's main benefit: no viscous drag.

**DIESEL**  
JEANS AND WORKWEAR



Cosmopolitan-like woman's magazine.

all speak to the 'extra-sexual'/'circumstantial homosexuality' in the military, single-sex hostels for migrant laborers in the townships; and the skesana/injonga (passive/active) 'marriages' of men living on the mines. These stories, in fact, point to how insistently visible these ghettos are and were — the military publicly separating the manly men from the effeminate, and the mines encouraging a heterosexual-modeled homosexuality to ensure that 'family values' were maintained despite the absence of women and children. Reading these books reinforced the despair I experienced during a recent visit to South Africa where I witnessed the unflinching patriarchal grip on both 'straight' and gay communities.

**Advertising Queer**

In this new post-Apartheid society, I was struck during my last visit by the queer allusions in mass culture. A billboard of gay, African-American Olympic athlete Carl Lewis poised to start a race wearing red stilettoes with the simple, relatively small text "Power is nothing without control;" between the pages of *Style Magazine* (like *Cosmopolitan*) are two femme, blonde-haired, red-lipped, white women — blouses unbuttoned — on the verge of a passionate kiss, advertising "Diesel Sunglasses;" the TV commercial for Castrol Oil—three drag queens in a flashy convertible ("Too Wong Fu, Priscilla Queen of the Desert") communicating Formula SLX's main benefit: "no viscous drag;" the article I found in the main section of the Sunday Times entitled "The Art Of Being Gay" begins, "The campiest thing in South Africa's first national gay and lesbian (traveling) art exhibition...is a full-length portrait of Nobel Laureate, Archbishop Desmond Tutu in all his bejeweled, High Anglican splendor... Tutu had been asked to attend the opening of the exhibit...but he couldn't make it. Instead he sent the portrait, painted by gay artist, Hayden Proud, and owned by the church, with his blessings." A black Archbishop advocating homosexual marriage.

*Defiant Desire* and *The Invisible Ghetto* collectively address many other issues — including media coverage, censorship of the gay press, political organizing vs. social support organizations, AIDS, butch/femme roles in lesbian relationships, and representations of homosexuality in literature. However, what is uniquely South African is the effect that apartheid had, and continues to have, on lesbian and gay society(ies). We have come so far so quickly. Bill of Rights, democracy and all. But in reading these two groundbreaking books, what materializes is how dangerous these giant leaps in South Africa's laws can be in potentially obscuring or rendering invisible the daily struggle of individuals, especially Black lesbians, to survive.

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