

THE GAY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT IN ZIMBABWE: BLACK EMPOWERMENT, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE RESEARCH PROCESS*

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I

This paper discusses an attempt to apply historical research directly to the development of a culture of human rights and democracy in Zimbabwe. The research concerns sensitive and controversial issues around sexuality, race, and nationalism that are important in and of themselves. What I would like to argue here, however, is that the method used to design and carry out the research project is at least as interesting. This holds true from the point of view of both professional historians like myself and community activists—two perspectives that are often difficult to reconcile in practice. In this project, “ivory tower” and “grassroots” are brought together in a mutually enriching relationship that offers an alternative model to the methods that currently predominate in the production of historical knowledge in southern Africa.

II

Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) is a non-government organization that was founded in 1990. It provides counseling, legal and other support services to men and women struggling with issues of sexuality. It also strives to promote a politics in Zimbabwe that would embrace sexual orientation as a human right. Toward the latter goal it has lobbied government for changes to current laws that discriminate against homosexuals and which expose gay men and women to extortion (so far, in vain). With somewhat more success, it

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has lobbied the police directly to raise awareness of the extortion issue. GALZ also publishes pamphlets, a newsletter, and other information designed to educate Zimbabweans in general about homosexuality and homophobia. Through these efforts it seeks to challenge popular stereotypes of homosexuals as Westernized perverts who spread diseases and corrupt children. One recent publication included detailed historical research that showed how homosexual practices—including loving and mutual homosexual relationships—have been indigenous to the country throughout recorded history, and probably from time immemorial.¹

GALZ first sprang into public attention following a series of demagogic attacks on gays and lesbians by President Robert Mugabe and other high state officials beginning in 1994. Notwithstanding overt threats of violence, GALZ was able to state its human rights case calmly and reasonably before the public. By 1996 its stance had won it widespread moral support both internationally and within Zimbabwe's small human rights and AIDS activist communities. The high profile it gained led to expanded membership, particularly among black males.² Optimism was given a further, material boost in 1996 when GALZ won a large grant from HIVOS, a Dutch organization that seeks to foster civil society in developing countries. With this money GALZ was able to rent a house and establish a permanent social and counseling center. The GALZ executive committee was justifiably proud for having successfully turned state bullying into an opportunity for growth and mature participation in the political life of the nation.

The experience of success was not without trials and tribulations. Many Zimbabweans simply could not believe GALZ assertions about the universality of homosexual orientation. Winning local allies outside the small white and liberal community has consequently been difficult—even some self-described radicals and femi-

¹ Marc Epprecht, "Homosexual 'Crime' in Early Colonial Zimbabwe," *The Avid Queer Reader* (January 1998), 22-24, an extended academic version of which is published as "'Good God Almighty, What's This!: Homosexual 'Crime' In Early Colonial Zimbabwe" in Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, eds. *Boy Wives And Female Husbands: Studies In African Homosexualities* (New York, 1998). See also idem., "The 1907 Commission of Enquiry into 'Unnatural Vice' in South Africa," *Gazette* (Winter 1998), 4-5 as well as GALZ, *Salwira: Being Gay And Lesbian In Zimbabwe* (Harare, 1995).

² As I have noted elsewhere, I use racial and ethnic designations as they are found in common parlance in polite society in Zimbabwe, but without accepting any of their essentialist implications. The same precaution applies to gays, queers, queens, straights, and so on, who may or may not be quite what the labels proclaim but who exist in the discourse of the gay community I intend to respect. This, and what follows, reflect my understanding of events as an individual GALZ member, and is not an official view. Comments or queries may be directed to GALZ, Private Bag A6131, Avondale, Harare, Zimbabwe.

nists publicly distanced themselves from GALZ and *de facto* condoned the state's homosexuality-is-unAfrican position. More insidiously, the divided nature of Zimbabwean society as a whole was reproduced within GALZ. This provoked an internal crisis which threatened the organization's very existence only months after the HIVOS grant. The initial focus of the crisis was the perceived resistance by white members to the input of the growing numbers of black and coloured members. A tendency emerged, for example, for the more affluent, literate, and internationally-connected white members to press for a confrontational or queer liberationist stance in GALZ's dealings with the state. At times this was insensitive to the dangers it posed to black gays living in the townships, under the watchful gaze of extended families and with uncertain access to lawyers. Moreover, while the majority of the membership had become black, the volunteer leadership remained largely white.

In addition to racial tension, anger also surfaced among women in GALZ at the casual male chauvinism of many of the gay men, and at the way the flamboyance of certain transvestite queens was sometimes allowed to interfere with organization business. There were instances of petty corruption and of attempted blackmail of members by members, in many cases across sensitive class and color divides. By early 1997 nasty gossip and backbiting had become endemic, with several ugly scenes played out in public, including drunkenness and fighting at the new center. Particularly embarrassing politically was the defection to Holland of GALZ's first black president (on the grounds of human rights' violations). HIVOS finally threatened to withdraw its financial support unless the organization radically reformed its internal dynamics.

A crisis meeting open to the entire membership was held on 31 August 1997 in an attempt to meet the HIVOS demands and to save the organization. Grievances were publicly and emotionally aired. Through the process, members' commitment to GALZ's human rights ideals were affirmed, and by the end of the evening a radical plan of action had been adopted. This included the election of a whole new, mostly black and mostly professional, executive committee. The meeting also reaffirmed an "Outreach Committee" that had been struck in June. The mandate of the latter was defined as "to create a space for people of colour to express themselves fully in their own tongue . . . [and] to facilitate self empowerment so that they can build self confidence which would help them grow as individuals with responsibilities to themselves and to society."³ Its long-term goal is to foster an environment within GALZ—democratic,

³ GALZ, "Outreach Programme," unpublished document, July 1997.

professional, idealistic—that will militate against the manifestations of racism, sexism and self-loathing which nearly destroyed the organization. As one participant phrased it:

A few weeks ago I had the opportunity of seeing history being made before my eyes. I sat in on a GALZ executive meeting and believe me I could hardly contain my joy. . . . The executive not only looked but spoke more representatively. The enthusiasm and depth displayed by all put to rest many of the fears that had been gnawing at me for the past few months. I feel at long last the light has dawned and GALZ has finally started putting its house in order...⁴

III

The Outreach Committee has been most active since its formation in developing a network of skilled black gay professionals, in establishing a visible gay presence in the townships, and in liaising with black gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender groups around the world. One of its latest endeavors, however, may also be of interest to non-gays in and beyond Zimbabwe—the Gay Oral History Project (GOHP). This project has its roots in November 1997, when I received a post-doctoral research grant for a project entitled “Homosexuality, homophobia, and the construction of masculinities in southern Africa.”⁵ I was already a member of GALZ whose main contributions up to that point had been writing letters to the press. I had also been conducting archival research that proved the falseness of the argument that homosexuality is a white man’s disease.

The grant allowed me to approach GALZ for the first time with something more concrete. Using the budget line for research assistance, I offered to involve GALZ’s black gays, lesbians, and transgender persons in creating their own archive of life histories. Adhering to the goals of the Outreach Committee, my proposal was to “empower” black Zimbabweans in the organization by fostering a sense of community and historical rootedness. I was particularly interested in including black lesbians, who had hitherto been marginalized in the politics of the gay community. I proposed as well to relate historical research about homosexuality among blacks to human rights struggles that are of direct concern to the broader straight community—domestic violence, sexual exploitation of children, misogyny in “traditional” culture, HIV transmission, and more. Gathering gay perspectives on these issues could empower GALZ by strengthening the appeal of its human rights message in the wider community.

⁴ Francis, *Gazette*, 1/3 (September 1997), 2.

⁵ SEPHIS, based at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.

What was in it for me, the committee asked, correctly suspicious to hear a proposal to empower black gays and lesbians coming from a straight, white, bourgeois male. Well, I answered, my own research would be enormously enriched by good oral history. Moreover, my ego would benefit from grounding my otherwise elitist academic labor in a real-world political struggle that I admired and supported. I was looking, in other words, for a means to activate my frustrated activist inclinations. I wanted to put into practice an ideal of participatory or action research that had thus far mostly eluded me in Zimbabwe. Could GALZ help me?

At this point a diplomatic word needs to be said about the state of professional historical research in Zimbabwe that I suspect may be applicable throughout much of southern Africa. Historians as political dissidents or “organic intellectuals” have a long and honorable tradition in southern Africa along the very lines I was proposing, notably in the struggles against colonial rule and apartheid. When I returned to the region in 1995, however, that tradition struck me as largely enervated. A variety of factors were obviously contributing to this, not least of all the demoralizing working conditions on campus. The greater sophistication of oppression under the neo-liberal regimes now in power throughout the region also seemed to be taking the wind out of the radical sail.

In the case of Zimbabwe, with a few noteworthy exceptions, professional historians had largely abandoned the barricades in favor of other activities and interests. Several worrisome effects are increasingly apparent as a result. Notably, the production of historical knowledge about the Zimbabwean past now tends to be dominated by white, mostly foreign-based, scholars who mostly publish abroad, do not participate in local debates, and surprisingly often neglect even to send copies of their publications to the local archives.⁶ Economic recession since 1992 contributed to this tendency by undermining the already feeble local academic publishing industry. To give the most recent casualty of market forces, one of the main forums for radical historical argument over the past four years and a strong promoter of independent black scholars (*The Zimbabwean Review*) folded at the end of 1998. The last major redoubt of radical opinion (*Southern African Political Economy Monthly*) survives by virtue of heavy subsidies from Western donors—an interesting contradiction.⁷

A culture of academic caution seems also to have become entrenched and is reflected in a (to me) surprising timidity about chal-

⁶ See *Journal of Southern African History* 23/2 (June 1997), for a stark illustration of this tendency.

⁷ Personal communication with founder/editor Carole Pearce, 15 October 1998.

lenging colonial-era standards of truth, sources, and pedagogy. Excessive caution is reflected as well in a reticence to participate as citizens in civic debates. Professional historians were notably absent, for example, in speaking out against the abuses of power by the state in its anti-homosexual campaigns of 1995 and 1996, abuses such as the advocacy of violence against a peaceful minority group, and the claim to the right to censor publications sight unseen. So coy were the historians at one recent academic gathering that veteran nationalist historian Ngwabe Bhebe publicly berated them. Why could they not name a truth that almost everyone else outside the academe seems to know: Zimbabwe's ruling party is thoroughly corrupt and oppressive by any standard. How, Bhebe implied, will people overcome that oppression without the forthright leadership of responsible, accountable, historically-minded intellectuals?⁸

I conceived the GOHP as a personal means to engage with that muted radical tradition of scholarship in southern Africa. Notwithstanding my own whiteness and foreignness, both GALZ and the research board of the UZ eventually found this eccentric ambition harmless enough. My proposal to do extensive oral history exploring the past of Zimbabwe's gays, lesbians, and transgendered people was accepted by both and the Gay Oral History Project was subsequently launched in early March 1998.

IV

The GOHP is inspired by so-called queer theory, that is, historical materialist analysis which draws upon feminist, Foucauldian, and "subaltern" critiques of marxism. In addition to casting explicit attention on struggles around sexuality that are typically submerged or hidden in historical discourses, queer theory seeks to apply the knowledge so gained to current political struggles. Queer theory thus enjoins advocacy as well as empirical research. Indeed, it argues that the method should produce not only facts about the past but political consciousness, experience, and commitment through the process of fact production. Queer theory, like much contempo-

⁸ Note that some outstanding scholarship swims determinedly against the tendencies I have described: T. Barnes and E. Win, *To Live a Better Life* (Harare, 1992), and B. Raftopoulos and I. Phimister, *Keep on Knocking* (Harare, 1997) come immediately to mind, as well as the journalism of Iden Wetherell at *The Zimbabwean Independent* or Patricia McFadden at *SAPEM*. See also the "Rethinking Nationalism" seminar series launched in February 1998 by the Zimbabwe Institute of Development Studies (and introduced by Professor Bhebe, whence I drew my paraphrase above). This series promises to take up some of the intentions of an earlier frustrated attempt to organize a national, politically-engaged cadre of historians and history teachers (*viz.*, the Zimbabwe Historical Association, born and apparently deceased after a single newsletter in 1996).

rary feminist thinking, also foregrounds sensitivity to issues of race and ethnicity. The intention of so doing is to work against a tendency for those issues to get overlooked by an exclusive focus on gender or class struggle.⁹

The specific objectives of the GOHP are informed by this dual mandate:

- i. to conduct interviews with gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered and any other people with knowledge and sympathy toward people whose sexuality does not conform to the heterosexual norm or ideals and whose views have historically been silenced. Life histories would be gathered from all the districts and among all the different cultures of Zimbabwe, including migrant laborers from neighboring countries where possible.
- ii. to create an archive that could be a resource for people wishing to learn about the diversity of historical experiences of sexuality, and which could contribute to GALZ members' own sense of community in a political and social milieu that otherwise tends to divide and demoralize them.
- iii. to publish materials that summarize the above in English and in Zimbabwe's two main indigenous languages, Shona and Ndebele. These would become part of an information kit intended to influence debates at the World Council of Churches conference in Harare (December 1998), could be part of an AIDS-awareness or other educational package, and/or be published in sympathetic mass media. A history of alternative sexualities in Zimbabwe and the region will eventually be published by a reputable press in which GALZ members can take pride.
- iv. to bridge the chasm that commonly exists between professional scholars and local activists and to provide a model for shaping a research project in a democratic manner.

Stage one of the project involved a presentation by me to the

⁹ This is an argument I put forward in Marc Epprecht, "The 'Unsayings' of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24(1998), 631-51; also cogently argued by Deborah P. Amory, "'Homosexuality' In Africa: Issues And Debates," *Issue* 25/1(1997), 5-10. Among the most succinct and accessible explications of queer theory are Warren J. Blumenfeld, ed., *Homophobia: How We All Pay The Price* (Boston, 1992), and Rosemary Hennessy, "Incorporating Queer Theory On The Left" in Antonio Callari, Stephen Cullenberg, and Carole Biewener, ed., *Marxism In The Postmodern Age: Confronting The New World Order* (New York, 1995) pp.266-75. On method see also Susan Geiger, "What's So Feminist About Doing Women's Oral History?" *Journal of Women's History* 2(1990): 305-18; Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research: A Handbook for Practitioners* (Thousand Oaks CA, 1996); and Diane L. Wolf, ed., *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork* (Boulder, 1996).

membership of GALZ at large. Approximately 50 members came together under the shade of the jacaranda tree in the garden of the GALZ center—an unusually large number for any GALZ business event and an auspicious start. I began with a summary of existing historical research about homosexuality from around the region. Many in the audience were clearly moved, and not simply by my iteration of the facts (homosexual mine marriages among African men, a “lesbian princess” in the eighteenth century, transvested traditional doctors in the sixteenth century, and so on). Many were surprised that history need not be an oppressive dirge of meaningless dates and sexless Great Men, as it is generally presented in Zimbabwe’s high schools. Perhaps most astonishing was that people’s intuition (that Africans with homosexual feelings had existed in the past) could be verified beyond dispute by careful research. The political potential was immediately obvious to one and all and sparked a lively discussion.

The next step was to make a critical analysis of the shortcomings of the existing research, my own included. The court records that I had researched, for example, only rarely revealed truly consenting relationships, and never lesbians. The courts were also notoriously biased against Africans, whose testimony was often treated with contempt. Scholars who had explored these issues, meanwhile, had in many cases been blinded by heterosexist assumptions about the supposed pathology of homosexual behavior. I gave some specific examples—such as Ian Phimister’s scathing denunciation of an earlier work of mine—and how I felt such scholarship misrepresented Africans’ experiences and feelings.¹⁰ I then tabled my proposal for an oral history project to address those misrepresentations.

Once again this evoked a lively discussion. Members respectfully pointed out what seemed to them like heterosexist assumptions of my own, they wondered about who would own copyright, they suggested ideas for the proposed interview schedule, and they proposed ways to ensure that the project be as inclusive and democratic as possible. The discussion went on until the sun set and smoke from the *braai* began to distract our attention. To conclude, I called for volunteers to sign up as researchers. Where I had anticipated perhaps a handful might come forward, 14 did so. We met after the meeting in an atmosphere of eager commitment and arranged to meet again for training.

Stage two of the project involved an intensive training workshop in Harare for the 14 volunteers. The goals of the project were reviewed with an opportunity for the researchers to contribute their own ideas as to how the project could be refined to meet their

¹⁰ “From Ian Phimister,” *Zimbabwean Review* 3/4(Oct. 1997), 31.

needs as GALZ members. The interview schedule was discussed in detail and refined. It eventually included two sections, the first on "Being Gay in Modern Zimbabwe" (when and how did you first realize you were gay? what were the first words which expressed your feelings? can you describe experiences of discrimination or violence that came as a result of your gayness? and so on). The second section on "Nkotshana" (the historical term for homosexual mine marriage) was directed more toward people who did not consider themselves gay but who had had or who had witnessed homosexual behaviors in such places as the mines and prisons (what type of men did this? were there any particular "tribes" that were renowned for it? how common was it? what was the attitude of the bosses or guards? and so on).

Researchers were then given training in basic interviewing skills and drilled on the ethics of human subject research. They were also provided with equipment to get started, including a letter of introduction that they could carry with them to their interviews. That letter described the project, assured informant anonymity, and carried the *imprimatur* of an official University of Zimbabwe letterhead.

Considerable time was spent negotiating the financial side of the work. In order to keep mercenary feelings out and to free up resources to gather the maximum number of interviews, everyone accepted that remuneration would remain essentially token. Travel would be reimbursed at local "chicken bus" rates, for example.¹¹ A project coordinator (Rodgers Bande) was then elected and his specific duties and remuneration were defined by group consensus. The former included liaising with the researchers, coordinating travel, keeping a diary of the project's progress, keeping track of finances, checking for fraudulent or sloppily-written submissions, entering data onto floppy disks, and keeping the Outreach Committee informed of any legal or other types of harassment encountered by researchers. My own role was defined as a resource person on technical questions about social science research and as the one who would eventually distil the raw data into publishable form.

Separately, two straight researchers who were sympathetic to gay rights were trained by me to conduct interviews in their home areas (rural Matabeleland and the Wedza/Buhera district). Melusi

¹¹ For the record, informants were to be given ZW\$50 and interviewers ZW\$100 for each completed interview (at the time, approximately US\$2.80 and \$5.60 respectively). The project coordinator would earn ZW\$800 month (US \$44.80). From a separate budget GALZ agreed to "hire" me as chief researcher for ZW\$1000 per month plus an economy class one-way air fare from Harare to Toronto, my base after leaving the UZ in May 1998. By comparison, local researchers typically earn ZW\$100-300 per day, and foreign consultants for non-government organizations from US\$100 to 500 per day.

Sibanda, an honours student in the UZ theology department, aimed both to gain his degree through this research and to fortify the GALZ submissions to the World Council of Churches conference. Nyaradzo Dzobo, whom I met quite fortuitously, sought the excitement and self-confidence to be gained by striking up an independent "career" outside her roles as housewife and mother.¹²

Stage three saw the researchers fan out to their diverse communities around the country to begin identifying potential informants and conducting initial interviews. Personal life stories were also welcomed at this stage. As they came in, the GALZ interviews were checked by Mr. Bande and the independent researchers by me, then typed onto diskettes. The GALZ researchers convened in Harare twice over the next three months to discuss the research and share ideas on how best to proceed. In July I met with Mr. Bande and Harare-based researchers for an extensive debriefing.

Several problems were quickly identified and (hopefully) solved at these meetings. First came a complaint from the general membership of GALZ that the selection process to become a researcher had not been transparent. Since suspicion and envy had been part of GALZ's problem in the pre-Outreach days, the complaint was taken seriously. It was resolved in part simply by allowing the issue to be aired. Substantively, four new researchers were coopted with the consensus of the general membership. These replaced four of the originals who had by then dropped out.

A second problem that emerged was that many of the researchers, after making a good start with their informants, encountered intense suspicion as soon as they mentioned the case of Canaan Banana. Banana was the first president of independent Zimbabwe and a stalwart of the ruling party. In June 1998 he went on trial on criminal charges of sodomy and indecent assault dating back to 1983. Our inclusion of a question about Banana in the original interview schedule had been intended to stimulate discussion with informants on a topical issue (rather than gain any salacious detail of his case).

¹² Ms. Dzobo lived with her husband, a high school teacher, in the resettlement village where my partner Allison Goebel had been conducting her own research. "Mai Simba" had extended many generous welcomes to Goebel and had insinuated herself into the research projects. Not only did she positively enjoy the work, but was so good with her informants that word of mouth quickly spread. Widows, in particular, came from miles around to tell her their stories. Who can say what cathartic or other effects this had for the women, but it certainly appeared to fit with the empowering model of research. It was on that basis that I offered Ms. Dzobo the chance to seek out local men and women with homosexual encounters in their past. Her tact in doing so and then in asking the boldest of questions made her interviews among the richest of all the researchers on the project. She plans to use her earnings to invest in an income-generating project.

Yet so fearful are many people in Zimbabwe of the retributive power of government that informants interpreted the question as a threat. Some of the researchers were accused of being spies for Banana's lawyers, others simply found that their informants grew tense and reticent. All reference to Banana was consequently dropped and I urged researchers to keep their questions focused as far back in time—and away from contemporary controversies—as possible.

Another unforeseen problem arose that temporarily stalled the whole project. Indeed, some of the researchers went on a virtual strike, having done interviews but refusing to hand them over until their remuneration was increased. It seems we all underestimated the rigors of conducting social science research in rural Zimbabwe (conversely, we overestimated the staying power of idealism). Some researchers had to spend hours and in one case a whole day waiting in the hot sun without food before the potential informant agreed to meet with them. Some had to return for a second interview. The "chicken buses" for which we had budgeted imposed another inconvenience, with delays and unanticipated overnight stays. The translation and transcribing were also taking much more time than we had expected. These grievances were expressed to Mr. Bande and me good-naturedly but with an impressive negotiating panache. I therefore agreed to raise the remuneration (although it remains at volunteer levels) if the Outreach Committee agreed to seek new sources of funding that could keep the project going after my grant was depleted.

A fourth problem related to the quality of the first interview transcripts. From my point of view as a professional historian, the amateurism here was disconcerting at times. Notwithstanding the guidelines established and explained during the training stage, for example, the different researchers did not adhere to a consistent style. Some wrote themselves out completely, some included their questions and prompts; some translated everything, others retained key indigenous terms; some neglected to record interview details or who their informants were; and so on. In light of this we had to revisit the basics. I emphasized that an appearance of professionalism and consistency would make the final result more plausible to skeptical future audiences. At the same time, however, I also revisited my own dogmatism about style and conceded that a certain level of amateurism (diversity of appearance, vernacular expression) could enhance the accessibility of the future archive for non-academic readers.

Finally, security emerged as a worrisome issue. Around June the state-controlled press and the police renewed their campaigns of harassment and slander against GALZ, most likely as a tactic to dis-

tract attention from the embarrassing revelations made at the Banana trial. This campaign included a scurrilous criminal case concocted against the GALZ Programmes Manager and police confiscation from his home of "evidence" against him. This brought home the danger of a police raid of the GALZ center. The danger was heightened by the fact that some of the early interviews had neglected to respect confidentiality—real names rather than pseudonyms were recorded there in black and white. The police were not the only worry in that regard. The GALZ center hosts many people at all times, some of whom it seems could not resist "borrowing" GOHP correspondence. Security therefore dictated that the interviews be kept under lock and key. They were also revised so that all individuals who had not specifically given their permission to be identified were disguised.

Interviews will continue for as long as researchers remain motivated, whether by the remuneration, by the commitment to the ideals of the project, or by the sheer addictive fun such work can be. Stage four, however, is meanwhile proceeding already, this paper being its first product. Stage four involves the analysis, writing up, and presentation of the data in ways which the Outreach Committee itself decides will best serve its interests. The principal target is to have one hundred life histories as a database and an "executive summary" in three languages by the end of 1999. Lesser targets include publicizing the project and incorporating pieces of data in GALZ "propaganda" that could strengthen its arguments for legal change and social tolerance.

V

Thus far (December 1998) approximately 40 interviews have been completed. The informants range from 70-80 year old men who recalled living at the mines in South Africa and Zimbabwe in the 1930s and 1940s, to young men who took male lovers in prison, to a young woman who was "raped" by an aunt. They included men and women who considered themselves to be gay, as well as a significant number who thought of themselves as straight (but nonetheless had stories of consensual homosexual behaviours in their past to share).

A striking element of these interviews is how forthcoming "ordinary" Zimbabweans can be about homosexuality. Even among very old and conspicuously straight villagers, little of the official abhorrence for homosexuality comes through in their recollections about homosexual experiences. This makes a noteworthy contrast to the virulent homophobia of many of Zimbabwe's mission-educated leaders. It suggests that Western discourses around

homosexuality, rather than the homosexual behaviors themselves, have created a threat to “traditional culture” that was not there before.

Indeed, many informants felt that the upsurge in overt homophobia was directly linked to Christianity—traditional society did not recognize such a thing as a “homosexual” but believed discrete acts or “accidents” could be cured or contained by proper rituals and family intervention. Others noted that homosexuality was increasing because of the Western institutions retained in independent Zimbabwe (prisons, hostels, convents, and boarding schools) rather than decadent Western propaganda or tourists.

The interviews so far also shed interesting light on a number of questions which conventional sources have left hanging. For example, how common were so-called mine marriages? Informants were almost unanimous in estimating 5 to 7 out of every ten men in a hostel setting, a much higher rate than has ever been mooted before. Great caution is warranted with numbers obtained in this way; however, they do strengthen the case against the it-was-an-insignificant-pathology school of labor studies.

Informants were also almost unanimous in identifying the contemporary Shona word for homosexuality (*ngochani*) as originating from either the Shangaan or Zulu people or their offshoots in Zimbabwe since the 1830s, the Ndau and Ndebele. Many (including a woman who was herself from Mozambique) believed that homosexual relationships were “normal” in Mozambique. Others thought that Malawian migrants (*matanyera*) were to blame for spreading “that game.” Among those who admitted to having heard about the alleged homosexual behaviour of Canaan Banana, meanwhile, several wondered if this was because he was Ndebele (therefore, to many Shona, not *really* indigenous). In short, the desire to “explain” homosexuality as foreign in origin is a compelling trope in popular culture that extends beyond—and probably antedates—the more recent scapegoating of whites in that role.

Perhaps the most striking finding (striking in that it has never before been alluded to in the ethnographies of Zimbabwe or the countries which provided migrant labor to Zimbabwe) is the widespread belief that men could engage in homosexual sex acts in order to enhance the main social attributes of masculinity—conspicuous strength, power, and economic success. Hence, several of Zimbabwe’s most famous black boxers were reputed to be homosexual as a medicine (*muti*) to acquire success in the ring. Others, including chiefs, were thought to have had homosexual sex in order to make their fields or herds prosper. Accidents down the mine shaft could be averted with the same kind of *muti*, while the victims of unsolicited attentions in this way were presumed not to resist or protest out of fear of its power.

Much of the rest of the testimony gathered so far confirms assertions that have already been made by scholars in Zimbabwe and the region who have been working from other sources. For example, after the first shock of being introduced to the "game," male wives typically became willing partners in the relationship. They gained a patron and sometimes considerable well-being from their role as wives. Two of Ms. Dzobo's informants actually claimed that they preferred their former life of a wife in prison to their present life in a model resettlement village. They were even considering to commit small offenses in order to be reincarcerated! Testimony such as this cautions us to be very careful in our use of the words homo- or heterosexual where they can be taken to imply an essential or natural sexuality.

Yet the stories told by self-identified gay people also confirm that refusing to conform to heterosexual norms or ideals in modern Zimbabwe can be a harrowing experience. Rapes, beatings, ostracism, employment blacklisting, blackmail, and more are all attested time and again. It would be wrong to infer from this that straight Zimbabweans are more barbaric towards gays and lesbians than populations elsewhere in the world. However, voices from modern Zimbabwe's most reviled minority group do point to the violence implicit in "normal" gender relations. They expose as well the thinness of the state's commitment to human rights ideals (or even its own laws). The standpoint of people oppressed on account of their sexual orientation provides a vivid critique of actually existing capitalism in a so-called emerging market economy.

Finally, aside from the collection of such data, the GOHP involves reflection on process and praxis. The initial findings in that regard are promising in the ways that action or participatory research predict. Notably—and notwithstanding quibbles over remuneration, transparency, and style—the morale and level of cooperation among the researchers has been high. An ethic of confidentiality, sometimes honored in the breach to be sure, has at least made a bridgehead into a notoriously "gossipy" group. So too, self-confidence to participate in professional-ish work. People who had hitherto tended to take a back seat to more experienced and assertive GALZ members on business matters were contributing to discussions and debates. They also took advantage of the forum to criticize their social "superiors" (like me) in constructive ways and to shape an important project through their own input. Remember, with the exception of the honours theology student at UZ, these are not intellectuals in the usual sense of the word. They are activists struggling to recast a hitherto race- and class-exclusivist social club into a democratic and inclusive human rights organization. They are also individuals who grew up in a society that taught them to

despise the very core of their being. The flags of “gay pride” and “black consciousness” (by any other name) are being uplifted in them as individuals and in the face of society in general.

The example of Mr. Bande appears to illustrate this well. Although he was required to come to the center twice a week in order to earn his coordinator stipend, he was actually coming in almost every day. He is learning computer skills. He is also exercising the leadership and teaching skills from which, as a homosexual, he is *de facto* banned elsewhere. He has applied for a scholarship for human rights advocacy training in the United States. He told me (with evident pride):

When people see me rushing off in the morning they ask where are you going? I say I’m going to work. To work, they ask, knowing that I was fired before. Yes, I’m researching the history of homosexuality in Zimbabwe. What?! Oh yes, we’re writing a book on it. What do you think?¹³

From my own personal perspective, constructing this project has also been an enriching experience. I was compelled to be patient in getting the research going, including by having to win the trust and cooperation of my researchers through slow, “concrete” contributions to their political struggles. I was then required to take directions and critical input from, and to ensure that my scholarship could be communicated to a decidedly non-academic audience. These are important skills for radical scholars which the dominant discourse of professional history in southern Africa tends strongly to devalue, if not actively to discourage.

Working with (as opposed to simply gazing at) activists at the cutting edge of social and political change also provided me with a deep appreciation of the difficulties and the excitement of the struggle. Through the experience I have come to appreciate better—and thence, hopefully, be able to represent better—the wit, the survival skills, the volatility, and, yes, the occasional deviousness and other unpleasant human attributes of the strugglers. The theory predicts that this will make me a better scholar and citizen in the long run.

VI

Zimbabwe is not a totalitarian state. Like most of its neighbors in the region, however, its leaders have a strong authoritarian streak and do not brook public criticism well. Tolerance for activities or beliefs that appear to be propagated by “the West” can also be quite

¹³ Interview with Rodgers Bande by Marc Epprecht, Harare, 20 July 1998.

low. Open discussion of homosexuality strikes a particularly raw nerve in that respect and over the past four years has prompted police state-like action. Nonetheless, considerable social and political space still exists for the expression of alternative politics and lifestyles. Activists are campaigning to protect and expand those spaces on many fronts with some noteworthy successes. GALZ was one of those successes, having stood firm in its commitment to a human rights ideal and having established a permanent resource center in the face of state intimidation.

The successes of GALZ in 1995-96, however, were tenuous and its position weakened by a lack of critical historical consciousness. This tended to show up in, for example, naïveté about Western-style democracy or the dogmatic assertion of unsubstantiated opinion. GALZ members' strong desire to believe that black homosexuals always existed was simply implausible to many Zimbabweans. The lack of real evidence to support that aspect of their case made it difficult to win local allies. The GALZ crisis in 1996-97 also illustrates how lack of historical consciousness can disrupt internal dynamics. The legacies of nearly a century of state-backed racism, sexism, class inequity, and violence were not being recognized and addressed. Yet without "outing" these legacies as they linger in society, GALZ exposed themselves to bitter, debilitating internal struggles which the state was all too happy to enjoy.

Professional historians are obviously well-placed to assist in the development of a critical historical consciousness among social activist groups like GALZ and, indeed, in the past have done much to strengthen civil society in relation to oppressive regimes. My contention, however, is that that role has been neglected in recent years to the relative impoverishment of both public debate and historians' own work. Public debates in a context where demagoguery is rife will obviously benefit from disciplined historical argument.

I also maintain, though, that the historical research itself will be enriched by participatory or action research methods. Such methods involve the historian directly in the lives and struggles of non-academic, non-elite people (who are not our relatives, I mean). This can sensitize us to issues that otherwise rarely or only peripherally intrude on our consciousness and experience. Participatory research in a place like Zimbabwe also includes Africans in the production of their own histories, guided, where appropriate, by a professional hand. At the very least, those methods apply a brake to the kind of "academic tourism" by visiting whites that tends to disempower and marginalize blacks in the main spheres of intellectual production in southern Africa today.

The GOHP is a personalized attempt to reconcile the two solitudes that have deepened between professional historians and so-

cial activists in the post-Independence era in Zimbabwe. Flawed as it no doubt is, and bearing in mind its extremely modest parameters, I would like to argue that the GOHP shows that good quality oral history need not be the preserve of foreign experts. It can be organized and gathered in ways that include indigenous activists as people who democratically shape the course of research. Research funding, normally the preserve of well-connected and articulate academic elites, can be directed in ways which "trickle down" to have an empowering effect on small, struggling, human rights or development-oriented organizations. In the short run this may inhibit the individual historian on the fast-track to academic glory or standards, narrowly conceived. But in the long run it can help revitalize the general practice and perception of history in a region that sorely needs sober, mass reflection upon its painful past.