

Hidden voices: immorality, respectability, and African women on the Rhodesia Railways

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This paper is based on a chapter of my PhD that uncovers the hidden voices of African women in the history of the Rhodesia Railways, the colonial railway system that operated in Zimbabwe and Zambia. My research places specific focus on colonial Zimbabwe and in this paper, I will discuss the ways African 'railway women' fashioned lives for themselves in various cities there. Hidden in colonial records, the stories of wives, whether legal or temporary, daughters, sisters and female friends who lived with African railwaymen have largely been ignored and considered somewhat irrelevant in the history of one of the most significant technological advancements of its time. The paper will address some issues around androcentric and racist colonial archives, which have rendered the experiences of these women unimportant. By situating these experiences in the broader historical developments around the railways, I argue that we can read these phenomena in new and fascinating ways. I will demonstrate how unearthing these hidden voices allows us to think of African railwaymen as more than just units of labour, as they have been predominantly understood in existing historiography. By reading railway documents against the grain and analysing civil court records and newspaper reports, I unpack domestic and private performances of African femininity and masculinity by African railwaymen and women and demonstrate how these had implications on the public operations of the railways.

Informations pratiques :