Dock workers – much like seamen, railway and other transport workers – are widely considered the darlings of Global Labor History. Their lives are entangled with global networks of exchange, quite literally crossing national borders and often appearing to exude the cosmopolitanism of their trade. Transport workers throughout colonial Africa have occupied strategic positions in the infrastructure of trade and have accounted for a notable record of industrial action. Likewise, port cities act as popular sites of inquiry, constituting themselves as both gateways and gatekeepers to these global networks of trade and communication. By early apartheid times, the formerly marginal British colonial port town Durban had transformed to become the most important harbor of the progressively industrializing Union of South Africa. Apart from looking back on a long history of workers’ radicalism on the docks – Durban was considered the „strategic centre [sic!] for subversive elements“ (p. 143) in the province of Natal – most studies on the city’s shipping sector direct their gaze towards the broad expanse of the ocean and its wide possibilities.

The advent of this emphasis on transnational entanglements of the working classes, however, has also raised doubts concerning the limits of such interconnectedness. In this spirit, Ralph Callebert in his book On Durban’s Docks ventures into the opposite direction, following the livelihoods of 1950s dock workers from the wharves of the port city towards their rural imizi, their homesteads in Natal’s Reserves. Callebert’s research is based on seventy-seven oral histories from interviews with retired Zulu migrant dock workers and their families, which were conducted in isiZulu by Sibongo Dlamini – himself a former dockworker – and research associate Snegugu Lerato Mchunu, and which are interpreted as texts alongside archival sources ranging from official government and police documents to newspapers and manuscript collections.

Thematically composed into six main chapters, Callebert illustrates the multi-layered livelihood strategies and social realities of the dock workers’ households beyond the simple dichotomies that perpetuate the traditional perception of migrant labor in Southern Africa. In a critical reflection on the discourse around Harold Wolpe’s influential 1970s Reserve subsidy theory, he carves out how their household strategies were actually designed in the practice of mutual subsidy. Not only did the rural subsistence economy become essential to apartheid capitalism by subsidizing wages below the cost of social reproduction, but vice versa their cheap and casual labor on the docks enabled workers to tap into an informal trade of pilfered goods. This was often used to build a commercial side business that could even be extended into the rural areas with the help of their household members, as Callebert shows in the book’s descriptive core. He hereby challenges the myth of the dual economy and instead highlights the intersections between formal wage labor and informal entrepreneurialism, between proletariat and petty bourgeoisie and between rural and urban spaces: „Durban’s dock workers were rural, Zulu, African, working class, entrepreneurial, permanent or [casual] workers, masculine, old or young, and dock workers“ (p. 128).

Despite these urban enterprises and elements of working class consciousness, dock militancy and collective action, Callebert points out that the majority of Durban’s dock workers maintained a strong rural connection and by building a sustainable livelihood through the combination of wage labor with informal commercial enterprise, many of them managed to accelerate their retirement to the Reserves as respectable patriarchs. While they were away, however, female members of the homestead were able to act as de facto household heads and thereby undermine the conservative ideals many of the workers exhibited. Though excluded from

owning land or cattle – traditional carriers of status and value – their inclusion into informal business networks enabled rural women to access financial resources and take part in economic decision-making. Callebert illustrates this conflict of the patriarchal bargain as a spirit of collaborative competition. Gendered and generational relations were constantly renegotiated, all the while contributing to the common aim of making the household a viable economic unit.

Callebert tells a story of strategy, opportunity and African agency as creative responses to the socioeconomic duress and political domination under early apartheid and the migrant labor regime. Still, the author shows that the decision to leave the Reserves and come to Durban as a migrant worker was not made as a sheer proof of masculinity but displays economic as well as social necessity despite dangerous working and living conditions in the city. From decasualization and worker militancy, to the moral economy of pilferage on the docks, networks of support, value theory, and Zulu ethnic consciousness and nationalism, Callebert weaves many threads into his complex narrative. The connections he draws are often enthralling but at times leave the reader craving for a more in-depth analysis of each strand. The personal stories of interviewees that act as introductions to many chapters illustrate his argumentation very well and could have been used more extensively to add to the book’s overall appeal.

With this book, Callebert positions himself as an „Africanist writing back […] to labor history“ (p. 16) and advocates for an understanding of African social realities beyond the dichotomy of the dual economy. By following the diverse and seemingly contradictory interests and strategies of Durban’s dock workers, Callebert demonstrates that the Eurocentric categories of proletarian and entrepreneur as distinctly separate agents of the formal and the informal economy have limited applicability when we try to understand South African economy. Although the informal economy is a popular subject of development research, it often stays disconnected from formal wage labor and therefore fails to capture the complex livelihoods of a large section of workers. The political dimension this conceptual disconnect of the existence of two separate economies entails is apparent to this day, as Callebert points out in his analysis. By dividing unemployed and poor parts of the population into a separate „informal“ economic sphere, policy makers can evade the conclusion that the affluence of a small part of South African society comes at the great expense of the rest of the population.

Callebert’s narrative ends with the termination of togt work in 1959, after which the noose tightened for South African worker activism until a new era of radicalism and internationalization was heralded with the Durban Moment in 1973. Through their labor on Durban’s docks, the workers portrayed in this book were active producers of international trade and consequently the process of globalization, even though they themselves stayed largely excluded and actively disengaged from it. Still, it was their position in this globalized shipping industry that enabled them to diversify their income, lead rally oriented lives and thereby resist complete proletarianization. In this persuasive argumentation, Callebert invites the reader to rethink established categories by opening up more nuanced perspectives on identity and labor, making the book a worthwhile and inspiring read.