

Where Have the Midwives Gone?

Everyday Histories of *Voetvrou* in Johannesburg

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Abstract

At the heart of a complex network of knowledge sits the *Voetvrou*—a black autonomous midwife who looks after the health of and nurtures new life in her community. She mentors others in these practices and in this way, shares her knowledge across communal lines. But who is the *Voetvrou*? What is her history? What constitutes being a *Voetvrou*? How does one come to be a *Voetvrou*? Harriet Deacon (1998) identifies a broad shift in power relations between medical men and black autonomous midwives in the nineteenth-century Cape Frontier. These relations were underpinned by growing racialism at legal and institutionalised levels, and effectively squeezed black women out of the practice of midwifery—hence their apparent disappearance from public archives from 1865, onwards. However, these black autonomous midwives have *not* disappeared. This research asks, where have the midwives gone? To this end, I used semi-structured in-depth interviews and archival research to explore where the midwives have gone. I conclude that these women have been part of a living archive, continuing their practices in the margins of power. They are essential to networks of care in Eldorado Park. The *Voetvrou* escapes the discourses of medical anthropology and Indigenous Knowledge systems. My research attempts to re-insert her into these discourses.