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Exploring black lesbian sexualities and identities in Johannesburg

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Abstract

Exploring black lesbian sexualities and identities is a multifaceted in-depth ethnographic study of black urban lesbian life in contemporary South Africa. This study, which focuses on lesbian women aged between 17 and 40 years, reads the term lesbian as both a political and a theoretical project. It speaks to current concerns, which raise questions related to the politics of inclusion/exclusion, love, sexuality, identity politics, violence, style and urban space while sensitively giving agency to women's narratives. In many ways, it enriches and challenges conventional gay and lesbian studies and studies on sexuality in Africa by bringing meaning to the complex interplay between space, style, erotic practice and sexuality. It further illustrates the flexible practices and variable notions of sex, sexuality and gender categories. At the same time it tackles the precarious and painful position of black lesbian women whose lives are an ongoing maneuvering and negotiation between a potentially hostile or violent environment and a country with constitutional protections. The political and theoretical imperative of the study is evident in the representations of black lesbians as occupying subject positions in which they determine the structures and meanings of their lives. Their narratives show that they inhabit the world actively, not only as victims or in relation to others, but also as conscious subjects that make meanings of their lives: subjects who are actively and critically engaging with the world we inhabit.

Key words: lesbian, sexuality, ethnography, space, identity, style, erotic practice, queer, violence, and sexual pleasure