

FOREGROUNDING DIVERSE AFRICAN SEXUALITIES

Gunkel, Henriette (2010) **The cultural politics of female sexuality in South Africa**. New York & London: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-89555-2 pbk. Pages xii + 181.

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In her book, **The cultural politics of female sexuality in South Africa**, Gunkel develops a comprehensive analysis that powerfully illustrates the complex ways in which sexuality is socially and historically constructed. In particular it highlights the importance of the concept of “intersectionality”, which emphasises the varied and complex ways in which a number of “social positionalities” (or “axes of social power”) such as politics, gender, race and sexuality intersect, shape and constitute each other (Steyn & van Zyl, 2012: 8-9). More specifically it highlights the importance of what Steyn and van Zyl (2012: 9) refer to as “a politics of location”, that is, a recognition of the way in which sexualities are constituted in particular ways in particular socio-historical locations. In this way the overall project of Gunkel’s book is, in her own words, “centered around, and seeks to account for, the sexual politics that have emerged out of post-apartheid South Africa” (p 4).

One of the issues that Gunkel engages with extensively in **The cultural politics of female sexuality in South Africa** is the possible limitations of a (human) rights approach to sexual orientation. After exploring, in chapter one, the historical and contemporary meanings of sexuality in South Africa Gunkel moves onto, in the second chapter, a debate about the effectiveness of a constitution that recognises the rights of those who identify as homosexual. In chapter two, and, in particular, chapter four, Gunkel questions whether some South African same-sex female intimacies can be better understood *outside* globalised lesbian identity politics. She suggests that these same-sex intimacies may in fact actively resist global lesbian identity politics and present “a language that refers to relationships/intimacy that does not reproduce the homosexual/heterosexual binary” and resists “a Western standard of gender organisation” (p 133). In a recently published article Gunkel (2013: 67) engages with the online petitions of international activists in response to the phenomenon of African “postcolonial homophobia”. In this article Gunkel (2013: 69) problematises the “antihomophobia discourse” and critiques how a specific Western based human rights framework has informed global “antihomophobia” initiatives in the African context with problematic effects. Gunkel (2013: 76) argues that within the African context the demand for gay rights by Western governments “refer to an assumed global gay identity” and as a result the diversity of same-sex intimacies in a number of African

cultures are overlooked and often labelled as “pre-modern”. As a result sexual practices and intimacy are categorised in specific terms that “allow limited flexibility and possibilities to expand” (Gunkel, 2013: 76).

In chapter four of **The cultural politics of female sexuality in South Africa** Gunkel provides an extensive discussion of her research on South African female same-sex intimacies that on the one hand provides insights into culturally specific forms of same-sex intimacies and on the other hand powerfully illustrates “the limits and immobility of the human rights discourse” when applied to sexual orientation (p 135). In this chapter Gunkel describes what one of her participants refers to as an “amachicken relationship”, which refers to a relationship where an older girl helps a younger girl adjust to the new demands of life at boarding school. A more contemporary term for this relationship is the “mummy-baby relationship”. Gunkel’s analysis is intent on showing how the “amakchicken discourse” is very different to the “discourse of lesbianism” that has its origins in Western notions of sexuality and intimacy (p 110). Based on interview data Gunkel goes on to demonstrate how the “amachicken relationship” is not constrained by homophobia where it and its various forms of intimacy (even sexual at times) is accepted as a legitimate cultural practice, but *is* open to policing when this form of female same-sex intimacy is reinterpreted as a specific sexual identity, that is, lesbianism. Gunkel demonstrates how this has happened in South Africa through the protection of gay and lesbian rights in the post-apartheid constitution. Gunkel problematises the fact that the term “sexual orientation” in the constitution reflects “a globalised and individualised gay identity” that “inevitably reinforces and re-inscribes essentialist identities” (p 76). In this way a diverse form of female same-sex intimacy in the South African context is (re)constructed through a Western discourse of sexuality that results in the very act of homophobia that Africa is seen as particularly guilty of by the West [see Gunkel (2013) for a more extensive discussion of this].

Gunkel highlights that the contemporary idea that homosexuality is un-African in the South African context is not referring to “older and culturally specific forms of same-sex intimacy” (p 135), but is rather referring to US-based and European conceptions of sexuality. Gunkel illustrates this powerfully when she described how in one participant’s story the schooling authorities did not attempt to prevent “amachicken” or “mummy-baby” relationships until they were conceptualised through colonial (religious) discourses as “lesbian”. Gunkel argues that by not naming or classifying their same-sex intimacies African women who engage/d in them were/are able to “enjoy same-sex intimacy without fearing homophobic rhetoric or action that can lead to an ‘identity crisis’ as visible in metropolitan South African and in the West” (p 122). As she argues, for most these relationships “do not develop into social identities” (p 123). Gunkel does not deny or even problematise the fact that some women who have experienced same-sex intimacies have subsequently taken on the “social identity” of lesbian, she does, however, problematise the way in which the imposition of a Western construct of sexuality has, in the South African context, re-conceptualised female intimacy “into an apparatus of sexuality as a means of exercising power through heteronormativity and the gender regime”(p 125). Gunkel is concerned with how an experience of “homosociality” (female bonding), community and kinship, that is reflected in many African female same-sex intimacies, is under threat because of the imposition of a Western construct around sexual orientation. To illustrate this she makes reference to one of her participants, Bongiwe, who states “If I went and said to a girl ‘do you wanna

be my “mummy”?” it would be like fuck, she’s a lesbian and, you know, she’s probably wanting me” (p 132). Through her discussion Gunkel powerfully illustrates the “limits and immobility of the human rights discourse” (p 135).

While reading **The cultural politics of female sexuality in South Africa** I was reminded of the bold work of Massad (2002) who, like Gunkel (2013) critiqued the activism of Western organisations who sprang up to defend the rights of non-Western “homosexuals”. Massad (2002: 362) refers to these organisations’ “missionary tasks, the discourse that produce them, and the organisations that represent them” as “*the Gay International*”. His article focuses primarily on the Gay International’s mission in the Muslim world and describes how its larger mission has been to “liberate” Muslim “gays and lesbians” from “the oppression under which they allegedly live by transforming them from practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as homosexual” (Massad, 2002: 362). His argument is extensive (if not controversial) and well worth reading, but in essence he argues that it is only members of the increasingly Westernized upper and middle class Muslims who have adopted the Western identity of homosexual. Massad (2002: 373), however, suggests that they “remain a minuscule minority among those men who engage in same-sex relations and who do not identify as ‘gay’ or express the need for gay politics”. He goes on to argue that the Gay International has engaged in a project that he describes as “incitement to discourse”, which incites discourse on homosexual rights and identities. Massad (2002) points out that the effects of this international gay rights discourse is that there has in countries like Egypt been calls for the criminalisation of same-sex practice. Massad (2002: 383) argues that “by inciting discourse about homosexuals where none existed before, the Gay International is in fact *heterosexualizing* a world that is being forced to be fixed by a Western binary”. He goes on to suggest that heterosexuality is becoming compulsory in such contexts “given that the alternative ... means becoming marked outside the norm – with all the attendant risk and disadvantages of such a marking” (Massad, 2002: 384). The final outcome, according to Massad (2002), of the so-called liberation project of the Gay International is that diverse “social and sexual configurations of desire” are being destroyed in the interest of reproducing a world in the Gay International’s own image. This, again, highlights what Gunkel sees as the limitations of the human rights discourse.

Returning to **The cultural politics of female sexuality in South Africa**, Gunkel states in her conclusion that the culturally specific forms of intimacy and homosociality described in her book need to be “understood as a challenge to Western discourses, particularly discourses of sexuality” (p 145). In her recently published article Gunkel (2013) offers a way forward for a more ethical engagement with gay rights initiatives in the African context. She argues that by critiquing and questioning the work of global activism we are able to encourage “a reading of history that questions what is considered normative and allows us to embrace new concepts, theories and improvisations, and collaborations that enrich us all” (Gunkel, 2013: 78). In this review I hope to have sparked an interest in readers who are interested in the politics of sexuality and in particular researchers who are concerned with the much needed process of documenting, exploring and theorising *local* sexualities. I would hope that such a process would disrupt what Gunkel sees as the dominance of European and North American scholarship in sexualities studies.

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