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Claiming a space in the historical narrative

A. Diesel (ed.), *Reclaiming the L-Word: Sappho's Daughters out in Africa*

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In *Reclaiming the L-Word: Sappho's Daughters out in Africa*, Alwyn Diesel offers an edited collection of essays that seeks to shed light on the variegated texture of lesbians' lived experiences in contemporary South African society. From the start of her introductory chapter, Diesel is explicit about the motivation that led her to commission these essays. She is concerned about the erasure of lesbians from mainstream historical narratives. She correctly notes that even after the increasing focus on excavating women's histories that accompanied the second wave of feminism, lesbians' stories remain vulnerable to elision in the work of feminist historians. Diesel expresses her discomfort with the marginalisation of lesbians' narratives without an attitude of blaming either historians in general or feminist historians in particular. On the contrary, she recognises the extent to which lesbians themselves have resorted to self-imposed censorship in their accounts of their own stories. If readers are looking for a finger of blame running through these essays, it invariably points to the patriarchal organisation of social structures and systems. Heteronormative assumptions, expectations and pressures flow from these patriarchal social configurations. These essays are for the most part not academic in the conventional sense and they do not contain extensive theoretical explanations. Yet, while many of the essays merely hint at the complex ways in which heteronormativity maps onto patriarchy, the perceptive and attentive reader will be able to trace how the confluence of these ideological structures shapes the experiences of the lesbians whose life narratives are recounted in this text.

Diesel's collection constitutes a valuable addition to work that South African scholars have done on researching so-called alternative sexualities. This research has been published in texts ranging from Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron's groundbreaking collection, *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* (1994), to Melissa Steyn and Mikki van Zyl's more recent, *The Price and the Prize: Shaping Sexualities in South Africa* (2009).²³ This latter work has gone some way to addressing an important shortcoming in much of the earlier research on homosexuality, namely the tendency to focus on the experiences of gay men while neglecting those of lesbians. Although Gevisser and Cameron's collection does contain some chapters that deal primarily with lesbians' experiences, the focus is undeniably on the narratives of gay men. Gay men's experiences are also presented in Robin Malan and Ashraf Johaardien's collection *Yes, I Am! Writing by South African Gay Men* (2010).²⁴ In her exclusive focus on lesbians' life stories, Diesel's collection is comparable to Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa's *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men*

23. M. Gevisser and E. Cameron (eds), *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1994); M. Steyn and M. van Zyl (eds), *The Prize and the Price: Shaping Sexualities in South Africa* (HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2009).

24. R. Malan and A. Johaardien (eds), *Yes, I Am! Writing by South African Gay Men* (Junkets, Cape Town, 2010).

and *Ancestral Wives: Female Sex Practices in Africa* (2005).²⁵ Diesel includes a useful list of additional readings at the end of the text. I would add two texts to this list, namely Paul Germond and Steve de Gruchy's edited collection, *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa* (1997); and *The Country we Want to Live in: Hate Crimes and Homophobia in the Lives of Black Lesbian South Africans*, by Nonhlanhla Mkhize, Jane Bennett, Vasu Reddy and Relebohile Moletsane.²⁶ These additions notwithstanding, the brevity of the list illustrates the relative paucity of same-sex research in a South African context. Texts, such as that of Diesel, which insist that lesbians' stories deserve to be told, published and disseminated, thus make a valuable contribution to existing documentation of lesbian lives and histories. GALA (the non-governmental organisation Gay and Lesbian Archives) articulates the importance of such projects in their slogan: "Without queer history, there is no queer pride". In her foreword, Dr Devarakshanam Govinden similarly points to the pernicious effects of ignoring one's history by quoting a poem from Lebogang Mashile's collection *In a Ribbon of Rhythm*: "Tell your story / Until your past stops tearing your present apart" (p ix). Such documentation is no simple task and it is certainly not for the fainthearted. In her acknowledgments, Diesel thanks her contributors for their bravery and, as the essays which discuss the issue of "corrective rape" so chillingly demonstrate, speaking out can in fact be a question of life or death.

The first essay, "Pulled out of the Closet and into my Family's Embrace", by Heidi van Rooyen, introduces the reader to a number of concerns that crop up in many of the following narratives, albeit in different guises and with different inflections. As the essay title suggests, she explores the importance of family in a lesbian's experience of coming out, whether that family constitutes a valuable support structure or a damaging locus of blame and resentment. As with most of the other authors' stories, Van Rooyen was surprised to find that her family's reaction fell overwhelmingly in the former category. Another point of similarity between this essay and many others in the collection can be found in Van Rooyen's sensitivity to the ways in which sexual orientation intersects with other aspects of identity, including race, class and religious identification. She perceptively illustrates the nuanced negotiations that many lesbians engage in to claim their lesbian identity without neglecting other, equally valuable and important aspects of their identities. In the second essay, the photographer and gender activist Zanele Muholi offers a moving tribute to her late mother in "I have Truly Lost a Woman I Loved". Muholi, who is no stranger to controversy, was the subject of considerable media coverage last year when the news broke that the then Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana, walked out of an exhibition of Muholi's photographs because she found the images of lesbians immoral.²⁷ As in the case of Van Rooyen, Muholi's essay recounts her memories of family members who have been accepting and supportive. In this narrative about a mother who was a domestic worker for 42 years with the white Harding family, the reader can never forget that experiences and identities are shaped by the manner in which gender, sexual orientation, race and class intersect.

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25. R. Morgan and S. Wieringa (eds), *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Sex Practices in Africa* (Jacana, Johannesburg, 2005).
26. P. Germond and S. de Gruchy (eds), *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1997); N. Mkhize, J. Bennett, V. Reddy and R. Moletsane, *The Country We want to Live in: Hate Crimes and Homophobia in the Lives of Black Lesbian South Africans* (HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2010).
27. For a discussion of the incident, as well as Xingwana's response, see L. van Wyk, "Xingwana: Homophobic Claims 'Baseless, Insulting'", *Mail and Guardian online*, <http://mg.co.za/article/2010-03-05-xingwana-homophobic-claims-baseless-insulting> (accessed 28 September 2011).

Although many of the essays focus on encouraging examples of acceptance, others contain quite startling accounts of homophobia and ignorance that remind the reader just how far South Africa still needs to go to make the Bill of Rights a substantive reality in the lives of gay people. For example, in Addie Linley's essay "A Life In-between" she recalls how her father insisted that there were no gay men in the South African armed forces during either the Desert War in North Africa or the Second World War (p 102). In Keba Sebetoane's "Who are you to Tell me Who I am?", the author relays how the man who raped her prefaced the assault by telling her: "Tonight I'm going to change you, and from now on you're my girlfriend" (p 92). Her description of her subsequent treatment at the hands of the police, medical and legal professions, leaves the reader with a profound sense of despondency. The reality of sexual violence against lesbians is further emphasised by the fact that many of these women still feel compelled to write their stories under pseudonyms. In the final essay called "Thinking through Lesbian Rape", Muholi calls for a "reciprocal dialogue" between readers and herself as the author of this essay because, she says, "mostly I just need to talk things through and be heard" (p 189). This need to have one's experiences and histories validated becomes a leitmotif throughout the collection and Diesel's text makes a valuable contribution by providing a space where lesbians' stories, in all their rich complexity, are the focal point.

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