

Zethu Matebeni, 2012

My research interests are located in a range of fields and sub-fields, including Sexuality Studies, Gender Studies, Urban Studies, Ethnographic theory and practices, studies on Identity as well as HIV and AIDS. My PhD thesis, *Exploring black lesbian sexualities and identities in Johannesburg*, is considered “the first in-depth monograph length study of black lesbian life on the African continent”. Another reviewer considered it a “significant” manuscript because “it challenges the idea and meaning that black lesbian sexualities lack pleasure, or that such sexualities are only shaped by violence”. Building on this thesis, my ongoing research investigates the ways in which sexuality and gender are used to unsettle and defamiliarize the ‘normalized’ and the ‘norm’. In most cases, the people with whom my research is interested in are considered ‘less human’, unAfrican, made to be outcasts in many ways and even violated. I am curious about the ways in which these groups of people transgress, challenge and expand society’s notions of what it means to be human. Currently I am working on three projects that deal directly with this pre-occupation.

1. HIV and AIDS among Southern African lesbians and women who have sex with women

In 2009 Prof. Vasu Reddy invited me to join him as Co-Principal Investigator (with Theo Sandfort) on an Open Society Institute Southern Africa, OSISA,-funded study, *Raising Visibility of Lesbian, Bisexual and Other Women who have sex with women in relation to HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa: A cross-country study, 2009-2012*. The study, being the first of its kind on the continent, places lesbians and women who have sex with women on the global agenda for HIV prevention. This population has been largely ignored and overlooked in relation to HIV prevention and service programmes. The erasure of lesbians and other women who have sex with women has contributed to the invisibility of lesbians in relation to women’s health, HIV and related health risks.

My ongoing role in this project ensures that the qualitative component of the research is published and well-publicised. We have completed a number of publications and are presenting the findings in various international and regional spaces. Moreover, together with lesbian, gay and bisexual and transgender organisations involved in the study, we will soon be working on a volume that focuses on the experiences of lesbians living with HIV in Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa and Namibia.

2. A manuscript on sex and gender

We may understand that while sex and gender are different, they may co-exist. However, when it comes to the business of attraction, intimacy, erotics, we fail to understand how same sexes and different genders can make life together. This is the dynamic which this manuscript addresses. Through the narratives of more than fifty lesbians in South Africa, I hope to offer an original and enriching contribution to writings on black female sexuality and gender.

The focus on ‘lesbian’ lives contributes to the significant dearth in the writings about the diversities of women in our contexts. Women are generally assumed to be heterogeneous, lacking sexual difference and gender complexity. Research among lesbian groups suggests the contrary. In fact, the

gender differences among lesbian women speak to the wider gender orders in our societies. The research is based partly on my PhD research and field research I have been doing over the past two years in different parts of South Africa.

3. “Revisions” – a documentary film

My next co-directed film is a visual portrayal of gender, sex and life transitioning with a twist on architectural spaces. I am intrigued by the ways in which architecture and the urban landscape can speak to our own physical changes. This film follows a character who arrives in Cape Town to start a new life. That life includes, among many things, a female to male transition which is highly marked by his relationship to city spaces.