

Ep08\_BetweenAcrossThrough\_AllenLesbians

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[music]

**00:04 Yana Romero:** You're listening to *Between, Across and Through*.

[music]

**00:22 YR:** You've heard the anthem, "We Are Born This Way." It's a strong North American declaration of sexual freedom, but not everywhere in this planet is this how people experience the world. There are places where masculinity and femininity, where active sexuality and passive sexuality, where pillow queens and pleasure tops, all mix, blurring the lines of how we understand the embodiment of sexuality. Today, Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neil, Director of the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies, speaks to Professor Andrea Allen from the University of Toronto. They'll discuss how the intersection of socio-economic backgrounds, gender and race shape the embodiment of lesbian relationships in Brazil. Please join us as we travel between, across and through.

**01:16 Kevin Lewis O'Neill:** Hi, I'm Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neil, and I'm joined by Professor Andrea Allen. Thank you for being here. Andrea, what is tribidism?

**01:23 Andrea Allen:** Tribidism is the idea of women engaging in sexual activities that involve a genital to genital contact, or genital to body contact, whether thigh, leg, arm, buttocks, any type of sexual contact that involves genital to body sexual behaviors.

**01:44 KO:** And why is that important to study?

**01:46 AA:** Well, frankly, throughout the academic research about sexual activity between women, oftentimes tribidism or focus on genital to genital or genital to body contact is not the focus of much research. So for my study I was interested in the course of discovering women's sexual activities, and this was one of the sexual activities that women discussed. And as I was conducting background research about this, I read other authors, for example, Jack Halberstam, who discussed the idea of the tribad and how the tribad has been lost in history, that this... First, this idea of the tribad was a woman who was the focal point of much consternation and castigation as opposed to her fem partner, because the tribad was seen as the one who was what we would call the female homosexual of her day.

**02:39 KO:** And in your research, you speak a great deal about people identifying as intengida, what is that?

**02:46 AA:** An intengida is a woman who identifies as basically non-heterosexual. So, intengida comes from the Portuguese word *intendere* which means to know. So, one could translate intengida as to be in the know. So an intengida is someone who is a non-heterosexual woman, identifies with non-heterosexuality, and engages oftentimes in female same-sex relationships, as well as at times can also participate in bi-sexual relationships.

**03:15 KO:** Is it an empowering term to be in the know, as opposed to being known?

**03:21 AA:** I think *intengida* is a word that is less often used now than it was used within, I would say, in the 60s and the 70s. Nowadays I would see most women who engage in same-sex sexual activities identify as lesbian women. But you will find older women, women who are in their 40s and 50s and older, who will identify with this idea of *intengida*, because *intengida* is someone who's in the know meaning, that you are aware of other women who who may be like you. You're in the know and almost like you're in on a secret.

**03:55 KO:** Wow. And what's so provocative about your research in Brazil is that it presents a vocabulary and coordinates for sexuality that often seem very different than the ones we have in North America. How does it fit this, to be in the know, fit or doesn't fit with what we understand in North America about sexuality, even the very popular idea of being born a certain way.

**04:19 AA:** I think within a North American and European context, there oftentimes is a focus on sexual identity over sexual activities and behaviors. So for example, within Brazil and Latin American contexts, alongside notions of sexual identity, you have a focus on sexual behavior. So, if you are the person who is in the active sexual penetrative position within a sexual encounter, you're considered to be the dominant position, and this position always already is a masculine position that is inhabited by men, while the passive sexual position is someone who is being penetrated in a sexual encounter, it's considered the feminine position. And this is a position that can be occupied by both women and men. And this understanding of sexuality is less of a focus on one's understanding of self being tied to your sexual desires and behavior, and your identity is not tied to your sexual behavior. So this notion of sexual identity is not a universal notion that depending upon the culture and the context, and even within the North American context opined on the community, there's less focus on sexual identity and more focus on what position you're in, in a sexual encounter. So it's more about what you are doing, than who you are doing.

**05:40 KO:** And this kind of tension between doing and being seems to be an important tension in your own research when you are completing interviews and field work with lesbian communities in Brazil. What's this active-passive sexuality? How does it relate to the femininity and masculinity of lesbian relationships?

**06:00 AA:** I think for many of the women that I interviewed and encountered in Brazil, oftentimes they were aware of this active sexual paradigm, because that has been the predominant sexual paradigm within Brazilian society. But many of them, I would say, I think in their thinking, have moved beyond this paradigm and now focus on sexual identity, that as lesbian women they can encounter other women, they can encounter them in sexual activities and they can both inhabit the active as well as passive sexual position. And of course, when talking about female same-sex sexual behavior, active and passive sexuality does not have the same connotations than when you're talking about sexual activity within a heterosexual encounter. Because who is the penetrated, who is the penetrator, those lines become blurred and are ambiguous within sexual contact between cisgender women.

**07:00 KO:** Your field work in Brazil really brings some of these more conceptual points to light, ethnographically, when you introduce some of your inner lockers like Roberta. Who was Roberta?

**07:08 AA:** Roberta was a fascinating woman because she definitely blurred the lines between notions of active and passive sexuality. And she was fully aware of how she was engaging in that time's transgressing sexual as well as racial norms. Roberta was a woman who, when I met her, she was in her 40s. She was a dark-skinned, heavy-set woman who at the time was unemployed. In the past she had been employed in different working class jobs. She was a janitor, she had also been employed as a childcare provider. And for her, she identified herself as a woman, but also as someone who had a masculine gender identity. And focusing on her masculinity was very important. And one way in which she was able to display her masculinity, and display it in a way that combated racism as well as sexism, was through engaging publicly, engaging in romantic relationships with white women and light-skinned women.

**08:15 AA:** And she even said to me once that it was impressive for her to walk around the neighborhood with a loira, which basically is a blonde woman, but it could be a light-skinned woman. So even though she was a dark-skinned woman who was not a heterosexual man, or a cisgender man, she still could, as she said, pegue, which means to get, she could still get a loira. That's what she said. And so it was fascinating to me when she said this, because she was fully aware of the racial and sexual dynamics and the gender dynamics, and how by parading around with loiras she was able to demonstrate her masculine prowess, which is what she was doing. So even though she did not have a penis, she still was able to pegue, she was still able to get a loira. Yet on the other hand, she was of the women who I spoke with who I had greatly identified with masculinity. She was the most open to all sexual activities, whether they would be included under active sexual behavior or passive sexual behavior. Because in the moment, the fire and the heat of sexual desire and sexual pleasure, what was most important for her. So she straddled the lines between, I wouldn't say masculinity and femininity, but masculinity and non-masculine pleasures.

**09:33 KO:** And so then the public parading or the performance of it, could you tell us a little more about how that codes as masculine, or how that becomes a performance of masculinity?

**09:43 AA:** Well, the very fact that she was able to walk around with loiras, she was able to walk around with women who... And most of these women who she had romantic relations with were women who identified or could be identified as heterosexual women. So that was another get for her. Not only was she engaged in romantic relationships with women, and light-skinned women or white women, these were women who had men at home. So walking around the neighborhood where other men, 'cause she identified herself with masculine gender identity, walking around the neighborhood with other men, they could see her and they could see that she was in essence a competitor. Not only was she a competitor, but that she was winning.

**10:24 KO:** Yes, and she was quite successful in this competition.

**10:26 AA:** Yes.

**10:28 KO:** You also interviewed a woman named Falana. What was she like?

**10:33 AA:** Falana also was very fascinating, because of the people that I interviewed, she was very analytical about her sexual or romantic choices. And while these choices may not have been the

most ethical choices, because she engaged in extra-relational activities and did not tell her wife, she was fully aware of those ramifications, and she had justifications for her activities. Falana was a woman who had a master's degree in psychology, and she also was interested in psychoanalysis and she specifically told me this. And so first she was very interested in interrogating her sexual activities and choices, and she was able to justify her extra-relational activities. And this... When I was conducting my interviews, I tried not to use the word cheating because I didn't wanna give a moral valence to my questions, so I would ask women, I would use the wordy phrase extra-relational activities, sexual activities, which is wordy, but I wanted to refrain from asking moralistic questions. Because the word for cheating in Portuguese is *traição*, which means betrayal, which is very hardcore.

**11:44 KO:** Well, even cheating is quite strong but betrayal is...

**11:47 AA:** Betrayal, yes.

**11:48 KO:** Shoots to a conclusion.

**11:50 AA:** So I would ask her about her extra-relational sexual activities and she said, "Well, I treat my wife with such care, affection and compassion that if she doesn't know about these activities I have, then that's okay, because I still treat her very well." But even though she thought that she treated her wife well, she didn't think her wife treated her well in several ways. One way was because she did not think her wife provided her with sexual satisfaction, because her wife was a masculine woman, and typically masculine women are seen as the active partners within and outside the bedroom, or her wife was typically passive in the bedroom in terms of sexual activities. And Falana was someone who liked to be both active and passive in her sexual choices, so she was dissatisfied with her wife, who was white and had more wealth than Falana did. And because of this dissatisfaction I think she was able to justify her sexual activities. Additionally, she was dissatisfied with her wife because she thought her wife did not treat her well. At times, her wife wanted her to cater to her, all of her whims and her desires, and she didn't think her wife fully took care of her in a way that she took care of her wife.

**13:12 KO:** It's an extraordinary study of activity and passivity or in these kind of intimate relationships. I'm also really interested in your place in the study being a certainly a trained ethnographer and as you say, with trying to find alternative ways of saying betrayal or cheating, trying to maintain a value-neutral positioning, but these interlocutors oftentimes, it seems told you a number, a very intimate personal secrets, your whole research depends on that kind of sharing and intimacy. How did you maintain that or established those relationships?

**13:48 AA:** One way I think I was able to do that was I was able to talk to people about my own experiences. I'm married and I have a wife. I would talk to them about our wedding and I even showed some people our pictures and I think for me sharing with people my experiences and I oftentimes would meet with people more than once, so it wasn't like I would interview them, and then the first time I met them. Typically, I would meet them within a social gathering or a social event and then I would tell them about my research, I would explain to them what I was interested in interviewing them about. And then we would set up a first interview and the first interview would go over basic demographic information. I would ask them questions about race, sexuality,

nationalism in Brazil. And then in the second interview, I would ask the more intimate questions. This was typically what I did for most of my interviews. And I think I was able to establish a great rapport with different people. And one way I think I was able to demonstrate this rapport is that typically after I would interview people, I would ask them if they had any questions for me.

**14:53 AA:** And the number one question people had for me was they wanted to know if I ever cheated on my wife. That was the number one question. And so for me, I included this in my book because I thought it was important ethnographic point to demonstrate that although many of these people throughout the interviews they would discuss the value of sexual fidelity, the reality of their expectations clash with the reality of their sexual desires and their sexual passions and I thought this was demonstrated in this popular question for me. And when I would explain to them that my wife and I, we decided to be faithful to each other, oftentimes they express surprise. One person even asked me if I ever... Well, what about just kissing someone? And I said, no, we have decided that we are going to be faithful to each other. And so I think this was just a way to this question. And this interest was a demonstration of not necessarily how I'm an outlier, but people were curious about me and my romantic dealings I guess, in Brazil.

**16:01 KO:** Sure. When it's also a good example of the kind of emotional reciprocity that makes field work possible this kind of research 'cause the conversations you were ultimately able to have with Falana about her partner... Is it Diana?

**16:14 AA:** Yes.

**16:15 KO:** How would she have felt if Diana cheated on her, on Falana?

**16:20 AA:** Oh, she would not have stood for that because in her mind, she was in the masculine position. And that she was the active romantic partner even though she did not identify with masculinity in relation to her gender identity, but I think she related to masculine energy, sexual energy especially. So I think she would have found that an affront to her pride, a demonstration that Diana did not respect her as a sexual partner, and romantic partner, even though she cheated on Diana.

**16:56 KO:** Right. Right. Right. Could you tell us a little more about Falana, and how this activeness and passivity differed in public and private areas of her life?

**17:10 AA:** Beginning with her sexual desires and choices and activities within the bedroom or in sexual spaces, Falana was the initiator of sexual activities with her wife Diana, which was interesting because Diana carried herself with a masculine demeanor. She had short hair, she wore masculine clothes, which was interesting 'cause many women I encountered who were middle class, and especially white at middle-class and upper middle class, they did not identify with masculinity, but according to Falana, Diana did. Yet, within the bedroom, she was passive, meaning that she did not participate with sexual activities in terms of being an initiator of sexual activities. She did not perform sexual activities on Falana, Falana was the active sexual partner. And this was to Falana's consternation because while she enjoyed being in the act of sexual position and she particularly enjoyed different acts that she attributed to masculinity, she also at times wanted to be passive. I use

the term a pillow queen. This is a term that's used within different lesbian circles to discuss women who are considered the passive sexual partner within a lesbian relationship.

**18:39 KO:** Is there any parallel in the context of that phrase?

**18:44 AA:** I don't think there is a parallel to pillow queen.

**18:47 KO:** Yeah.

**18:48 AA:** No.

**18:48 KO:** Okay.

**18:49 AA:** One could argue that the pillow queen ultimately is within the active sexual position because they are the one dictating the sexual activities and they are the ones who are in essence having sexual activities performed on them. When we talk about active-passive sexuality within heterosexual scheme, the active sexual partner, the male typically who has a penis, he is the initiator of sexual activity. He is the one who is receiving the sexual pleasure, the focus of sexual pleasure is on him. And one can make the argument that the pillow queen, and the same scenario is the one who's also receiving the sexual pleasure.

**19:32 KO:** So passive, but the idea of queen certainly suggest some kind of power.

**19:36 AA:** Right. So and this is where it gets tricky when we talk about active and passive sexuality within understanding of lesbian sexuality because who is the one who is in charge? Is the one who is receiving pleasure? Is that the one that... Typically, when we think of queens, queens give orders and they are the ones who receive people, onto them. And, in the same scenario, the pillow queen is the one who's receiving pleasure, and she's receiving it from her partner. Yet, people talk about, within lesbian spaces, lesbian sexual spaces, that the active partner is the one who is performing sexual activities.

**20:17 AA:** So, going back to Falana, outside the bedroom, at time she considered herself within a passive relationship, or in a passive position with Diana, because she had less money than her, they lived separately, although they were married. And when Diana would come to her house, she would do everything for her, which is what Diana was used to, because she had a servant. She had a domestic worker at her own house, so Falana would get food for her, she would get her water at night, she would take the water away, and she felt, at time, that she was in a subservient relationship with Diana. So, this is where it's interesting to talk about active and passive inside and outside the bedroom, because in their relationship there, at times, could seem like Falana was always within the active position, but the reality did not match that. And that was, at times, she was concerned about the imbalance of power in their relationship.

**21:16 KO:** In the Brazilian context, as a black woman, how did Falana feel about this tension in her relationship?

**21:22 AA:** I think she was dissatisfied with it. And one of the ways that she was dissatisfied was because I think she was clear that people thought that Diana was the one in the masculine position, or in the active position, in their relationship, because she had a masculine demeanor. And, on top of that, she had more money than her. And, on top of that, Diana was white. So, by all appearances, there was this imbalance in their relationship. And this imbalance, this appearance of imbalance, also matched the reality of this imbalance. Yet, she also loved her, she had great affection and care for her wife, but she also thought her wife, at times, did not treat her the best.

**22:09 KO:** You also mention in your work that Falana, this particular interlocutor, worked in a black activist group. Why is it so important that she keeps her sexuality a secret in that particular circle, which you mentioned in your research?

**22:23 AA:** At times, I think it's less of a case now. But if we wanna think of the black activism, historically, from the '60s, '70s, onward, many of the black activists who are women, especially in Salvador, are women who were in relationships with other women, yet they were silent about their relationships, or maybe a few people were in the know about it, but it was not publicly known. And I think because Falana worked at a black activist organization that was not a black feminist organization or a black lesbian organization, that she felt she needed to keep her romantic life separate from her activist life, particularly because she was married to a upper middle-class white woman.

**23:07 KO:** Are these also in the Brazilian context seen as two different movements? Or are those two movements, in terms of sexuality and race, are they seen as compatible?

**23:18 AA:** I would say they are compatible, and they had similar goals. But, from my experience, especially in Salvador, most of the women who were black activists, or black feminist activists, were not in black lesbian activist spaces. There were a couple of women that I knew, who were in their 40s and 50s, who were active in both spaces, but oftentimes, there tended to be a separation between black lesbian activism and black feminist activism, because of homophobia, and specifically lesbophobia, within black activist spaces.

**23:54 KO:** And, from my own perspective, over the last maybe five or 10 years, Brazil has increasingly emerged as an incredible site for research. And growing number of social scientists, but also other researchers across the university, are pursuing really exciting active projects in Brazil. I would say that the terrain that you cover in your own research remains under studied, and I would love to hear your perspective. But, how does the fact that the daily lives of like Roberta and Falana are under research, how does that affect their daily lives?

**24:27 AA:** I think one way it affects their daily lives is that different... On a fundamental level, different resources are not funneled to black lesbian organizations. That there tends to be more money and more resources towards organizations that are led, at least within a Brazilian context, that are led by gay men, and also groups that cater more to white LGBT Brazilians. And I think one of the consequences of this lack of research is lack of funds. And why funds can be so important is because, within the Brazilian context, oftentimes, LGBT organizations and other social justice-oriented organizations have received, in the past, have received funds from the Brazilian



government. Now, with the new regime of Jair Bolsonaro, obviously, changes have been made, and less resources, even before him, with the presidency of Michel Temer, less resources have been funneled towards LGBT organizations, which means even less resources for black lesbian organizations.

**25:36 AA:** Another consequence, I think, is the tumult of black lesbian organization activism is under research and understood, because one of the consequences of racism, sexism and gender inequality within the Brazilian context has been that black lesbian activists don't have a space to organize, because oftentimes they have to have other jobs, they have to provide for themselves. So, there hasn't been, at least within Salvador, where I conducted most of my research, there was such turnover while I was there, with different black lesbian organizations. So, that space to organize, that space to think, that space to dream, is not available to them. And I think research about black lesbian activism can be a way to understand their experiences, and a way to provide information for them about what has gone on, provide a historical view of black lesbian activism within Salvador, as well as within Brazil, as a whole.

**25:50 KO:** What do you think could be accomplished, moving forward, in terms of increased research interests, or funding? Obviously, within the current administration in Brazil, for those unfamiliar, it seems like a very difficult future that lies ahead of, particularly, these political organizations, when it comes to funding and interest, but with increased research and increased funding, what could be a political horizon that these groups could set?

**27:08 AA:** I think, despite the setbacks that black lesbian activism has had in Brazil, they still continue. New groups continually are established. They continue to protest, they continue to meet, they continue to participate in conferences. And so, I think having an international and transnational focus can be to the great benefit of having black lesbians around the African diaspora organized, having black lesbians around the diaspora learn from each other. And I think that has been occurring, and my hope would be that that would continue to occur, and that would grow. And I think social media has been a great way for that to occur, for people to get in touch with each other.

**27:55 KO:** Yeah, and I think just raising awareness, which your research and, hopefully, this conversation will advance. Thank you, so much.

**28:02 AA:** Great, thank you.

[music]

**28:11 YR:** That was Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill, in conversation with Professor Andrea Allen, from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto. On our next episode, we'll talk to Professor Austin Zeiderman, to discuss life aboard a Colombian riverboat. Please subscribe on Stitcher, Apple Podcasts, or your favorite app, so you won't miss it. This monthly podcast was brought to you by the Center for Diaspora & Transnational Studies, at the University of Toronto. I am Yana Romero. Thank you for listening and joining the conversation.

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