

Falu, Nessette. 2023. *Unseen flesh. Gynecology and black queer worth-making in Brazil*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 201 pp. Pb.: \$25.95. ISBN: 9781478025184.

Book review by

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Nessette Falu's ethnography, *Unseen Flesh*, shines a light on the gynecological experiences of Black lesbians in Brazil, calling attention to the mental, emotional, and physical traumas that these women are often subject to within gynecology appointments and exams. Falu examines the prevalent racial, sexual, gender-based, and class biases Black queer women face within Brazil's medical system as a jumping off point for understanding how they create and sustain their well-being and self-worth in the face of this persistent prejudice. Using Black queer feminist methodologies she names "shadowboxing fieldwork", Falu brings together a multitude of public discourses, material media, spaces, events, and extensive interviews and participant observation from Black lesbian life (and Black life in Brazil more broadly) in order to recognize the ways that resistance occurs across the many rich shadows of people's lives, beyond what happens solely in the space of the clinic (p. 13).

Falu begins by closely exploring the sexual health and gynecological encounters of Black lesbians and then builds to broader examples of how they respond to institutional violence in their social worlds. The chapters ultimately work together to paint a picture of how Black queer bodies move in and out of oppressive spaces, with an invitation to "humanize, re-imagine, and recreate a different world" (p. 20). In the *first chapter*, Falu considers what it means for Black lesbians to live their best healthy and sexual lives, and how their queer, liberatory self-identification as virgins disrupts the gynecological encounter as a form of erotic power. In the *second chapter*, Falu introduces her term "gynotrauma", a re-articulation of the medical terminology "gynecological trauma," which

she uses to emphasize the social and emotional traumas that emerge from abuses of power within gynecological spaces (p. 52). Falu grounds gyno-trauma in Black lesbians' affective experiences and argues that through these experiences the body becomes a site of resistance and survival as patients surveil and critique their interactions with gynecologists.

Falu's perspective is bolstered not only by her own identity as a Black lesbian, but by her extensive professional experience as a physician's assistant, which allows her to provide deeper analysis and context across these medical encounters, a strength that is especially beneficial in the third chapter. Here, Falu works to situate gynecology in Brazil, both socio-historically and in the present, as a "social clinic" that functions as a microcosm of the country's social world and a key site of intimate violence and social inequities (p. 86). By critically examining Brazil's histories of medicine and gynecology, alongside the ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality that are constructed within gynecological training and practice, this chapter plays a crucial role in articulating why these very spaces can be essential sites for challenging the interlocking forms of oppression that Black queer women experience. *Chapter three* is book-ended by two brief ethnographic interludes that invite the reader into the field alongside Falu, providing powerful examples of how the histories and ideologies of this chapter were present both within the clinic and in the public discourse that Falu observed during her time in Brazil.

The final two chapters continue this rhythm of moving within and beyond the gynecological encounter to explore how Black lesbians respond to violence and prejudice in their lives more broadly. Through participant observation at protests, social events, and religious spaces, Falu demonstrates how these interventions take place through collective organizing, through re-articulations and imaginings of well-being as a justice issue, and in the ways that Black lesbians navigate ethical relations to themselves and their networks. The last chapter specifically theorizes the concept of "bem-estar Negra", or "Black well-being" as a reproductive justice framework that considers and embraces the possibilities of life and healing that emerge when Black queer women free themselves from trauma and pain (p. 143-144). Falu concludes the book with what she calls "beautiful experiments," that open up her theorization of Black well-being as tied to radical imagination and the creative envisioning of Afro-futures (p. 150). Falu's combination of theory and ethnography sings in this final chapter, as she thoughtfully moves through different stories, sites, and experiences from her fieldwork that reflect what these radical possibilities might look and feel like for Black queer women.

While Falu's analysis could have further situated the racism and homophobia of these gynecological encounters within broader discourses and movements against obstetric and gynecological violence across Latin America, her citational practice is a masterclass in centering the voices of Brazilian theorists and activists. Her work is deeply grounded in the historical and theoretical frameworks of her field site, while also drawing on the rich transnational exchange of Black lesbian knowledge production between Brazil and the U.S. The result is an ethnography that feels incredibly relevant and representative of the communities from which it came, while also scaling beyond Brazil to ask broader questions about Black queer worth-making and both individual and collective practices of resistance.

This book is a valuable resource for those in search of a strong example of Black queer feminist methodologies and theoretical analysis in practice, and for those seeking to understand better the historical and social dynamics of medical racism and homophobia within Brazil's system of reproductive medicine. Falu's ethnography lovingly brings forward the unseen flesh and the unheard voices of Black Brazilian lesbians, and her careful attention to their lived experiences brings the focus beyond structural violence within medicine to forge instead an analysis that centers the worth-making practices that sustain these women and brings agency to their struggle.