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Review: Sex, Power and Taboo: Gender and HIV in the Caribbean and Beyond

Edited by Dorothy Roberts, Rhoda Reddock, Dianne Douglas and Sandra Reid
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Everyone knows that sex sells. This is the cliché and the verity that is used by all advertisers, filmmakers and book publishers, academic and non-academic alike. But what happens when sex and death have become bedfellows that are too close for comfort. The editors of the book, *Sex, Power and Taboo: Gender and HIV in the Caribbean and Beyond*, point not only to the global problem that the spread of HIV and AIDS has wrought on sexual pleasure and reproduction of human life, but to the specific ways in which they affect the populations of the Caribbean. It is estimated that 27,000 people in the Caribbean became infected with HIV in 2006, that youth comprises the fastest growing population to be infected, and that 51% of the adult population living with AIDS are women.

The spread of this disease globally has evoked the conventional medical and social responses among health and welfare workers. There is an almost exclusive focus on *epidemiology*—a concern not so much with the “factors that shape human sexual intercourse and prescribe human sexual relations, but with a policing of the boundaries for curbing the spread of the disease.” Thus, the search for a solution to the problem of HIV/AIDS leads to the search for a high-risk group, who in the process become labeled and stigmatized. When gay sexual practices in the US and other northern countries could

be cited as the truant source for a very high-risk population and for the spread of the disease, other countries, including those in the Caribbean, could dismiss the complexity of the disease and the reasons for its spread in the safe othering of a high-risk group and of countries that present populations and cultures which condone sexual behavior that leads to infection. With its wider spread among a heterosexual population, the focus on the disease and its epidemiology has shifted from north to south, in particular sub-Saharan Africa, giving rise to other hemispheric scapegoats in the process. The poorer societies and the ones where codes of conduct perceived as sexual promiscuity are less likely to be condoned, along with the increasing liberalization of attitudes toward homosexuality as contemporary modernization proceeds, have now been placed under greater scrutiny, and understandably so, as the statistics of infections and people living with HIV/AIDS support some of the theories about the reasons for its spread.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the book *Sex, Power and Taboo*, however, is first that it confronts HIV from a specifically gendered viewpoint, and second that it focuses on the Caribbean, but from the vantage point of seeking a more profound understanding of the social, political and cultural mechanisms that influence human sexuality and sexual expression and thus the reasons why sexual behavior is difficult, if not impossible to circumscribe. The thirteen essays in the book, written by scholars and practitioners in the fields of law, gender studies, sociology, literature, media studies, medicine, clinical psychology, nursing, and psychiatry, are rich and varied in style and content. Many of the scholars work or have worked in the Caribbean, although some essays do not focus exclusively on the region and offer scope for comparative analyses, as for instance, Shanti Parikhs's "Love letters, youth romance and the paradoxes of condoms in Uganda" or Ida Tafari's and Louis Marcelin's who deal with diasporic Caribbean Haitian youth in Miami. One finds in this publication the sense of a commitment beyond the scholarship of publish or perish; rather, collectively, there is commitment to making an impact on the perception and attitudes of those who live with this disease and those who will become potential carriers of it. The treatment is contemporary, direct, hard-hitting and deliberate—as it must be. Typical of the book's approach is the essay by Lisa Croom, which looks at hyperheterosexuality's impact on prison culture in Jamaica and its perpetuation of a regime of discipline and punishment that endorses the cycle of violence among inmates and between warders and their captive populations.

Paula Morgan, in an interesting twist examines two literary texts, Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother* and Powell's *A Small Gathering of Bones*, both of which render up for scrutiny and demystification the metaphors that have come to be associated with HIV and AIDS, such as the disease being a visitation of divine judgment on vice, or a virus that attacks the defenseless, sleeping, innocent—those who persist in remaining convinced of their immunity and invincibility. Kamala Kempadoo's aptly titled essay, "Dying for sex," names the dilemma that the sex worker in tourist-ridden islands is faced with in the transactions that have long dichotomized pleasure and economic need, a double standard which most states dependent on the tourist dollar have not wished to confront openly.

I personally welcome this collection of essays: for too long the medicalization of the discourse and its focus on risk populations have failed to deal with the fundamental issue

which papal admonitions will not arrest, that to be human is to be a sexual being. Human expressions of sexuality are instinctual, emotionally charged and psychologically bound up with questions of gender identity, cultural ways of living out bodily pleasures, and systems of production and reproduction of ethnicity itself. Insights from the Caribbean in this continuing debate are of particular value precisely because they emanate from a region that has never been reticent in admitting these realities in its dance, music and culture of everyday life.