

Stumbling Into Sexualities

International Development Encounters Dissident Desire

ANDIL GOSINE

L'auteure se réjouit de voir le nouvel intérêt pour le sexuel dans le travail sur le développement international mais relève quatre questions qui posent problème : l'assomption que le modèle occidental de la sexualité est universel; les discussions politiques sur la sexualité sont concentrées sur le virus VIH Sida; l'invisibilité des femmes et finalement le caractère raciste du Tiers-monde.

More is being said about the sex of “Others” than, perhaps, ever before. White/western culture’s most dominant institutional actors—European explorers-invaders, legislators, medical practitioners, economists, and also writers, artists and scholars engaged in the pursuit of colonial projects—have for centuries been fascinated by the observed or imagined sexual activities and ambitions of the non-white peoples of Asia-Pacific, Africa, and the Americas. While this preoccupation has been a vastly productive endeavour, informing the organization of institutions (prisons, hospitals, schools, mass media), the creation and enforcement of laws and social codes, and the very constitution of knowledge and culture across disciplines and territories, only quite recently has this interest in sex not been almost entirely focused on the management of heterosexual sex. Anxieties about “inter-racial mixing” and the fertility of non-white and poor people remain, but now more investigators and policy planners are also concerned with the social implications of homo-sex.

That there are more stories being told and more questions being raised about the experiences, living conditions and rights of the Third World’s queers¹ is a consequence of many factors, including the organizing efforts by local groups for better rights for marginalized peoples (e.g. Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe, Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays, India’s Bandhan and Swikriti), international networks linking gays and lesbians across national borders (e.g. International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), Human Rights Watch, Naz

Foundation International, Behind the Mask and the Canada-based ARC International group), urbanization and the rise of “gay ghettos,” the growth of sex industries, the proliferation of cultural representations of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, transexual and other queer sexualities, and a global context where more countries recognize non-heterosexual sexual practices and relationships as legitimate choices. None of these events, however, quite matches the powerful spectre of HIV/AIDS, and the threat it poses to the global economy.

Governments and international agencies were slow to respond to the spread of HIV/AIDS when the disease first emerged. But as its impact has become more evident and more widely felt over the last decade, many (but certainly not all) have been forced out of complacency. The disease has resulted in over 20 million deaths since its first strains were identified in 1981 and UNAIDS estimates that between 35.9 and 44.5 million adults and children are now infected (*2004 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic 2*). Studies also document its devastating social and economic impacts.²

Afforded new political capital by the still-emerging global consensus on the importance and urgency of addressing the HIV/AIDS crisis, sexuality rights advocates have seized upon “opportunities” to bring visibility and attention to the welfare of people engaged in non-heterosexual sex. As I write, a group of men who have sex with men (MSM) are lobbying the Senegalese government to dedicate some of the US\$74 million pledged towards HIV/AIDS support and prevention to activities directed at MSM—a request supported by the major international donor agencies and one made more significant given that homosexuality is illegal in this Muslim state (“Senegal: Gays fight to be included in anti-AIDS campaigns”). In St. Lucia, where both male and female homosexual acts are punishable by imprisonment, constituents continue to react to the public musings of the Minister of Health about the need for decriminalization:

There are closeted homosexuals infected with HIV/AIDS. They cannot come out openly to receive treatment because of a fear of being discriminated against because they are homosexuals. Do you think it's fair to make homosexuality a criminal offence? I don't think it's fair at all. Why not make infidelity a criminal offence? Why criminalize homosexuality? (qtd, in Olibert: 2)

And in Washington, D.C., a number of World Bank staffers are strategizing on "mainstreaming" sexual-mi-

Conversations pursued by development analysts in Africa, Asia and Latin America did not seek to build on indigenous knowledge or traditions about sexual practices.

nority issues in Bank operations and development programs; the most popular approach has been to "cost" the impact of HIV/AIDS, to illustrate the disease's threat to economic growth, and move key institutions into action.³ They are joined in policy-focused dialogues by legions of academics, entrepreneurs, politicians, high-priced consultants, activists and other players in the mammoth global development industry, all forced by HIV/AIDS to begin to break their long-held silence on the subject of sexuality.⁴ Finally, international development analysts and practitioners are encountering sexual dissidence; but what is being said?

While the emergence of conversations about homosexuality has mostly been viewed as an encouraging advance, discussions and approaches so far suggest that development thinkers and practitioners have merely stumbled into sexuality. Rather than engage in a broad critical consideration of the significance of sexuality to the rights and well-being of people living in the regions of the Third World, the most dominant actors have instead elected to configure discussions on sex and sexuality within a limited HIV/AIDS framework that leaves intact development's colonialist-imperialist and patriarchal-paternalist trajectories. Four key features of this emerging discourse reveal its critical limitations: the assumption of a western model of sexuality as universal; the confinement of sexuality matters to HIV/AIDS policy discussions only; the invisibilization of women, particularly queer women; and, finally, the racist characterization of Third World people.

Dominant development models tell one story of progress-destiny, and development theorists and practitioners have for the most part sought to represent and re-create the Third World through and in the image of the First; even the terms themselves (developed/underdevel-

oped, First/Third, etc. continue to situate capitalist North Americas and Western European states as the civilized normal which others must emulate). Similarly, conversations pursued by international development analysts and policy-makers about sexual practices in Africa, Asia and Latin America did not usually seek to build on indigenous knowledge of or traditions about sexual practices. Instead, western assumptions about sexual identities and behaviours were imposed. Populations were divided into heterosexuals and homosexuals (with more recent accommodations sometimes made for bisexuals and other queers), and people engaged in non-heterosexual sex in Asia, Africa and Latin America were asked to relate and locate their experiences to western terms, whether in naming their identities (gay, lesbian, queer), forming partnerships ("open" or "closed" relationships), creating traditions (coming out) or developing institutions (gay bars, the gay village, strip clubs). All history and all other possibilities were surrendered to the supposed superiority of the western (specifically, Anglo-American) model, and white/western gays and lesbians could feel assured they had, like Christian missionaries before them, contributed to the enlightenment of less civilized peoples.

Yet sexual practices between men or between women are neither new phenomena in Third World states, nor unique to western metropolises. There are names, traditions, and institutions among sexual dissidents that are indigenous to their cultural geographies. Words like "gay" and "lesbian" may be recent introductions to local vocabularies across the South, but there are many names used to describe non-heterosexual acts. More importantly, while "gay" or "lesbian" may imply identification of a prescribed social arrangement, those arrangements may not be so strictly defined elsewhere. The *yan daudu* of Nigeria, for example, may dress effeminately and live as women, preparing food for festivals and celebrations, procuring clients for women sex workers, and sometimes acting as prostitutes themselves—but many may also be married with children while living as women and having male sexual partners. Similarly complex arrangements have been common in other countries, including India where, for example, *hijras* hold a much more public presence than is generally afforded eunuchs and hermaphrodites in the West.

Traditions that have become institutionalized in gay and lesbian contexts in North American and European cities may also not seem appropriate or desirable in other contexts. For example, the process of "coming out" is generally regarded as a necessary act in (white) gay and lesbian communities in the West. It is, as counsellors advise at the Student Health Centre at the University of McGill "a focal point of gay life."⁵ But coming out is not seen to be as important in other places. In the Philippines, for example, declarations of sexual involvements—of whatever kind—are regarded as both shaming and unnecessary (Manalansan IV 434). While reluctance to "come

out” is often regarded as a weakness in mainstream white gay and lesbian communities, it may well provide advantages. Connie S. Chan notes,

the East Asian cultural restrictions upon open expression of sexuality may actually create less of a dichotomization of heterosexual versus homosexual behaviour. Instead, given the importance of the concept of having only private expression of sexuality, there could actually be more allowance for fluidity within a sexual behavioral continuum. (247)

Not all Filipino or East Asian communities (or individuals) may adhere to the same social codes, of course, but the point is that there are no universal rules about how to realize sexual identities.

In most of the discourse on sexuality and HIV/AIDS, more attention has also been given to those political leaders who have adopted hostile positions towards sexual minorities, particularly homosexual men, and to discussions of sexuality in general. But it is not the case that throughout the developing world, national leaders, including religious leaders, are opposed to strengthening visibility and support for sexual minorities. South Africa was first to offer the most significant constitutional protections and rights to sexual minorities of any country in the world. Contrary to (racist) western expectations of African homophobia, many tribes also believe that God specifically created some women in men’s bodies (Murray and Roscoe). Similarly, China has a tradition of same-sex love that did not encounter as violent hostility as in the West, and there is evidence that homophobia in China originated in colonial Christian influences in the nineteenth century (Jolly). Even in places with strict prohibitions against homosexuality, men and women find creative ways to meet, to communicate, and to resist the punishing arm of the state.

While a more appreciative understanding of the complexity of the sexual experiences and arrangements of Third World peoples is emerging in some quarters—no doubt because of the insistence by individuals and communities in the Third World and their allies—and conceptions of sexuality as fluid are gaining favour in the West (especially among queer anti-racist scholars), it is still this universal model that informs National AIDS plans, which remain, in many countries, the only space available for official recognition of sexual dissidents and/or minorities. In most plans, such as those implemented in the English-Caribbean nation-states, MSM are neatly boxed outside the “normal” population and effectively cast as deviants.

There is also an inverse relationship at work here: all questions about sexuality and sexual deviance are confined to the subject of HIV/AIDS. Development practitioners may have been forced to deal with sexuality because of the impact of HIV/AIDS, but they appear entirely unwilling to raise questions about sexual dissi-

dence in other contexts. Outside of HIV/AIDS work and specific campaigns launched by human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, the development machinery continues to characterize Third World peoples as universally heterosexual. No room is made available for recognizing the existence of people engaged in same-sex relationships, or for advocating for their participation and rights. Thus, even the promotion of gender-equality policies has sometimes worked against the interests of lesbians and unmarried women in many countries because of their assignment of

Even the promotion of gender-equality policies has worked against the interests of lesbians and unmarried women because of their assignment of heterosexist gender roles.

heterosexist gender roles for men and women. For example, in many countries, Gender Affairs departments are relegated to Ministries of the “Family” and support heterosexist notions of male and female roles. In this construct, “what is ‘natural’” becomes conflated with heteronormative values of sexuality, gender, and modernization and modernity. While gender policies are largely seen to benefit women, Amy Lind and Jessica Share instead observe,

merely celebrating women’s increased visibility in politics and development does little to challenge the systemic binarism that relegates women to the reproductive sphere in the first place, nor the inescapable economic dependence on fathers and husbands engendered by it (62).

Instead, “‘family’ and ‘heterosexuality’ merge,” they argue, “tightening any space for kinship to broaden its meaning and welcome lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people, same-sex desire and homosocial relationships into the community” (62).

The welfare of non-heterosexual women is of little concern in HIV/AIDS work, anyway; as these women are perceived to be a “low risk” population, it would seem unnecessary to be concerned about their rights. Studies on the vulnerabilities of women who have sex with women (WSW) are few and far between, even among sexual health organizations engaged in rights campaigns for MSM. One policy-maker working at a major HIV/AIDS donor agency described the attention given to WSW in her organization as “less than a drop in the bucket” (anonymous personal interview). A search at the website of the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), conducted in March 2004, turned up hun-

dreds of documents related to MSM, but *not one* on WSW. Additionally, since much of the focus in human rights work has been on anti-sodomy laws, there has been little discussion of lesbians or other WSW in that work (although this is improving⁶).

Men engaged in sexually dissident practices would appear to fare better. It is certainly true that funding from development agencies has helped to create and institutionalize spaces for gay men. For example, the Canadian International Development Agency has provided small grants to organizations focused on support for MSM in Guyana, Brazil and francophone Africa. Disbursements from American and European AID agencies have also supported projects focused on MSM. But the particular configuration of "Third World dissident men" in the discourse on HIV/AIDS and development is also problematic.

Most often, efforts to advance sexuality rights through HIV/AIDS prevention work have emphasized one persuasive argument: since studies show that most MSM in the developing world also have sex with female partners (who may in turn have sex with exclusively male partners), HIV/AIDS in sexual minority/dissident communities may infect the whole society. As put in the AIDS Alliance report *Between Men*:

Sex between men ... is one of the primary ways in which HIV and other sexually transmitted infections are passed on. In every society, some men have sex with other men, and some of these men have many sexual partners, including women. This means that anal intercourse without a condom between men also places the men's female partners and their future children at risk of infection. (3)

The threat, powerfully wielded by many advocates of sexual minority rights, is clear: if homosexuals are not recognized, if their security is not assured, the whole nation may fall apart. While this approach may be effective in getting support for HIV/AIDS support and prevention programs, it also places responsibility for the disease on men not exclusively engaged in heterosexual relationships, and in so doing defines appropriate moral codes for sexual experiences and behaviour.

Moreover, the reductive focus of development discourse about sexuality on "fighting AIDS" takes up the same view of all Third World peoples as espoused in previous population control and family planning projects: that they are one-dimensional organisms led only by raw desire (whether for survival, reproduction, or sexual fulfillment), and do not experience the full range of emotions so readily associated with love and sex in the First World, and among white people in particular. The limited focus on sexual practices may be an attempt to avoid debates about more contentious political questions about identity, rights, and related institutions, but it is

also a racist characterization that makes non-white people appear to be less full humans who do not engage in as complex (and as intelligible) negotiations about matters of the heart (and body).

"Without HIV/AIDS," one African gay rights activist told me, "there would be no way to talk about gays and lesbians" (Gosine 6). The AIDS crises have forced development theorists and practitioners to notice two things: first, that men and women living in Third World countries have sexual desires which are important for a number of reasons (although, as most continue to insist, primarily because of the concentration and spread of HIV/AIDS among men who have sex with men); and second, that some men and women living in the Third World engage in non-heterosexual sex. Yet, with few exceptions,⁷ the range of questions and critical interrogations that flow from these observations remains perilously limited, and few have pursued conversations which challenge the patriarchal/paternalist, hetero-normative or racist logic of much international development analysis and work. A more ambitious dialogue is needed.

The author would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for supporting this research through a post-doctoral fellowship. Dr. Gosine held this fellowship at the University of Toronto in 2003-2004 and at York University in 2004-2005.

Andil Gosine is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, York University. For more information on his research projects, visit www.pierrot-grenade.com.

¹Throughout this paper, a number of terms are used to describe people engaged in sexual activities that are not exclusively heterosexual. When citing research or examples, I use the terms of the author or that are dominant in the area of work being discussed. My own preference, however, is to employ the phrase "sexual minorities and/or dissidents" as an alternative to the culturally specific and sometimes narrowly instructive terms coined by gay and lesbian movements in the West. Similarly, "Third World" and "developing world" are terms used interchangeably to collectively describe populations of Africa, Asia, Latin America—as they are generally used in international development work—although both descriptors are problematic for several reasons, including their easy conflation of vastly different geographic and cultural spaces and reaffirmation of Western European culture as the central referent for interpretation of the rest of the world.

²For example, the World Bank's 2003 report, *The Long-Run Economic Impacts of AIDS: Theory and An Application to South Africa*, suggests that HIV/AIDS is responsible for a significant decline in GDP. Shanta Devrajan, co-author of the report and then Chief Economist of the Bank's Human Development Network, noted, "in those coun-

tries facing an HIV/AIDS epidemic on the same scale as South Africa, for example, if nothing is done quickly to fight their epidemic, they could face economic collapse within several generations, with family incomes being cut in half.”

³The “Economic Costs” of HIV/AIDS is the first item listed at the “Data and Statistics” section of the World Bank’s website on HIV/AIDS (www.WorldBank.org/aids). See also World Bank (2003).

⁴I am not suggesting that development policies have not previously been about sex or sexuality; as it was in the preceding project of colonization, sex is at the very heart of international development, informing the full gamut of social and economic policies that are implemented in the name of poverty alleviation, from family planning initiatives (which presume and aspire to regulate both gender roles and sexual practices) to taxation programs (which alternatively privilege or punish particular kinds of sexual partnerships and preferences). But explicit discussions of sexuality—even in work by feminists, gender specialists or other, more radical development thinkers—have numbered few, and discussions of non-heterosexual sex are rare.

⁵See www.mcgill.ca/studenthealth/information/queerhealth/comingout/. The site also offers “guidelines for coming out to parents” and instructions for how to cope during the “personal” and “public” phases of coming out.

⁶The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, however, has begun to record a series of violations that are specific to wsw. An aptly-titled 2000 report, *Written Out: How Sexuality is Used to Attack Women’s Organizing* provides detailed evidence of efforts to cast any women engaged in political activism for women’s rights as lesbians and so normalize violence and discrimination against them. On February 25, 1998, for example, the government-controlled Tunisian newspaper *Al-Hadath* printed the pictures of six prominent feminists under the title, “Why aren’t these women married?” (qtd. in *Written Out*). A 2003 report, *Justice for Women: Discrimination Against Lesbians* identifies efforts at the sustained discrimination of women in education, employment and health care in Costa Rica. More than half of the lesbian-identified women, the report noted, were from lower-income groups (15), and 39 per cent had to hide their sexual orientation at work, for fear of dismissal (14). Almost three-quarters of the respondents continued to live with their parents because they could not be economically independent (11). Testimonials from Costa Rican women also provide evidence of violence by police, breach of civil rights and job insecurity.

⁷Feminist scholar/activist Sonia Correa, for example, is raising a much broader range of questions in her (as yet unpublished) work (e.g. at an October 2002 lecture for the Sexuality, Health and Gender Seminar, Department of Social Sciences, Public Health School, Columbia University).

References

- AIDS Alliance. *Between Men*. London: AIDS Alliance International, 2003
- Chan, Connie S. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Know: The Formation of a Homosexual Identity and Sexual Expression Among Asian American Lesbians.” *Ethnic and Cultural Diversity Among Lesbians and Gay Men* Ed. B. Greene. London: Sage, 1997.
- Correa, Sonia. “Sexual Rights: Much as Been Said, Much Remains to be Resolved.” Lecture at the Sexuality, Health and Gender Seminar, Department of Social Sciences, Public Health School, Columbia University, New York, October 2002.
- Gosine, Andil. *Sex for Pleasure, Rights to Participation and Alternatives to AIDS: Placing Sexual Minorities and/or Dissidents in Development*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2004.
- International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. *Written Out: How Sexuality is Used to Attack Women’s Organizing*. New York: IGLHRC, 2000.
- International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. *Justice for Women: Discrimination Against Lesbians*. New York: IGLHRC, 2003.
- Jolly, Susie. “Queering Deelopment: Exploring the Links Between Same-Sex Sexualities, Gender and Development.” *Gender and Development* 8 (1) (2000): 78-88.
- Lind, Amy and Jessica Share, “Queering Development: Institutionalized Heterosexuality in Development Theory, Practice and Politics in Latin America.” *Feminist Futures*. Eds. Kum KumBhavani, John Foran and Priya Kurian. New York: Zed Press, 2003. 55-73.
- Manalansan IV, Martin F. “In the Shadows of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma.” *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 2: 425-38.
- Murray, Stephen O. and Will Roscoe. *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998.
- Olibert, Petulah “Gays outlawed in St. Lucia: A change is coming?” *St. Lucia Star* 23 August 2003: 1.
- “Senegal: Gays fight to be included in anti-AIDS campaigns.” *PlusNews.Org* January 12, 2005. Dakar: UN-OCHA Integrated Regional Information Networks.
- United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS. (UNAIDS) Online: <http://www.unaids.org>. Date accessed: March 1, 2004.
- United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS. (UNAIDS). *2004 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic*. Geneva: UNAIDS, 2004.
- World Bank. *The Long-Run Economic Impacts of AIDS: Theory and An Application to South Africa*. Washington DC: World Bank, 2003.