

BOOK REVIEWS

Pleasures and Perils: Girls' Sexuality in a Caribbean Consumer Culture.

By Debra Curtis. [The Rutgers Series in Childhood Studies]. (New Brunswick, NJ.: Rutgers University Press, 2009. Pp. vii-222, 4 black and white photographs, notes, index.)

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Pleasures and Perils is an ethnography of adolescent sexuality, globalization and consumer culture on Nevis, a small Caribbean island. In this study, Curtis highlights the fluidity and complexity of adolescent sexuality as influenced by globalization and localized cultural norms. The notion of commodity erotics in Nevis — the conflation of sexual practices and commodity desire — renders a continuum that ranges from the exchange of sex to meet the family's basic needs, to sex for personal consumption. Commodity erotics also measure the sexual value of commodities, like sexy lingerie, designer clothing and jewelry, which produce sexual desirability. Curtis's study of Nevis offers a snapshot of globalization by focusing on popular culture influences on conceptions of adolescent sexuality in a society that has undergone rapid socio-economic and technological changes over the past two decades.

The first islands in the Caribbean to be colonized by Europeans, the Federation of St. Kitts and Nevis achieved full independence in 1983. The islands were established as major sugar producers until the industry was dismantled in 2005. The growth of tourism and offshore financing necessitated advancements in infrastructure and increased access to technology and electronic goods, including televisions, cable, video, and the Internet. Curtis asserts that prior to the emancipation of slaves in 1834, the plantation culture generated a permissive sexual system, which was later challenged by Protestant missionaries. According to Curtis, ideological tensions between traditional sexual systems and Protestant morality have been compounded by the influx of global popular culture and shaped sexual subjectivities.

Curtis, a cultural anthropologist, conducted fieldwork in a Nevisian village over six months in 2003. Personal history interviews, focus groups and surveys assessed sexual practices, leisure activities, and consumerism. She observed public health centers and analyzed music videos from Black Entertainment Television (BET), imported movies and television shows, local radio programs, soca, reggae, hip hop music, and sex education materials. Curtis also incorporated coming-of-age stories with young Nevisian women as a counterpoint to the teenage girls' reported sexual practices, reproducing their words in the Nevisian dialect throughout the text.

The author highlights the multidimensionality of sexuality in Nevis by drawing attention to conflicting religious, traditional, and global discourses. The majority of Nevisians regularly attend church and participate in religious activities, while

teenage girls have unlimited access to television and the Internet at home. Curtis states that marriage is not a common practice in Nevis and that sexual exclusivity is rare. She suggests that living arrangements like single parent homes, common-law marriages, and visiting marriages (in which the spouses live in separate households and visit each other) contradict a fundamental Christian discourse that espouses sexual virtue, corporeal control and chastity. While older Nevisians denounce global influences, the government has imported American sexual education programs to address teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases in a society that does not openly discuss sex and stigmatizes girls' use of condoms.

Curtis asserts that various global imports have influenced female codification. Teenage girls' identification with the imported images and lyrics from music videos, fashion magazines and sexual scripts — like materialism and masculinity — expressed in hip hop and Caribbean music, translates into female desire for sexual pleasure and commodities in exchange for sex. The consideration of female pleasure contradicts the prevalence of female sexual pain resulting from the widespread threat of sexual crimes that goes unaddressed by law enforcement, legal and medical authorities. This pervasive threat in women's everyday experiences and the desire for sexual agency may underlie girls' explicit requests for commodities and cash in exchange for sex or families' accepting cash settlements rather than prosecuting rapists. According to Curtis, women's traditional use of sex to meet their basic household needs set a precedent for contemporary teenage girls' exchanging of sex for personal effects, such as car rides, compact discs, jewelry, and lingerie. The interaction between commodities and female pleasure amidst tradition, religion and globalization reveal the complex nature of sexual subjectivity, which is equally determined by social regulation and self-construction, and highlights malleability of subject formation.

The examination of sexuality and economics among marginalized women is complicated by issues of representation and the limits of cultural relativism. The ethnography runs the risk of reproducing historical stereotypes of sexual pathology and fetishizing Nevisian girls. Despite her focus on globalization, the author isolates Nevis from a global context, which at times makes the girls' behavior appear bizarre and pathological. Overall, this ethnography of Nevis's explosive economic, technological, and social growth offers a valuable assessment of relationships between globalization and sexual discourse, global scripts and teenage behavior. Additionally, it offers a multidimensional perspective on the construction of sexual subjectivity, as it relates to culture, poverty and power that is useful to readers interested in Caribbean cultural studies, popular culture, sexuality studies, policy and public health. Curtis's interdisciplinary approach illustrates why considerations of culture and social change are fundamental to effective public policy and public health programs.