

‘Race’, Culture, Power, Sex, Desire, Love: Writing in ‘Men who have Sex with Men’

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1 Introduction

‘We’re queer, we’re here! (Get used to it!)’ is a cherished and powerful refrain in gay and lesbian movements. Sexual dissidents have been written out of historical texts and continue to be invisibilised in contemporary ones, so this assertion is often a necessary starting point in struggles for rights, resources and social justice. That analysis seems to hold true in the field of international development. Its chief architect, John Maynard Keynes, may have enjoyed queer activities throughout his lifetime,¹ but from the moment that the Bretton Woods institutions were founded, dominant development discourses represented the Third World as an exclusively heterosexual space. Micro- and macroeconomic theories, social programmes and policies of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and collaborating partners assumed and imposed a heteronormative outlook on the South, and effectively conspired with other forces (local forms of nationalism, patriarchy, homophobia, etc.) to deny the existence of, and/or actively condemn, anyone and any acts that did not subscribe to it.

This view has begun to change of late, in part thanks to the efforts of sexual rights advocates and their allies, and because of HIV/AIDS. The debilitating impact of the virus, not just on individual victims but on whole communities and national economies, has shaken the leading actors in international development out of their slumber, and (finally) put questions about sexuality on the agenda. Consequently, people once rendered unimportant have earned significance, and there is now greater interest in the choices they make and the lives they lead. Queers have arrived, and the World Bank, UN agencies, IMF, their client governments, and so on, are beginning to ‘get used to it’.

Some activists and health workers feel encouraged by this willingness to discuss sexuality matters in development, and by the greater recognition of sexual diversity among some of the field’s dominant players. But I think it is also necessary and important, at this moment, to consider the form and flow of these emerging conversations, to ask: how are sexual dissidents and/or minorities being written in? In this short article, I begin to consider one way sexuality is being articulated in development research and practices: through the organisation of analysis and policies around men who have sex with men (MSM).

2 What’s in a name?

Many names are given to identities, ‘behaviours’ and practices that suggest or involve sexual activity between men: queer, gay, homosexual, dandy, batty man, queen, bachelor, fag – my ‘Eurocentric queer erotic pocket thesaurus’, *Outbursts*, lists hundreds of possible affirming or denigrating synonyms in the English language alone (Peterkin 2003). In international development, however, MSM has fast become the preferred descriptor for myriad expressions of same sex desire by men. The World Bank, UNAIDS, state-sponsored donor organisations, academic institutions and various international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) now pursue research on, write policy papers about, and/or advocate or fund sexual health strategies and programmes that target MSM. For example, by 2006, UNAIDS had already published 200 documents about or which reference MSM, and most organisations engaged in work on HIV/AIDS had identified them as a priority group for sexual health interventions.

‘MSM’ is not an inconsequential designation. The term has a history, it makes important assumptions

and conveys powerful and complex suggestions, and an analysis of its selection and application is useful in revealing how sexuality is being framed in international development. Attention to the purposes, uses and effects of the discourse of MSM disturb its easy deployment, and encourage us to think about how particular ideas about 'race', culture, power, sex, desire and love are configured through and around its proliferation, and the consequences they hold for the people named MSM.

3 Before

'Men who have sex with men' is a recent addition to the lexicon of international development – the major institutions did not begin to use the term until after 2000 – but its history goes back further. Several years earlier, grassroots activists and healthcare workers concerned about the devastating impact of sexually transmitted diseases in their communities coined the term as an alternative to 'gay' or 'bisexual' men. This was a radical gesture at the time; a sharp refusal of the dominant narratives about sexual orientation and sexual behaviour that were being relayed by organisations led by white, gay-identified men.

Organisations of non-white men living in Western cities insisted that there were other ways in which sexualities were organised, and other means of expressing sexual identities. Groups like the Naz Project London pointed out that many non-white men who engaged in homosexual acts did not connect with the dominant expressions of Euro-American metropolitan gay culture, and were consequently being ignored in sexual health education and promotion strategies. 'MSM' also refused the attachment of identities to disease, and focused attention on sexual acts. It provided a way to speak about safe sex practices without committing clients to fixed and culturally specific identities ('gay', 'bisexual', etc.), and without invoking moralising discourses. But Naz also foregrounded a political agenda in its sexual health work and did not exclusively focus on sexual acts.

Like many other organisations of Black, Latino and Asian men in North America and Europe, Naz was engaged in and prioritised efforts to build better lives for people engaged in same sex practices. They organised campaigns against homophobia in their own communities, and against racism in gay communities. They joined with other groups to contest various forms of exclusion based on 'race',

gender, class and sexuality. Most importantly, perhaps, Naz and groups like the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention (Black CAP) and the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention (ASAAP) celebrated sexual expression through the organisation of social events and support and encouragement offered to men looking for partners. For them, attempts to prevent, control and treat HIV/AIDS were inextricably linked to struggles for rights, justice, freedom and also, joy and love.

4 Since/after

As 'MSM' is appropriated into the machinery of development, some of its original purposes remain intact – its most appealing quality appears to be that it focuses attention on a particular set of practices (e.g. anal sex between men) for the purpose of controlling and preventing HIV/AIDS – but the expression's more radical intonation may be fading.

5 'Race'/culture

'MSM' was and still is being used by many organisations of non-white men in North America and Europe to challenge Western ways of naming, knowing and speaking about sexuality. As other terms commonly used to describe same sex desire, such as 'gay', 'homosexual', 'bisexual' and 'queer' were produced in particular social and economic conditions that primarily referenced metropolitan white cultural expressions of sexuality, 'MSM' was (and is still seen by some) to be a more appropriate and inclusive descriptor. Indeed, in its earlier usage, 'men who have sex with men' was understood to be just a descriptor, not a state of being, and the groups that employed the phrase tended to emphasise the idea that sexual identities were fluid. The 2004 Naz (India) manual on MSM reflects this understanding in its acknowledgement that 'some believe the notion of a sexual identity, and in particular the use of the term 'gay', is a Western import that may not be relevant or appropriate for South Asian countries' (Naz Foundation (India) Trust 2004: 9). However, as the term has become more widely referenced in international development work, the challenges it once posed to the authority of the West appear to have been blunted.

First, through its use as a broad description of men leading very different lives in very different contexts, MSM has mimicked Orientalist strategies of collapsing cultural differences between non-Western (and non-white) people, and marked them as

'others'. *Kothis* in Bangladesh, *ibbi* in Senegal, *'yan daudu* in Nigeria, African–American and Latino men 'on the down low' in the USA, and *hijra* in India are collectively tagged 'MSM' despite speaking different languages, holding different religious beliefs, occupying different social positions in various environmental spaces, and being engaged in different kinds of sexual practices and emotional relationships.² Interestingly, this universalising narration of sexualities across the South is also happening at a time when more challenges are being posed to dominant models in the West.

While not always successful, scholars, healthcare specialists and other workers engaged in studies of sexualities and sexual practices in Northern countries have become more appreciative of their complexity. For example, we are more careful to point out that there is no necessary relationship between expressions of gender and sexuality, so we know that boys performing (what dominant cultural norms characterise as) 'feminine acts' may not engage in homosexual acts, and people born with female sex organs undergoing operations to have male ones, may not be – indeed, as research has established, are usually not – motivated by sexual desires. In international development work, however, the attachment of gender identities to sex organs or to particular expressions of femininity and masculinity is usually taken for granted, even though many of the people referred to as 'MSM' do not see themselves as 'men' or males, and some, such as *hijra*, have even removed male sex organs. Consequently, in the rendering of all non-white expressions of same sex desire as 'MSM', the complex and not easily discernible layers of meanings embedded in the configuration of sexual identities and acts disappear.

Second, representations of MSM as sexual dissidents who transgress normative expressions of gender and sexuality also result from the application of Western frameworks of sexuality, and may not fairly represent what is viewed as 'normal' sexual culture in non-Western contexts. The characterisation of people into 'normal' heterosexuals and 'deviant' homosexuals occurred under specific political and economic conditions in Western Europe. It is neither a natural nor universal division. A 1990s study of several thousand Indian men led Shivananda Khan to conclude: 'there are no heterosexuals in India'; local patterns of sex between men were not the exclusive practice of a few 'homosexual' men, his research

showed, but were a part and parcel of general sexual practices, thus denying the characterisation of men engaged in homosexual acts as a minority, and of exclusive heterosexuality as 'normal' (Khan 1998: 5). In many countries across the Third World, the introduction of Western conceptualisations of sexuality have had the effect of marking practices that were previously tolerated as deviant and dangerous. For example, Oliver Phillips credits the famously homophobic leader, Robert Mugabe, as the one who:

... has not only been responsible for producing a conception of homosexuality in the Zimbabwean context, but also that of heterosexuality. All those Zimbabweans who have previously not even considered this notion of a 'sexuality' suddenly find themselves blessed with one – by designating others as 'homosexual' you automatically designate the norm as 'heterosexual'. Many Zimbabweans suddenly came to see themselves as 'heterosexual', where they had no such consciousness before. (Phillips 2000: 30)

Caribbean feminist M. Jacqui Alexander also points out that the criminalisation of homosexuality in most of the developing world only came about as a consequence of colonialism, and contemporary laws forbidding homosexual acts and relationships are revisions of preceding colonial texts (Alexander 2005: 21–65).

Third, reification of the notion of 'men who have sex with men' implies a racialised hierarchy of sexual expression that continues to privilege white metropolitan sexual identity practices. For example, the universal concern among activists, NGOs, health workers and policymakers about the 'invisibilisation' of MSM follows from the expectation and celebration of public declaration of sexual identities in the West. As Alan Sinfield observes, 'if there is one thing that characterises metropolitan lesbian and gay identities, it is "coming out"', a ritual that allows the supposition that this kind of gayness was always there, waiting to be uncovered'. This understanding 'suggests that we really always knew about it, individually and as a culture, but failed to own up to it' (Sinfield 2000: 21–2). But as many Third World scholars and activists have pointed out, declarations of sexual involvements – of any kind – are not viewed as necessary. Thus, calls for greater visibilisation of MSM, through the organisation of social and political spaces that mimic those of gay

and lesbian movements in the West (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) groups, gay bars, etc.) presume that non-Western ones are inferior. Describing his experiences 'back home', Kim, an Indian immigrant to the USA challenges the professed superiority of sexual liberation strategies in the North, and pleads:

For once, let's not impose our templates of what a blissful society should be on those halfway around the world. Let us endeavor to become aware of the situation there, try our utmost to comprehend how affairs evolved to their current point, and give consideration to the thought that maybe the gays in India are actually better off than we are! (Kim 1993: 93–4)

Similarly, Connie S. Chan suggests:

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 having only private expression of sexuality, there could actually be more allowance for fluidity within a sexual behavioral continuum. (Chan 1997: 247)

MSM in India or in East Asia may or may not be 'better off' than their European and American counterparts, but simply measuring experiences produced in very different cultural and material conditions against a single yardstick necessarily undermines other ways to express sexuality.

6 Power

Against the position taken by Chan above, many believe that just as they have been for gays and lesbians in the West, public pronouncements of existence are politically necessary in the Third World. Human rights activists and sexual advocates appear to believe that the recognition of MSM in HIV/AIDS work will provide an opening to talk about and work towards sexuality rights and the empowerment of marginalised groups. However, it is unclear whether political opportunities to shift dominant relations of power will necessarily result from the visibilisation of MSM in particular.

'MSM' appears to have become a way of speaking about sexuality without forcing (although still making available) an examination of the ways in which sexual

practices and identities are regulated and repressed, and without holding various actors accountable for sexuality-based marginalisation. This strategy is evident in the Naz Foundation (India) Trust's 2004 manual, which includes a description defining the differences between 'gay men' and MSM. It says 'MSM':

... recognizes that many men may have sex with other men, but do not necessarily consider themselves to be homosexual or gay. They do not consider their sexual encounters with other men in terms of sexual identity or orientation.

Conversely,

... being gay is more of an identity or 'lifestyle'. They see their gay identity as a determining or defining characteristic for making certain lifestyle choices. These may include not getting married, living with a male partner, etc. In some cases the gay man may be 'out', or open to family, friends, work colleagues and others about their sexuality.

Some men who identify as 'gay', the authors also submit,

... do so as a means of politicizing homosexuality. They are interested in increasing the visibility of the homosexual men and the struggle for their rights. In this sense, the term 'gay' is increasingly being adopted as a social and political identity. (Naz Foundation (India) Trust 2004: 8–9)

'MSM' is thus understood as a 'politically neutral' term, operating as a tacit agreement between the larger development agencies and states that the identification of MSM as a key target group for the purposes of controlling HIV/AIDS will not commit either party to a broader conversation about their 'lifestyles' or rights – those are seen as issues that relate to gay men, not MSM. Thus, references to MSM now appear in National AIDS Plans negotiated by the World Bank in states that criminalise homosexuality including Senegal, Uganda, India, St Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados, and some governments see no contradictions between investing in sexual health programmes aimed at MSM and denouncing homosexual practices. The availability of more funding opportunities for groups focused on sexual health work directed at MSM may have also blunted the political agendas of NGOs and activist groups. As they redefine work programmes around funders' primary

interests in HIV/AIDS control and prevention, questions about rights, power and justice may be lost, or less strongly emphasised.

7 Sex

The consequences of this narrowing focus on HIV/AIDS and MSM are especially revealing when issues relating to the representation of women are considered. Women are configured in the writing of MSM in two ways. First, women who have sex with women (WSW) are almost completely invisibilised in emerging discourses on sexuality in development. The reason for this absence is well known: as WSW are perceived to be at 'low risk' for contraction of the HIV virus, they have not been deemed significant. Studies and policy papers about these women number very few, and have been almost exclusively pursued by feminist researchers working outside mainstream development institutions. One policymaker working at a major HIV/AIDS donor agency described the attention given to WSW in her organisation as 'less than a drop in the bucket' (Gosine 1998: 6). A search at the UNAIDS' website, conducted in March 2004, turned up hundreds of documents relating to MSM, but *not a single one* about WSW.

Equally troubling, are the ways in which women do appear in emerging work on MSM. Most of the time, they occupy the status conveyed in the following excerpt from a UNAIDS statement on MSM, and repeated by many, many others:

Sex between men occurs in all societies without exception, although in many it is heavily stigmatized and sometimes officially denied. Largely because of the taboo, the female partners of men who have sex with men are often unaware of their partner's other liaisons, and the threat posed to themselves. (UNAIDS undated)

Women's representation as victims of deceptive and irresponsible MSM serve to place blame on the latter for HIV/AIDS transmission – and not the legal, social and cultural regulations that force dissident sexual practices underground. It also reassures a framing of sexuality issues in development that makes HIV/AIDS transmission the central focus – rather than the rights and well-being of those most marginalised as a result of the disease's spread – such that women's sexual rights and well-being are articulated only around the interests and experiences of men, and in relation to their assumed procreative roles.

Greater attention to women also challenges activists, policymakers and workers to better connect contemporary struggles for sexuality rights (and the participation of sexual dissidents in governance processes) with previous ones led by feminists. In both South and North countries, women's groups were often the first places gay men and other MSM looked to for support and resources. As well, feminist groups have long been the most vocal champions of sexuality rights in international development. At the Fourth World Conference on Women, for example, activists struggled against organised opposition to advocate women's agency and autonomy in defining and pursuing sexual identities and forms of expression. Attempts to enshrine recognition of women engaged in sexual relationships with women into the action plan were rebuffed by multilateral agencies and most nation states, but feminists' efforts nevertheless served to stimulate and revitalise ongoing discussions about sexuality rights for marginalised peoples.

Acknowledgement of this history not only displaces the gendered focus of discussions (i.e. on men), it also presents important learning opportunities. Feminists' efforts to reconstitute narrowly focused family planning and health programmes as fuller debates geared towards the achievement of reproductive and sexuality rights, for example, offer practical and strategic insights about how to reconfigure initiatives tightly focused on the control of HIV/AIDS into broader conversations about the rights and welfare of MSM, WSW and others engaged in marginalised and criminalised sexual practices. More attentive consideration to these experiences also better prepare activists, health workers, etc. to navigate their way through the political negotiations involved in constructing knowledge about and programmes on sexuality.

8 Desire/love

One of the many consistencies running through discourses on family planning, reproduction, population control and sexualities is the way that Third World peoples' sexual desires are represented. When population growth was/is a more pressing concern among policymakers, efforts were/are geared towards regulation of women's sexual and reproductive choices, whether through coercive means (e.g. China's one-child policy, forced sterilisation in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean) or through the application of more

implicit measures, such as educational programmes that warn(ed) women not to have large families or about the environmental consequences of 'overpopulation'. Throughout, women's sexual desires were either denied or condemned. Mirroring racial anxieties of the colonial era, fears about the 'limitless' fertility of non-white people and the voracious sexuality of savages meant that the Third World's poor, and women in particular, were blamed for environmental degradation, poverty, resource scarcities and conflict. Moral panics about HIV/AIDS have constituted MSM as a similar kind of menace, and sex between men as a negative activity engaged by people unable to control sexual desires or, through expression of individual agency, experience *love*.

It is important to recognise that only non-white men tend to be described as 'MSM'. Even when the term is used in the North, 'MSM' is usually exclusively attached to non-white bodies. The characterisation of non-white men engaged in homosexual practices as MSM makes particular suggestions about their cognitive abilities, dignity and worth that reveal a troubling adherence to traditional processes of racialisation that reduce non-white peoples to their bodies – and bodily functions – alone. For example, Khan argues that in India, sexual behaviour takes the place of sexuality among MSM:

Male sexual behavior becomes self-absorbed, and is reduced to one of discharge rather than based upon a desire for the other person. Sex behavior becomes depersonalized. Sexuality has no construction. The sex act becomes brutalized whether it is between male and female or male and male. (Khan 1996: 3)

This characterisation is patterned after the historical definition of colonised, non-white peoples as having only bodies and no minds. Representations of 'MSM' as selfish and deceptive men who exercise little control over their primal urges are circulated in many other sexual health texts, reproducing racialising colonial narratives about the 'natural' proclivities of non-white men, and undermining the complex negotiations that they make in expressing sexual choices.

9 *Brokeback Mountain/On the Down Low*

Their very existence long elided, sexual dissidents and/or minorities are now being 'written in' in international development. While the recognition of

the real diversity of sexual practices and identities is important, we need to pay attention to the particular strategies through which the experiences and situation of sexual dissidents and/or minorities are being represented. The use of 'MSM' as a conceptual site around which analysis of and policies about sexuality may be constructed is fraught with problems. In its current, dominant applications in the field, 'MSM' appears to be informed by colonial-imperialist notions of sexuality and 'race', and may work to reify sexual identities and marginalise women. That does not mean we should simply dismiss its use outright – rather, we should be more vigilant in critically evaluating the terms of its use.

As a conclusion to this discussion – a discussion that is only being introduced, at this point – I want to briefly call attention to contrasting representations of homosexuality in two popular and internationally circulated American texts that bring into focus how some ideas about 'race', power, culture, sex, desire and love are collaboratively articulated in the contemporary articulation of 'MSM': J.L. King's (2004) *On the Down Low: The Lives of 'Straight' Black Men Who Sleep With Men* and the celebrated Ang Lee film, *Brokeback Mountain* (Focus Features). The former reported the author's experiences with and analysis of heterosexual-identified African-American men who have sex with men. Although they are located in the developed world, the men described in 'down low' meet the three criteria said to be shared by all men tagged 'MSM' throughout the developing world, despite the different cultural contexts they occupy and sexual rituals they act out:

- 1 They are defined as 'men' because they were born with male sex organs.
- 2 They express sexualities in ways that run counter to anticipated patriarchal, heterosexist norms.
- 3 They are non-white.

King's book became an international bestseller after the author appeared on an episode of Oprah Winfrey's talk show, and it generated prolonged public debate. Throughout, the tone of discussions was consistent: black men were pathologised and condemned for their 'dishonest', 'dangerous' and 'irresponsible' behaviour, and positioned as 'threatening' to women and the nation. Lee's box office hit was also about men who were hiding their sexual relationships from their wives, friends and families. But unlike the 'down low brothers',

Brokeback's main characters, two married white ranchers named Jack and Innis, were represented as respectable and responsible men who, despite their infidelities, cared deeply for their wives. Jack and Innis were celebrated as romantic heroes, and the multi-award-winning film – a triumphant love story – was featured by Winfrey on another episode of her show. That celebration was made possible because,

as white men, Jack and Innis were represented as complex humans, able to reflect upon and exercise control over their lives, and whose sexual encounters brought them joy and pleasure, not merely 'release' – qualities that are expressed through their inhabitation of white identities, and which would appear to ensure they would not be marked 'MSM'.³

Notes

- 1 Keynes' homosexuality is widely acknowledged in several biographies of the economist, e.g. Escoffier (1995).
- 2 *Kothis* and *ibbi* adopt 'feminine' mannerisms, 'yan *Daudu* dress as women, *hijra* perform 'feminine' roles and remove their male sex organs, and all have sex with men, though not necessarily exclusively. Some are engaged in sex work, some are not.
- 3 Wikipedia's entry for 'MSM' notes that the term 'is especially used to describe African-Americans. MSM behaviour is also known as 'being on the

down-low ... the ex-convict, gangster, and rapper stereotypes are associated with this term'. While the male partner of someone 'on the down-low' is often aware of the double life implied by such sexual activity, the site's entry goes on to explain, 'wives and girlfriends are usually kept from that knowledge'. Finally, this label, 'is also used in the context of 'macho' culture or subcultures for distinguishing between 'active' and 'passive' sexual partners, where the 'active' partner does not usually consider himself to be homosexual' (Wikipedia undated).

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