Book Review/ Compte rendu

Fahs, Breanne, Mary L. Dudy, and Sarah Stage, eds., *The Moral Panics of Sexuality.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 259 pp. $115.00 hardcover (9781137353160)

Ripening out of a research cluster and a conference at Arizona State University in 2011, this anthology's themes form five juicy sections titled "female desire," "creating norms," "colonial erotics," "tactical panics," and "critical panics. " With inquiry spanning three centuries, contributors drill down into the pivotal irony: moral panic witnessed in legal cases, in therapists' offices, in politics, in classrooms, in boardrooms, in intimate relationships, and across all media platforms, has an "uncanny way of directing attention away from actual sources of danger" (2). Editors Fah, Dudy, and Stage brilliantly point to how "things" become coated in a "thick tar" (2) of sexual shame, disgust, and misinformation, while lived realities - poverty, immoral wars, intransigent racism, and violence against women and trans folks - are obfuscated. The editors' aim in assembling this cheeky, multidisciplinary collection of qualitative work is to interrogate the distractions and diversions *from* institutionalized inequalities that intensify and deepen in an American "culture of panic" (2). They ask: what is the genesis of moral panics? How might we better identify them, and what strategies might we employ to fight back? Feminist, postcolonial, and antiracist at its theoretical "core" (15), the volume grapples with the ever-changing paradoxes and challenges of "scary sex" (15).

The authors comprise a spicy blend of writers, bloggers, community activists, teachers, and graduate students. With great flare, wit, and political bite, Michelle Ashley Gohr examines the myth of vagina dentata – the castrating "vagina-with-teeth" – in science fiction, vampire tales, and contemporary video games. Gohr's excellent meditation on depictions of women as vampiric, devouring, and villainous temptresses is followed by Ellen Stockstill's deft reading of Le Fanu's Victorian story, "Carmilla" (1872), which features an "aggressive, possessive and phallic" female vampire (48) who frustrates heteronormative and patriarchal conventions by feasting on female lovers, only to be viciously slain for her transgressions by "The General."

Under the rubric of "colonial panics," Ayaan Agane smartly dissects Herman Melville's short novel, *Typee,* and Charles Warren Stoddard's

Summer Cruising the South Seas – both paradigmatic examples of nineteenth century travel writing and imperial discourse. Agane argues that stories by both white men/sexual tourists exploit a metaphorical conflation of sex and eating: "cannibalism constitutes alimentary deviance just as homosexuality constitutes sexual deviance" (119). Turning her gaze to colonial rule today, Rachael Byrne examines the complicity of Hillel Vancouver's website, IsrealIsSoGay.com (2010) in the cyber pinkwashing of Israel as an exceptional "paradise for queers of all nationalities" (136) while evidence mounts of Israeli state violence against Palestinians, including queers.

In "Bodies that are Always Out of Line," Sara McClelland and L.E. Hunter offer tantalizing insights into the regulatory rhetoric of 'age appropriateness' for both youth and aging women diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. Reflecting on an activist assignment for her Psychology of Gender course, Breanne Fahs champions the courage and creativity of her students' to fight menstrual taboos through six "menarchist" projects (80); she also comments ruefully on how they collectively confronted stubborn tropes of disgust, shame, and hostility projected onto the menstruating body. To enrich the provocative theme of blood, Bianca Jarvis questions judgments about women who choose "continuous contraception" for the purpose of eliminating menstruation. Calling for more fine-grained analysis of menstrual suppression, Jarvis introduces Japanese British performance artist Sputniko (aka Hiromi Ozaki) who commands a spaceship in the shape of a tampon and sings about suffering menstrual pain, rejecting the reproductive imperative, and preferring the life of a cyborg over that of a maternal goddess (217).

The TV show *Glee* (2009-2015) captures the imagination of Sarah Prior, who persuasively argues that the comedy-drama satirizes ideas commonly circulated in Abstinence Only Sex Education programs. At the same time, Prior notes how the show reinforces stereotypes about Black and Latina girls' hypersexuality, and stops short of probing complicated themes of consent, sexualized violence, and body image. While Prior investigates themes of queerness in *Glee*, Sarah Stage revisits the near forgotten sexological work of Katherine Bement Davis, who published results of her sex survey of twenty-two hundred "normal" American women – married and unmarried, in 1929. With grace, Stage unspools the controversy that met Davis's findings, and the patriarchal maneuvering of male scientists bent on discrediting her "objectivity." Drawing from autobiographies and archived congressional notes, Jordan O'Connell maps the journey of Steve Gunderson from his rural and devoutly Lutheran roots in Wisconsin to becoming the first out gay Republican elected to office in the United States. In the mid-1990s, O'Connell

argues, Gunderson made efforts to defy his party's heterosexist and homophobic policies, only to be "forced out of office and into the footnotes shortly thereafter" (164). In her conceptually sophisticated essay, Brooke Willock synthesizes the work of "crip theorists" and feminist disability scholars to "co-think sex and disability" as a dual strategy a) for upending the myth of intercourse-based, reproductive, and goal-oriented sex, and b) for centering the sexual subjectivity and desires of disabled people. In the final essay, Michael McNamara makes the compelling case that bareback porn - depicting unprotected anal sex between men - emblemizes a radical critique of an assimilationist, neoliberal gay and lesbian politics of respectability. In her "Afterward," Deborah Tolman commends the authors' recipes for how we must "intervene, interrupt, and insist on insinuating ourselves" into the tangles of panicky discourse and practice (255).

The Moral Panics of Sexuality is eminently teachable as a core text in gender studies, sociology of sexuality, social movements, and popular culture. With my social justice-minded undergraduates, I anticipate chewing over the vexing riddle identified early by the editors: Why, and under what conditions, do some people accept, collude in, and advance those very panics that constrain their freedoms and pleasures? In our chaotic, digital, and neoliberal age of sexting, porn ubiquity, sexualized capitalism, sexual assault on and off campuses, and tropes of sexual shame intrinsic to "sex education", what are the earthy, fertile conditions of possibility for individual and collective sexual agency, diversity, and liberation?

As we seek "new stories for old problems, and new frameworks for emerging problems" (9), I anticipate that media analysts will scrape Twitter and Facebook posts as well as specialty TV channels and online streaming services to mine sex-related dialogue and debate. On the ethnographic front, what more might we learn about how young trans bodies arouse panic among cis-normative parents, medical gatekeepers, and school officials? How do queer and racialized immigrants and refugees navigate the thickets of settlement, state surveillance, and white supremacist policing? What strategies do Indigenous folks employ to take erotic joy in their bodies, and in the bodies of others, to "strike out against five hundred years-plus of disregard, disrespect, and dismissal?" (Justice, 2008: 104)

In the spirit of the editors' impassioned call for radical resistance, I champion the brave push against whorephobia by sex workers and allies in Canada and the United States, as well as in Mexico, Cambodia, India, New Zealand, and elsewhere (see Laing, Pilcher, and Smith, 2015; Showden and Majic, 2014; van der Meulen, Durisin and Love, 2013).

While sustained examination of sex work is disappointingly absent from *The Moral Panics of Sexuality*, arguably no one has born the brunt of crushing repudiation more than women scapegoated as "strumpets", "harlots", "jezebels", "streetwalkers," and "hookers". I encourage multi-sited interrogations of how moral panic about sexual commerce obscures the knotty intransigence of structural racism, poor bashing, neocolonialism, transphobia, misogyny, and violence faced by so many sex workers globally.

Ours is a time of unsettling conservatism rooted in the "toxic sludge" (21) of resurrected and new modes of panicking. We urgently need more irreverent, timely, and strategically sharp work by scholar-activists unafraid being labeled "indecent", "unscholarly", or "perverse." Breanne Fahs, Mary D. Dudy, Sarah Stage, and their co-conspirators have boldly oriented us to novel entry points and directions. Bravo!

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References

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