

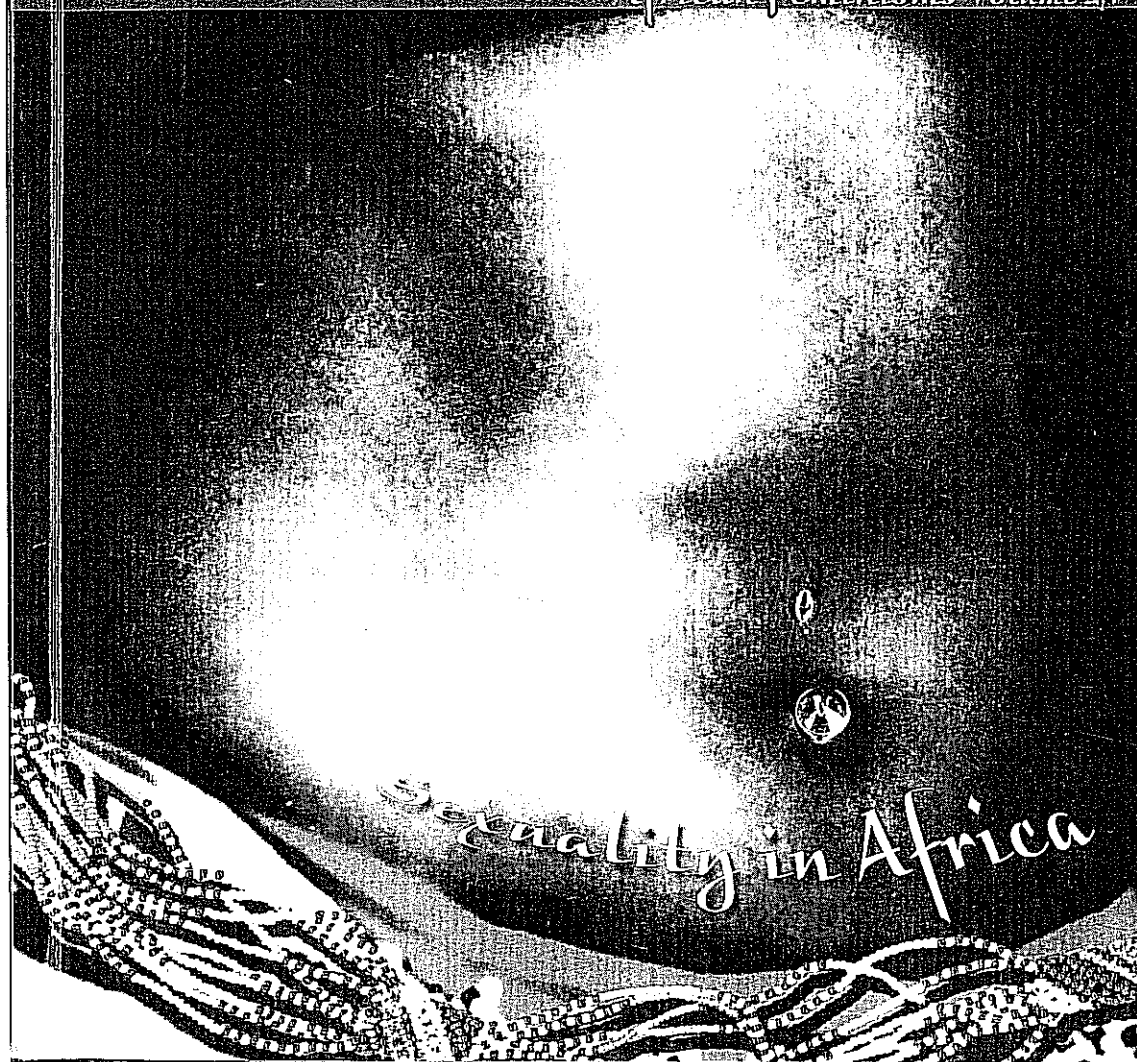
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NPO Number: 011-258NPO

Contact Details

Room E302 Diakonia Centre,
20 St Andrews St, Durban, 4001

PO Box 61163
Bishopsgate, 4008

Tel: +27 (0)31 304 7001/2/3
Fax: +27 (0)31 304 7018

Email Addresses

editor@agenda.org.za
info@agenda.org.za
director@agenda.org.za

Staff

Gil Harper
Amanda Trotter
Anamika Nundulali
Saffiyah Abdul-Karim
Lokile Molefe
Christine Davis
Nitasha Moothoo-Padayachie
Nosimphiwe Jikjela

Editor
Director
Marketing Manager
Administrator
Radio Programme Coordinator
Writing Programme Coordinator
Journal Intern
Radio Intern

Editorial Advisory Group

Jude Clark, Michel Friedman, Liane Loots, Thenjiwe Magwaza,
Lebo Moletsane, Asha Moodley, Jeanne Prinsloo and Venitha Pillay

Production

Design and layout: Artworks Communications: Christa Naidoo
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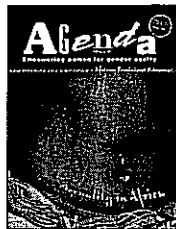
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Sex, lies and love letters: rethinking condoms and female agency in Uganda

Shanti Parikh

abstract

Through an analysis of youth love letters, this focus re-considers the commonly held notion among feminists and sexual health specialists that females lack power to negotiate condom use. While not ignoring historic female subordination, this focus highlights the subtle process through which females appropriate, subvert, and are co-opted into wider patriarchal ideologies in their romantic strategies. Youth romantic relationships are conceptualised as operating as a 'counterpublic' to dominant (adult) public health discourses on sexual risk and popular culture discourses of sexual pleasure. This youth counterpublic operates out of the direct view of authoritarian adults while simultaneously borrowing from conflicting public discourses in ways that might have detrimental consequences. The focus shows that Uganda's internationally lauded ABC (abstinence, be faithful, and condom use) campaign is often interpreted by youth in unintended ways, as they translate the message in ways that position monogamy and condoms as two mutually exclusive options for safer sex. Specifically, romantic love based on the modernist idea of selecting your own partner (as opposed to marriage based on family obligations) decreases the perceived need for condoms. If a young couple is modern and monogamous, there is no need for condom use. In the process of negotiating romantic relationships, many young females view condomless sex as both an indication of their ability to make wise and independent choices, and as an affirmation of monogamy and commitment to their male suitors.

keywords

sex, sexuality, condoms, HIV/AIDS, youth, relationships

Not as easy as ABC

Uganda is cited as the HIV/AIDS success story in Africa. It is estimated that the country reduced its HIV rates from as high as 29% in some sentinel sites in the mid-1990s to around 5.5% in 2003 (UNAIDS, 2004). In the standard international tale, the ABCs – abstinence, be faithful, and condom use – are portrayed as the champion behind this success, by Uganda's offering citizens a simple formula for acting sexually responsibly (Green, 2003; President George W Bush's State of the Union Address quoted in Elisabeth Bumiller, 'Uganda's Key to White House: AIDS', New York Times, 11 June 2003). The ABC mantra, however, has stimulated great debate among feminists and reproductive

health activists as they raise issue with the approach's primary emphasis on individual agency in sexual decision-making. We ask how can women negotiate safe sex when they lack sexual rights and are subject to a cross-section of gender inequalities? Critical theory further reminds us that the lives of women in Africa are situated within historical structures of patriarchy and economic inequalities (Akeroyd, 1997; Baylies, 2000; Obbo, 1995; Schoepf, 1997). Female economic dependence on males, general acceptance of gender violence, and male rights over female sexuality converge to sexually disempower women and girls. This lack of bargaining power is particularly salient in women's ability to negotiate condom use.



Figure 1

Recent ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in eastern Uganda, however, complicates the belief that women lack negotiating power as males and females repeatedly insisted that it is often females who do not want to use condoms. Although one could write this off as female false consciousness or decontextualised understandings of female actions, this patterned finding has bearing on how we interrogate sexual relationships and female agency. It calls our attention to the intimate scripts used in sexual relationships. As demonstrated in this focus, a close read of love letters exchanged by youth illuminates the multiple meanings and strategies that females (and males) attach to condom use within the context of consensual relationships. The apparent disconnect between local expressions of female agency in condom negotiations and what critical gender theory posits, has motivated me to reflect on our long-standing feminist premise and, more importantly, on the resulting analytic foreclosures. This focus opens up a space for rethinking condom use and female agency within the context of romantic liaisons.²

In this focus, I am concerned with three

questions.³ First, by primarily focusing on economic inequalities as structuring sexual relationships, what other aspects of sexual negotiation are we unintentionally silencing, ignoring or circumventing? Subsequently, what can be learned by repositioning our analytic lens to include gendered expressions of love and sexual strategies? Finally, to what extent does our insistence on female sexual victimhood not only overlook female agency but also blind us to the ways that females appropriate, subvert, and are co-opted into wider patriarchal ideologies? This focus does not deny persistent female subordination that exists in Africa but rather it attempts to pay close attention to the process through which patriarchy becomes subtly diffused and masked in the negotiations of sexual relationships.

Patriarchy disguised

In a March 2004 interview with a 16-year-old girl named Isabella, one can see how sexual theory and sexual reality can have counterpurposes even for the exceptionally informed HIV educator. Isabella began a romantic relationship with Herbert, a classmate at a prestigious secondary school in eastern Uganda. Isabella's

training as a peer HIV/AIDS educator in a school programme taught her about the importance of delaying sexual intercourse, and of condom use. She prided herself on being competently trained in different techniques for negotiating safe sex and condom use.

During the youth-designed training graduation activities, she vowed to wait until marriage to engage in sexual intercourse. Her boyfriend, Herbert, who underwent the same peer-training programme, also took the vow. As Isabella's interest in Herbert grew, however, her ideas about premarital sex shifted. She explained, 'Herbert promised to marry me after university, and it gave me a lot of confidence in our relationship.' Isabella recognised that promised marriage was a common strategy used by her male peers, but she believed Herbert was sincere. Like many girls her age, Isabella was curious about sex and wanted to appear sophisticated and mature to her lover. According to Isabella, after school one day:

Herbert suggested that we meet at a friend's rented room in town for some private time. He said that the friend would be working late and would not return until evening.

She expressed excitement about their growing intimacy but, since they had not had a direct discussion about their sexual relationship, she had reservations about when to mention condoms. She did not want to appear presumptuous or to be the initiator of sex, a great gender taboo. At the friend's house they began to kiss and touch. Isabella insisted on using a condom if they had intercourse. Herbert agreed. In Isabella's words, 'Things were happening quickly and I reminded Herbert to use a condom.' His reaction shifted from being empathetic to surprised and then to being insulted. He reaffirmed his love for her, suggesting that they did not need to use a condom as he promised to marry her. Confused and unsure, Isabella silently surrendered negotiating powers. They had condomless sexual intercourse.

Despite Isabella's sexual negotiation training, she was not immune to historically imbedded gender roles in sexual decision-making. In the end, the elusiveness of patriarchy and the emotional pull of romance proved more powerful than the rational decision-making logic in her sexuality education course (cf. Sobó, 1995). Isabella's story is common among young people in Uganda, and perhaps throughout the world. It poignantly

illustrates the subtle ways in which females relinquish their power in an attempt to demonstrate their love. This act of female acquiescence and sexual passivity is a common clique of global romance that circulates in popular culture and that informs young people's ideas about modern sexuality. To understand the nuances of this process is to tease out how competing notions of patriarchy, modernity, intimacy, and love intersect in a time when Uganda's HIV/AIDS reduction campaigns have aggressively introduced images of sexuality into the public sphere in historically unprecedented ways (Parikh, 2001).



Figure 2

Sex in the public sphere

Uganda's remarkable accomplishment in reducing its rates of HIV has become a window of hope for other African countries. Much less attention is given to how Uganda's aggressive HIV/AIDS campaigns have transformed local cultural and social processes in ways that create stress on historically important social ties such as between generations, genders and classes. No intervention is without its unanticipated consequences and tensions. This is particularly the case with sexuality, as it lies at the heart of social relationships and local notions of morality and propriety in Africa (Jeater, 1993).

In the late 1980s, Uganda became the first African country to initiate a massive AIDS campaign (see figure 1). The initiation coincided with the end of Uganda's 25 years of internal civil unrest and the country's entry into global capital and development networks. The new president, Yoweri Museveni, took bold steps to publicly address the HIV epidemic, and the international public health community, eager to study and abate the epidemic, provided the financial and human resources needed for Uganda's massive campaign (cf. Bond and Vincent, 1997). The AIDS education campaigns stimulated public conversations about sex as community, state and international public health agencies collaborated to educate Uganda's newly democratic citizens about the threat of the deadly virus that threatened the future of the nation.

Simultaneously, Uganda's burgeoning mass media sectors capitalised on the new publicness of sex and the emerging 'marketplace of sexual information' (Parker and Gagnon, 1995; also see Birken, 1988). Eager audiences were introduced to sexpert radio programmes, newspaper gossip columns, foreign romance novels, western pornographic films, and bikini-clad cover girls (see figure 2). With the new publicness of sex, sexual learning shifted from kinship networks to the modern public sphere (Parikh, forthcoming 2005). The threat of AIDS, combined with the increasingly visible images of sex, has heightened the anxiety and regulations surrounding youth sexuality. Parents, school officials, and local leaders

strongly discourage youth relationships, believing that it inevitably distracts young people from education and will result in moral decay and other consequences such as unplanned pregnancies, HIV or the release of unbridled female sexual agency. Ironically, while Uganda's HIV/AIDS reduction campaigns attempt to create sexually responsible citizens through discourses of regulation and risk reduction, the mass media circulates competing images of modern love based on individualism, freedom and hedonistic consumption. Adult-controlled HIV campaigns and mass media can be understood as representing different types of dominant discourses of sexuality in Uganda – that of risk and that of pleasure, respectively (Vance, 1990). Against this backdrop, youth romance functions as a transgressive act, simultaneously challenging and drawing from these adult definitions and regulations.

Youth's romantic relationships demonstrate, among other things, the public resonance of seeming private acts. Or, as Lauren Bertant and Michael Warner (1998:547) begin in their article 'Sex in Public', 'there is nothing more public than privacy'. This has particular currency in the context of HIV/AIDS when private intimacy and sexuality threaten the health of the nation. Youth romance – as an imaginative, transformative and experienced space – lies at the nexus of multiple public spheres of sexuality that co-exist in Uganda.

Building on the work of Jürgen Habermas, Warner (2002:119) defines the public as 'a multi-contextual space of circulation, organized not by a place or institution but by the circulation of discourse'. Like others, Warner is interested in how to conceptualise spaces that are marked by their tension with dominant or hegemonic discourses. He uses the term 'counterpublic' to refer to such a space. Warner posits (2002:56):

... counterpublics, against the background of the public sphere, enable a horizon of opinion

Sexual learning shifted from kinship networks to the modern public sphere

and exchange; its exchange remains distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power.

(see Landes, 1998, for a feminist analysis).

Youth romance can be seen as a counterpublic as it, by necessity, exists separate from dominant publics yet develops its contours by silently navigating around them. Whereas adult planners visibly generate campaigns to target and protect youth, and local adults lament about the disobedience of today's youth, we hear little about how dominant public spheres interact with counterpublic spheres of youth intimacy and romance. This focus seeks to uncover the 'missing discourse of desire' of adolescent sexuality (Fine, 1988).

Gendering romance

Boys are highly performative their letters, and employ elaborate language

Romance plays an important role in the lives of adolescents in Uganda, marking them as members of a youth subculture. Romance represents a transition from an unknowing, agentless child to a knowing, consciously acting adult. It also marks a broadening of young people's identity as civic networks begin to overshadow family ties. Through their romantic relationships, youth experience new adult selves and

express their developing emotions and desires. It also connects them to a wider world that exists beyond the bounded space of Iganga town. Popular images of romance in Uganda are tightly intertwined with the commercial economy, and youth's descriptions of romance reflect their connections between money and love. Gifts such as money, handkerchiefs and shoes represent love offerings, and outings to commercial places pronounce love publicly, a crucial element of modern love. Yet for most youth in the poor town of Iganga these symbols of modern romance remain economically and socially unobtainable. Within the context of economically inaccessible romance, letters and the romantic discourses in them have become standard

convention and central tokens of love. Secretly exchanging love letters exemplifies youth resistance to the surveillance that surrounds their sexual relationships.⁴ These letters offer a window into how youth creatively draw from seemingly disparate dominant discourses in their invocations (see figure 3).

Courtship narratives in romance novels, songs and fictional newspaper stories depict a markedly gendered chase in which the male struggles to convince the female of his love and the demure female resists.⁵ As she resists, the convincing increases until she submits. Cash-poor school boys invest a great deal of time and energy in their written declarations of love. If they do not possess the words to express their feelings, invented words serve the purpose and effective use can elevate the status of a writer. This 18-year-old boy proves his love through creative appropriation of a term he learned in school:

B4 I symbolise my symbolised symbology symbolologically I would like to write multiplying love b'tn me and u. My love is as lasting as a gravity stone ~ I love u b'se u are beautiful, charming and my best friend. I will always love you until the sea dries. Your shining face attracts and affects my feelings and makes me even mix up my chemical wrongly.

As the letter above demonstrates, boys are highly performative in their letters, and employ elaborate language to declare their love and request sex. Linguistic dexterity indexes education and is the sign of a sophisticated lover, signaling the writer's future upward mobility and indicating more romantic gestures and material gifts to come.

Youth not only use elaborate language from school but also borrow language from the dominant public discourses on sexuality. In negotiating terms of a relationship, girls frequently question suitors' fidelity. Terms found in the HIV campaigns and Christian sermons, such as loyalty and honour, offer adolescent girls powerful and widely recognised terms for demanding commitment based on monogamy. In order to support her insistence on faithfulness,

the following writer combines rhetorics of Christianity with local ideals of female chastity:

*Dear William,
Sorry for having let you down because you were showing me disloyalness. Remember I told you that if I find you with another girl, that will be the end of our love.*

On my side I was trying to show loyalness to you as my guy by not loving other boys out side. Remember that the bible says in (Hebrews 13:4): let marriage be honorable among all, and the marriage bed be without defilement, for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. And in (1 Peter 3:7) try to read. And now I fear you because you can spoil me, for nothing. You have the aim of saying that girls cry for you. Continue with those ones who cries for you.

The above writer's appropriation of dominant discourses from religious teachings and HIV campaigns allows her to more forcefully press her expectation of 'loyalness'. She not only demands her suitor's loyalness but, in effect, seeks to dismantle the general historical practice of male multiple partners by couching her grievance in discourses that are primarily considered the language of 'adults'. What was once an acceptable gender expectation of male multiple partners and female fidelity has been cleverly spun into a modern-day tale of imbalance that 'spoils' females. This appropriation of a dominant discourse presents a paradox. The vestige of power within the resistance format of a youth letter is exemplary of the way power and resistance work in tandem (Foucault, 1978).

In contrast to the grand effect and embellishments of love invoked in boys' letters, girls' tone tends to be sober and matter-of-fact, as illustrated in the above letter. As feminists have long noted, the distance and privacy of letter writing offers girls a reflective space to negotiate terms of relationships and to express their disappointment in their lovers' actions. Yet

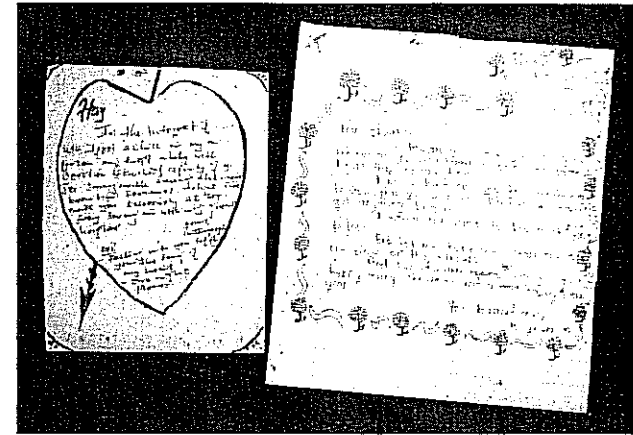


Figure 3

contrary to what most literature tells us about the effects of gender inequalities in sexual negotiation, males do not have exclusive rights over the 'condomless sex equals love' argument. A 16-year-old female writer uses similar logic that equates condomless sex with sincerity of romantic intentions:

The main point why I have written this letter is to tell me the reason why you tell me to play sex everyday and every night whenever I came to your home. Love doesn't mean playing sex my dear just be patient becoz patient.

And you told me that you want to use a condom and on my side I am not interested in using a condom the reason I will tell you later alone if you don't want we better stay friends becoz having a person whom you don't want is just drinking tea without sugar so better be serious with those words you talk.

Through youth's condom negotiations, we see more explicitly the unexpected contradictions that emerge in the intersection of public health discourses, historical realities, notions of modernity, and youthful resistance.

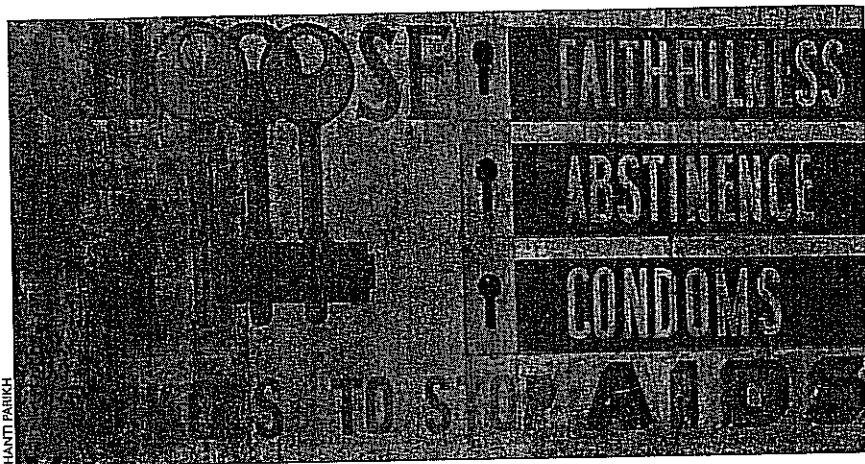


Figure 4

Condomless sex plays an important role in courtship practices. For many, it signifies that a relationship has shifted from the distrustful early stages to the mature commitment of monogamy. Ironically, the notion of modern love is in conflict with the medico-moral message of using condoms. Romantic love based on the modernist idea of selecting your own partner (as opposed to an arranged marriage based on family obligations) decreases the perceived need for condoms. According to some youth's interpretations of ABC messages, monogamy and condoms represent two mutually exclusive options for safer sex (see figure 4). If you are modern and monogamous, there is no need for condoms. Many young lovers view condomless sex both as an indication of their ability to make wise and independent choices, and as an affirmation of monogamy and commitment (cf. Sobo, 1995).

Since the burden of monogamy falls on females, as seen in the letter to William, a young woman will often suggest that they can cease using condoms as a strategy to prove her commitment. The expectation is that her suitor will use condoms with less serious partners, but will not with his main partner. The mere insistence on condom use becomes an indication that the partner has bought into the

public health message of adversarial and suspicious relationships, as illustrated in the opening vignette of Isabella and Herbert.

Ruses of modernity

In Uganda, the threat of AIDS, the increased flow of sexual imagery, and the corresponding shifts from family to civil ties for social mobility and identity has left many adults feeling that they have little control over their children's sexuality. Within the context of adult regulation, two competing narratives of youth sexuality emerge, both tending to centre on adolescent girls. On the one hand, development ideology assumes female victimisation and effaces possible female agency. On the other hand, local narratives portray females as not wanting to use condoms and being easily lured into sexual relationships by promises of the luxuries of modern life. If we look more closely at dialogue between youth peers, however, these narratives of victimisation and of waywardness form only part of the picture.

This focus has highlighted how methods designed to protect youth, such as restricting courtship, might in fact be putting youth at great risk precisely because youth create ways, a youth counterpublic, to manoeuvre around and divert the public surveillance of authoritarian adults. As

I have sought to demonstrate through an analysis of love letters, perhaps we need to reconceptualise youth relationships as gendered ways of appropriating discourses of regulation. Courtship, romantic discourses, and love letters, emerge as subversive acts against adult authority and regulation, while allowing youth a space within which to express independent subjectivities and emerging emotions.

Understanding the unfolding of HIV/AIDS in the lives of young people requires both a combination of political economy's focus on wider structures of inequalities, and cultural inquiries into multiple meanings of love, emotion, and relationships. Political economy reminds us of the limits of ABCs by highlighting the inequalities that structure people's lives. Even so, to not recognise the subversive nature of youth romance misses a crucial characteristic of its existence, however unintentionally harmful its outcomes may be. Finally, to ignore the emotional sides of youth romance is to reproduce sexual health campaigns that are irrelevant to the desire for affection of young people in the era of romance.

Yet modern romance might be putting females at risk. Females who imagine themselves in a romantic relationship can easily deny their sexual risk in order to preserve the ideal of romance and monogamy. As anthropologist Jane Collier (1997) observed in her longitudinal study on marriage in a Spanish village, women who perceived themselves in marriages based on notions of trust, monogamy, and romance foreclosed the need to inquire about partners' extra-marital relationships or to reach out to support networks. Yet they found themselves feeling isolated and alone.

In Uganda, popular culture and the mass media greatly inform youth's ideas about romance, casting romance as modern and promising to shield them from sexual danger. Similarly, social marketing campaigns for sexual health and development literature sell not just ideas about risk reduction, but like the commercial sector, they also promote a certain idea of romance, modernity, and love that is unobtainable to many youth. The public space of

'modern commitment' carved out by development discourses, the mass media and Christian teachings is precisely what youth negotiate, revealing gendered tensions and paradoxes of modernity. Ironically, the promises of modern romance subtly collude with histories of patriarchy in ways that subtly make females agents in their own submission to male suitors.

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Notes

1. For instance, Carol Bellamy, the Executive Director of UNICEF, maintains that the approach ignores structural realities. She argues: 'ABC is insufficient when it comes to women in general. A: Rape doesn't respect abstinence; B: their partners are supposed to be but that is increasingly not occurring and C: condoms are generally in the control of men. So when it comes to women and AIDS, let's understand the insufficiency of A, B and C.' (quoted in Jennifer Valentino, 'AIDS Conference Sees flaws in Bush's ABCs', *Associated Press*, 13 July 2004)
2. This focus is concerned with consensual relationships between youth. In other places I have written about sexual relationships between partners of significant power differences such as sugar daddies and adolescent girls (Parikh, 2004).
3. This focus is based on an examination of over 300 youth love letters, sexual histories of youth, and three years of ethnographic research in the agricultural region of Iganga in eastern Uganda. Works of anthropologist Lloyd Fallers (1965 and 1969) inform the historical background.
4. Love letter writing in sub-Saharan Africa has a long history (Brekenridge, 2000) and is intricately embedded within local lifeways.
5. For feminist analysis of how romance reproduces gender inequities outside of Africa, see Abu-Lughod, 1997; Bailey, 1989; Collier, 1997; Hirsch, 2003; Holland and Eisenhart, 1990; Illouz, 1997; and Rebhun, 1999.

Shanti A Parikh is Assistant Professor of Socio-Cultural Anthropology at Washington University in St Louis, USA. Her research focuses on sexuality, gender, and power in Uganda within the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and structures of inequalities. She has published on youth sexuality, and her most recent research project examines married women's risk for HIV transmission, infidelity and romantic love. She received her PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Yale University. Email: shanti.parikh@wustl.edu



Are we really? (ode to Africa)



Photographer: Sridiswa Juju, Model: Nasuko Mwendani, Stylist: Natasha Tshinyane, Thanks to Photojournalism Society of Technikon Natal.

David Kapp

Are we really out here in Africa?

When we go on holiday overseas

Are we really out here in Africa?

When we mild our barbarism on our women and our children

Are we really out here in Africa?

When we treat differently those who are not like us those who we do not understand (or want to)

All in the name of religion in the name of culture in the name of something

Return to family values: Spank your children (and your wife), responsibly and lovingly. In the context of obedience in the name of the old ways, before the Internet and the cell-phone.

Keep your wife (not partner) illiterate, Barefoot and pregnant in the bedroom pregnant and barefoot in the kitchen

the Right Way (the African Way?) know your place in the food chain of colonialism because we are out here, In Africa.