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# Books Forum: Confronting the AIDS Epidemic

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We dedicate this Forum to four recent books on AIDS, at a time when biomedical and public policy models for tackling the epidemic appear at a crossroads. The books reviewed in this issue reflect a long and painful process of learning about the causes and conditions of the epidemic in Africa and Latin America. They also make an implicit but forceful case for the value of anthropological insight and careful ethnographic attention for an analysis of the devastating, all-encompassing phenomenon that the HIV/AIDS epidemic has become in the global South.

Manjari Mahajan reviews Didier Fassin's *When bodies remember*, a study of the tormented politics of AIDS in South Africa. Fassin's book helps us to understand the controversies that dominated the Mbeki era: first, by including in the framework the conditions of discrimination and marginalization under the Apartheid regime; second, by relating the national and international narratives of 'HIV in South Africa' to the bodies and lives of AIDS survivors.

This attempt to reveal hidden dimensions of the epidemic—both in the personal lives of its sufferers and in the institutional and economic logics that drive the marginalization of particular groups—is also the leitmotif of João Biehl's *Will to live*, a study of AIDS in Brazil, reviewed here by Christine Cynn. Like Fassin, Biehl employs a range of ethnographic tools, including photographic portraits, in his search for the most vulnerable victims of the epidemic and the causes of their victimhood. As Cynn points out in her review, however, these attempts to document the face of the epidemic are fraught with risks, and force us to rethink the politics of representation in academic discourse.

Robert Thornton's *Unimagined communities*, reviewed by Ann Kelly, takes a very different methodological route to the subject, and in so doing reveals the range of anthropological methods and scales which can be employed in studying the epidemic and the forms of public intervention it generates. In his analysis of AIDS in Uganda and South Africa, the contrasting cases that have dominated much of the global policy debate, Thornton takes as his vantage point the national sexual networks of these two countries, and the large-scale cultural, political and economic dynamics in which they are embedded. Thornton's attempt to tackle 'the social whole' in the form of sexual networks runs counter, as Kelly suggests, to most contemporary anthropological research on health; it scales up the unit of analysis and aggregates actors into national publics, when most social researchers seem more interested in the nuances of the local, and in the documentation of personal lives.



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Finally, Johanna Crane reviews Helen Epstein's *Invisible cure*. For several years, Epstein has been describing the overwhelming spread of the HIV virus in sub-Saharan Africa and the failings of the global public policy response for readers of the *New York Review of Books*. *Invisible cure* reproduces some of her most important essays. The book makes explicit, as Crane argues in her review, the intimate connections between realities on the ground in Africa, the epidemiological models that have dominated the study of HIV transmission and the politics of Western responses to the epidemic. Epstein's book is a thought-provoking piece of reportage, but also—Crane argues—an expression of some of the implicit cultural assumptions that have guided much of the West's response to AIDS in Africa.

Taken together, and placed in the context of the global conversation over the failures of the United Nations AIDS programme and the ongoing search for HIV vaccines, these books (and the reviews we publish in this issue) offer a much expanded framing to understand the epidemic and its ravaging effects in the global South. Their targets and styles are varied and multiple, as the politics of AIDS are far too multiform and diverse to be captured by neat narratives or uniform research methodologies. But the books represent the range of challenges to the status quo that are emerging from the social sciences and investigative journalism.

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