REVIEW ESSAYS

LOVE IN THE TIME OF AIDS

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Mark Hunter. *Love in the Time of AIDS: Inequality, Gender, and Rights in South Africa.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. xv + 303 pp. Acknowledgments. Notes on Racial Terms. Acronyms. Photographs. Maps. Glossary. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $70.00. Cloth. $24.95. Paper.

Mark Hunter's *Love in the Time of AIDS* is one of the most important books on AIDS in Africa that has been published so far. Based on intensive and long-term ethnographic research in and around the township of Mandeni, KwaZulu-Natal, the book shows how intimate relations of love, sex, and (infrequently, these days) marriage have been shaped by the history and political economy of the township, situated as it is in the larger contexts of South Africa and the world, and how these relations have shaped, and are shaped by, the HIV/AIDS epidemic which has hit this part of the world so hard.

It is a depressing story.

Mandeni is one of those places dotted across the map of South Africa that confounds an easy distinction between urban and rural. Straddling land that was once part of the "homeland" of KwaZulu, as well as sugarcane farms that were once in Natal, the new Municipality of Mandeni in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal incorporates the geographical and social scars of colonial conquest and apartheid. In 1954 SAPPI (South African Paper and Pulp Industries) built a paper mill on the banks of the Tugela River. Two settlements were built to house mill workers: one for whites, named Mandini (a misspelling of Mandeni, the area's old Zulu name), and one for blacks, named Sundumbili, which comprised a number of standard apartheid-era four-room brick township houses constructed on a grid pattern. This older established "formal" township was built for, and around, nuclear families, typically headed by a man employed in the nearby SAPPI mill.

In the 1970s and 1980s an "industrial park" named Isithebe was established in the area, stimulated by subsidies designed to encourage industries

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to relocate to "border areas" so that their workers could remain residents of "homelands" rather than become migrants to cities. At the same time, informal settlements, often comprising barracklike rooms constructed and owned by township residents, were built on the fringes of Sundumbili and Isithebe to house migrants seeking work in Isithebe's factories. These newer settlers, moving in from more distant rural homesteads, were largely female and employed in the textile and clothing factories, which paid lower wages. They tended to find housing in single-room *imijondolo* settlements, often as tenants of earlier settlers. They also tended to be more financially independent than the women of the formal townships.

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, work opportunities diminished. In the 1990s in particular, clothing factories employing large numbers of women closed, victims of the ANC's trade liberalization policies. Few opportunities have opened in the postapartheid era for poorly educated rural women, but people continue to move into the area, escaping even worse conditions in the deep rural areas.

Tracing the history of residential settlements in Mandeni, Hunter shows how class divisions in black townships, which began widening in the 1970s and '80s as the apartheid state's efforts to prevent urbanization steadily collapsed, have become a chasm in the postapartheid era. Though few residents of the township of Sundumbili or the informal settlements in surrounding areas would claim to be anything other than "poor," residents of the formal township—who occupy much more comfortable homes, have better access to stable jobs, and are able to send their children to better, although not good, schools—have substantial advantages over others. Such divisions, reflected in a thousand distinctions of style and manner, are found in urban townships throughout the country. This growing socioeconomic inequality is one of the distinctive features of the postapartheid era, yet it remains one of the most difficult to articulate in political or scholarly discourse, given the heritage of racism and apartheid. Class divisions are shaping life chances in a myriad ways, including the chances of contracting HIV and AIDS. Periurban informal settlements, like those in Mandeni, have the highest incidence of HIV infection in South Africa today.

Hunter spent several years living in Mandeni in the early 2000s, learning to speak Zulu and making his home in a backyard room in an informal settlement. His book demonstrates the necessity of ethnography for understanding AIDS. Against the backdrop of the great transformations of twentieth-century South Africa—industrialization, urbanization, Christianization—he charts the history of love, sex, and marriage with their corresponding notions of the proper roles and places of men, women, and money. In the time of the Zulu king Shaka in the early nineteenth century, marriage was central to the creation of the homestead, joining families though the transfer of *ilobolo* (bride price) cattle from the bride's family to the groom's and creating thereby productive units that underpinned the economy of the kingdom. Ideally, all parties to a marriage arrangement

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would be in agreement, although the two most directly involved in the conjugal union had the least say in the matter.

Colonial conquest—which brought taxes, steadily increasing pressure on land, and opportunities for wage labor—transformed the institution of marriage. By the early twentieth century, as the cattle-rearing capacity of families decreased, sons were increasingly entering migrant labor markets and earning wages, which were necessary for the accumulation of sufficient bridewealth (either in cash or cattle). Fathers, at the same time, were losing control of the courting and marriage process as money earned in the form of wages afforded young men a degree of independence.

Migrant workers were also away from home for long periods—often permanently—which in turn transformed husband–wife relations. Hunter focuses primarily on male workers, but from the 1930s on large numbers of women also migrated to cities, mainly to work as domestic servants. Critics of the migrant labor system vociferously decried the "breakdown" and "degeneration" of the African family it supposedly entailed. Hunter argues, however, that "as migrant labor grew in importance, a man's constant movement to and from work became not only a factor in conjugal instability but a condition for family survival" (41). He coins the term "provider love" to describe "a set of material and emotional links that encompassed a woman being *lobola*'d (having bridewealth paid for her) and a marital couple 'building a home'" (42). Crucially, while "provider love" was usually the practical consideration at the root of a marriage arrangement, it by no means excluded the possibility of romantic love or sexual passion.

In urban areas, new notions of respectability emerged, focused on the image of the nuclear family with a working father, the provider, at its "head." This model was enshrined in state policy during the heyday of the township era—from the early 1930s, when the first public housing projects were commenced, to the late 1960s, when they ceased and only such families could gain access to houses. (This requirement also spawned countless "shilling marriages" by people who paid the fee for a marriage license in order to qualify for housing.) It was buttressed by Christian teaching about marriage. This model of respectability foundered on the rocks of unemployment, which has been growing steadily since the 1960s when the economy of South Africa changed from one marked by labor shortages to one of labor surplus. Marriage rates in African communities in South Africa have been steadily declining. As Hunter reports, marriage rates among black South Africans have declined from 57 percent of people over the age of fifteen in 1960 to a mere 30 percent today (93).[1] The increasing rarity of marriage in recent years is central to a pervasive sense of disappointment in urban communities, particularly among women.

By the 1980s, moreover, not only were fewer young men finding the sorts of jobs capable of sustaining marriages and providing for families, but the apartheid policy of restricting the construction of urban housing attempted to displace urban African populations from cities and retain

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potential city-bound migrants in the "homeland." That meant that increasing numbers of people were being crammed into the "matchbox" houses of their families in townships, often with a grandmother as the head of the household. Young men, and their potential spouses, were precluded from attaining the status of full adulthood, premised as it is for a man upon establishing a family in his own home.

By the time the laws restricting African urban settlement were repealed in the early 1990s, the model of the respectable nuclear family, still much desired, was in tatters. Women, particularly young women, still dream of finding the man who will love them with "tender care" and provide for his family in a respectable, monogamous, way—as the reams of advertisements in "lonely hearts" columns of newspapers seeking "non-smoking, non-drinking, church-going" men attest (usually placed by women who indicate they already have children, so perhaps they should know better about their chances of finding such a man). But most women know that, like their mothers, sisters, and aunts before them, they are likely to end up getting what comfort they can find from the male of the species while providing for their children on their own. (The middle-class Protea North "suburb" of Soweto, for example, home to many households headed by female teachers and nurses, was known in the 1980s as UDF territory—not as in "United Democratic Front," the leading political force of the time, but "Unmarried, Divorced, and Frustrated.")

One of the most striking demographic changes in recent decades in South Africa, then, has been the rise in the number of financially independent women. Since the 1930s, women have been employed in large numbers as domestic servants, mostly in white households. These women, mostly from rural homes, often supported families without the assistance of husbands. But as domestic servants, usually housed in rooms on their employer's property, they lived dependent on that household. And when they retired to rural homes, they lacked financial independence. But as Hunter shows, industrial employment for women expanded greatly in the 1970s, allowing women to migrate to settlements like Mandeni and establish independent homes. Since the 1980s, white-collar employment opportunities for women also have expanded greatly, virtually exploding after 1994. Black women employed in the formal sector of the economy today have a higher level of education than their male counterparts (see Black, Jafta, & Burger 2010). There is now a substantial population of independent, young (and youngish) women supporting themselves, their children, and extended families in the ways once expected of men. Many of these women are also choosing to support their husbands and lovers, using financial power as leverage in their efforts to minimize male behaviors they find objectionable—typically excessive drinking and "chasing women."

If you listen to conversations among women in the townships, it won't be long before you hear them denouncing men as "useless." For many poor families, as Hunter points out (echoing Isak Niehaus), having a man about

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the house who is not working can be a double burden. Not only does he not contribute financially to the household economy (while very likely making persistent demands for beer and cigarette money as well as the ordinary subsistence needs of food, clothes, and lodging), but any insistence on his patriarchal right to "rule" the household can end up preventing the sorts of flexible arrangements that female-headed households can more easily accommodate, particularly in sharing the burden of childrearing among mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. At the same time, poverty in this context is particularly hard on men. For whereas the suffering of a mother whose children go to sleep hungry tends to attract a great deal of sympathy, the fact of hungry children—the key index of deprivation in everyday discourse—is the indelible sign of a father's failure.

According to Mark Hunter, young women today, at least in Mandeni, have come to embrace discourses of "rights" in describing their position in relation to men who would "fuck" them, in all senses of the word, in the postapartheid era.[2] These discourses are deployed in ways that both accommodate the limitations of older notions of respectability and radically undercut them. He identifies five key rights that women invoke in everyday talk of matters such as sex, love, children, marriage, and AIDS: "The right to safe sex and sexual pleasure"; "the right to consume"; "the right to live without a man"; the "right to children"; and "the right to have multiple male lovers." Their grandmothers would be shocked to hear such talk. And in a context of high HIV prevalence, such rights can be dangerous.

As Hunter explains, relations of love, sex, and marriage—whether marked by "provider love" in so-called traditional arrangements or "romantic love" in a Western and Christian idiom—were always, and remain, conditioned by material considerations. In his discussion of love and what he terms "the materiality of everyday sex," he shows in great detail how the gifts bestowed by men on the women they love, or want to have sex with, are exchanges of a far more complex kind than is usually accounted for under the conventional rubric of "transactional sex."

The fact that sex is experienced in a world where, in the words of the popular slogan, there is "no romance without finance" in no way precludes the finest, tenderest, most loving, committed, and devoted feelings between partners. This aspect of love in Africa is extremely difficult for middle-class white people to comprehend (and Hunter includes himself in this), for so much of what we have come to understand as genuine in love relationships is predicated upon the absence of financial connections or relations of dependency. Yet the forms of "provider love," the character of sexual relations, the habits of courtship, the fashions of weddings, and the institutions of marriage—not to mention the nature and value of the gifts provided to sexual partners—are intimately connected to ways of making a living, creating a home, and fashioning a self. All of these require money.

One issue that Hunter does not discuss in relation to love and money is the concept of "property." I have never been to Mandeni, but in Soweto,

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where I lived for several years in the 1990s and remain connected to, "property" is a central category in the interpretation of romantic relations (see Ashforth 1999). Lovers speak of each other as "property" (usually using the English term); men, particularly, understand their status in relation to sexual partners, to whom they give gifts, in property terms. Lobola is often spoken of as "buying a wife," though the traditionalists will denounce the locution. And wise parents will seek a low sum for payment of lobola in order to avoid giving a husband grounds for thinking he has bought a slave.

Property is also the central category invoked in the violence between young men over women—the form of violence that in my experience is the most common, and most dangerous, in the townships. For young men—those most actively engaged in the game of courtship and "proposing love"—"property" of a woman carries with it the right to exclude other men from her sexual favors. It also imparts to him the right to physically punish her if she even gives the appearance of being willing to consider others as lovers. Women will also use this terminology, most tellingly in conflicts between two women over the same man. But because the direction of gift-giving invariably goes from the man to the woman, the notion does not have the same purchase in everyday discourses of sex and talk of love among women. Women will use the term, however, to disparage the paltriness of suitors' gifts. I remember the scathing laughter of a young woman telling of a man who thought he had bought the right to her sexual favors with a Wimpy burger and a Coke. She had no such disparagement for her real lover, however, to whom she was faithful—who had paid her college fees, bought her a car, helped her parents, and provided the down payment for her house. She was his "property," and was happy. She had no thought of marriage.

These attitudes toward sexual property can also confuse young men when they encounter women who really are in the business of selling sex. I recall drinking with some Sowetan friends in a downtown Johannesburg hotel where, alongside a good live Congolese band, legions of prostitutes plied their trade. One of the guys, having bought a young lady several drinks and enjoyed her company upstairs (presumably after a cash payment), thought he had bought a girlfriend. When, in the customary manner of the township, the Soweto guy became aggressive to another man whom he saw as encroaching on his property, the prostitute complained to the management and the bouncer threw him out.

Hunter is right to argue that the materiality of everyday sex is not the same as commodification. But property rights, involving constellations of rights to be included and to exclude, do not necessarily imply the commodity form. Unless Mandeni is very different from Soweto—which is possible, but unlikely—it seems to me important to understand the conceptions of property, underpinned by the giving of gifts, that shape and give meaning to intimate social and sexual relations.

Conceptions of property are central also to understandings of sexual violence. Among the young men that I spent time with in Soweto in the

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1990s, rape was primarily understood as a form of theft, a property crime in which something—sex, or more crudely, access to a woman's vagina—was taken without proper payment. For these men, violence is a means to an end: sex. Rape itself is not seen as inherently violent. The high prevalence of rape, moreover, means that a young man who claims a woman as his property needs to be able to protect her from abduction and rape by others. The phenomenon of "jackrolling" (abduction and gang rape) that emerged in the 1990s meant that young couples venturing out in public faced very real risks. I have also been told by many men, though I'm not sure I actually witnessed this, that women are prone to deliberately provoking their boyfriends—by talking to other men in public, for example—in order to test a boyfriend's willingness and ability to defend his property.

Hunter, rather coyly, manages to disclose that in the course of his research he did not become sexually involved with any of his subjects. If he had, he might have been more interested in another key issue in relations of sex, love, money, and disease: the question of trust. He mentions from time to time that romantic relationships are marked by distrust, and he invokes the notion of "structural distrust" to describe "how intense gendered conflicts . . . result in part from the almost complete demise of marriage and the tensions inherent in navigating alternative life paths" (5), but he does not delve into the issue of trust as such. Almost every person I have ever talked to about love in Africa spoke about lasting relationships as beginning with sex, proceeding to love, and then (with luck) to trust, in this sequence (though few women who are not in business for sex will bestow their favors without prior declarations of "love," however implausible they might be). Friendship grows on occasion alongside trust, although few lovers know their partner as a friend. As an ideal, such friendship is not so much undesired as unknown. Most women I know in South Africa say they would never trust a man, even—especially—their husband; men claim never to trust their women. I'm not sure that this has changed because of the decline of marriage, as Hunter seems to suggest, but rather the stakes are higher today.

This is important. When the consequences of sexual congress include the risk of contracting or transmitting a deadly virus, you have to trust the person you love with your life. Dispensing with the use of condoms, for example, is a very risky matter. It was especially so in the days before HIV-testing was widely available but it remains so today since you cannot trust your partner to tell you the truth about his or her status. Suspicions of infidelity in settled relationships are freighted with fears of infection.

Trust also shapes the meaning and significance of money in matters of the heart, since money is bound up with secrets and lies, both of which make building trust difficult. In my experience of Africa—shaped over more than thirty years of intimate connection—money is the source of the most tightly held secrets in social relations, whether between spouses, within families, or among friends. It is far easier to gain details of a person's shameful secrets

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such as illicit affairs than to find out exactly how much money he or she has access to. Typically, the answer to that question will be "Nothing," or some other version of what my Irish relatives call "crying the poor mouth." For, as I've learned the hard way, if people know how much money you have, they can, and usually will, make claims that can be hard to refuse and will complicate your relationships.

Ironically, however, in a context of widespread poverty and unemployment where discretion about one's resources is particularly advisable, a man must demonstrate, or exaggerate, or fabricate an impression of wealth if he wants to successfully court or seduce a woman. But the problem is that everyone knows that everyone lies about money. So when Mark Hunter's impecunious friend tells a fib about his lack of a cell phone (a sign of wretched poverty) to a girl at a funeral, the girl (unless she was improbably naïve) would have known that he was most likely lying. If she was amenable to a proposal of love, however, the lie could serve the purpose of smoothing the way to the prospect of future gifts sufficient to allow her to give up her own "gifts" without feeling cheap. Gifts, then, constitute tangible evidence of a person's worth and serve a crucial role in building trust between lovers. When a person living among the poor really does have significant sums of money (the amounts are always relative), the money has to be used in such a way as to build networks of obligation—"ties of dependence" in the words of Ann Swidler and Susan Watkins (2007) in their seminal paper on the subject. These ties are usually described as "patron–client," and in the case of relations between men and women, they are often framed by expectations of sex. That is to say, if you are a woman (unrelated by blood or marriage, of course) and I want to help you, and you want to accept my help, everyone will expect that my gifts are, as they should be, reciprocated by your love—which is to say, sex.

Notions and dreams of what it means to be a proper man or woman, and how the two may be properly conjoined, also change over the lifespans of individuals and the histories of communities. Sometimes things get out of whack. In twentieth-century South Africa, following the colonial subjugation of African polities in the region and their subsequent incorporation into the state in a quasi-imperial framework that eventually became "grand apartheid," three world-historical processes changed in the worlds within which Africans lived and dreamed of love: access to labor markets (determining who gains the means to financial independence and how, with all that entails for social life)—which for want of a better word we can call "industrialization"; Christianity, which, with its elaborate moral codes governing sexuality and mediated by exposure to "white" styles of living, is often known as "Westernization" or "modernization" (though both terms are misleading); and "urbanization"—patterns of access to housing (and therefore the ability to create homes) that have been shaped by government settlement policies, particularly by efforts known as "influx control" to control movement of Africans to towns and cities while the burden of

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"homeland" overcrowding increased steadily throughout the twentieth century.

While these great transformations have changed the possibility of marriage, the ways of making a home, and the character of sexual relations, some things have remained stubbornly intact: namely, the image of a man, the father, as provider. Yet ever-increasing numbers of people have never known such a man; generations of boys continue to grow up with no prospect of becoming such a man.

In the middle of the twentieth century, around the 1960s, South African businesses found more Africans seeking work than there were jobs to be done. From an emerging capitalist economy marked by persistent labor shortages in a region with significant productive alternatives to waged labor, the country was transformed to one characterized by labor surpluses and growing unemployment within a thoroughly capitalist economy. Prior to the 1960s, employers and politicians—white people, as it happened—were constantly seeking ways of inducing Africans, particularly young men, to leave their "traditional" agrarian pursuits and become waged laborers. In the latter half of the century the state tried, and failed, to stem the tide of African urban migration. As the twenty-first century lumbers through its second decade, oceans of poverty surround islands of prosperity in South Africa. For perhaps half of the population, there is no prospect of ever achieving the financial security necessary for stable family life. Marriage has become a luxury few can afford.

The impact of these large historical processes on the ways people find love, while not conducive to the forming of marital unions, turned out to be excellent for the transmission of the virus causing AIDS. For AIDS is not a disease of poverty, as is widely asserted, but of inequality. As Hunter shows, the convergence of female migration and unemployment in Mandeni—where some men still earned wages sufficient to play the role of provider, albeit in a partial and truncated way—fostered the creation of sexual networks through which the virus could pass rapidly and with devastating effect. With the steady toll of death rising through the first decade of the twenty-first century, images of the hyper-masculine playboy, known in Zulu as *isoka*, began to lose their luster. Sexual behavior is changing and the rate of infection is declining. The structures of dependence emerging from the growth of inequality, however, remain. AIDS will be in Mandeni, as elsewhere, for a long time to come. Finding love in a time of AIDS, then, will remain a tricky business. Among its many virtues, Mark Hunter's book does well in reminding us that, though often difficult, even in the hardest conditions love is possible.

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Note

1. It is possible that the 1960 figure is inflated by the number of "shilling marriages," mentioned above, which became less necessary after the 1960s when township housing was no longer being provided.
2. Hunter elaborates on the changing language: "Whereas sexual intercourse was denoted in the past through the verb *ukulala* (to sleep) or *ukuya ocansin* (to go to the grass mat), a word used today is *ukubhebha,* which is typically translated in English as 'to fuck.' These terms, which are used by women as well as men, indicate that sex is involved less with the bringing together of two families and more with a woman's sense of self—or a man's wish to gain pleasure from a woman's body" (136).

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