

Review of Infected Kin: Orphan Care and AIDS in Lesotho

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***Infected Kin: Orphan Care and AIDS in Lesotho.* Ellen Block and Will McGrath. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019, 246 pages, 13 color images, 1 table, 6 x 9 Paperback, \$34.95, 978-1-9788-0474-6; Cloth, \$99.95, 978-1-9788-0475-3.**

In the opening vignette, “A Story about Joala,” we readers are brought to the highlands of Lesotho to share homebrewed beer with brewers, research participants, and the authors. This experience of sharing a drink asks us to consider what it means to share in Lesotho, what the ties are that hold people together. Like the communal sharing of food, sharing joala is a defining social activity and as we learn throughout the ethnography, one that is important in the creation of kin. Indeed, this book is presented through a kinship-first perspective.

Using this framework and ground-up analytical methodology, Block and McGrath explore Basotho caregiving in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Uniquely, this ethnography is written by Block, an anthropologist, with contributions from her writer husband Will McGrath, who opens each chapter with a literary non-fiction vignette. These vignettes transform traditional anthropological fieldnotes allowing us novel insight into the orphans and caregivers, with whom they work. Using a critical biocultural approach, Block situates the epidemic within the political economy of Lesotho, tying the epidemic to the country’s history as a labor reserve for the South African diamond and gold mines. Care, she argues, is best understood through practice theory, where we see how kin networks are shaped by and shape the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The majority of caregivers are elderly women, notably maternal grandmothers, and they explore how these grandmothers both reinforce and resist patrilineal and patrilocal rules to care for orphaned grandchildren. She additionally provides a processual approach to understanding the creation of house and home as cultural symbols as well as explores medical pluralism in Mokhotlong.

Their ethnographic and literary approach achieves several things. First, while HIV is situated within the structural and geo-political inequalities of Lesotho, it brings us in to the process through which HIV reshapes kin-networks and culture. The combination of literary vignettes and ethnographic data allows the data to be seen from multiple perspectives at the same time.

Second, Block’s approach – both theoretical and narrative – achieves what the authors are ultimately concerned with: that there is joy and love in spite of HIV/AIDS and that essentialist approaches to HIV which reduce the epidemic to either cultural norms (i.e. “traditional gender roles”) or individual behaviors (i.e. “multiple concurrent partnerships”) and miss the structural drivers responsible for the spread of HIV in Southern Africa. Moreover, by underscoring the care in caregiving dynamics, this ethnography is a necessary extension of the anthropology of suffering which often ultimately renders individuals solely as victims. Her interlocutors have agency and compassion as well as heartache.

Third, Block makes a notable contribution to the analytical and ethnographic attention to AIDS orphans as a category. Too often, AIDS orphans are homogenized and treated as statistics. As Block asserts, “...I aim to present a fully realized picture of the lives of orphans and their caregivers...” – orphans and caregivers exist in mutual relations of care (17) and this ethnography well achieves her aim.

Finally, the gender lens used in this ethnography is not just focused on women. While Block notes that the majority of caregiving is done by women, she does offer examples of male caregivers and discusses masculinity and resistance to HIV testing. Not only does this respond to the historical treatment of gender in much of HIV programming until recently, it also situates testing in kin relationships which is important programmatically and theoretically. Relatedly, Block does not shy away from “seemingly unanthropological terms such as biomedical facts, misinformation, accuracy, and misconceptions...”(112) and argues that AIDS education is pervasive yet inconsistent. Her approach makes this work more accessible to readers outside of anthropology, such as public health and development workers.

Despite the success in achieving the aims of this ethnography, there are a few areas which may be useful for future exploration. Block states that she aims to tell the stories of women who are historically silent: elderly grandmothers. However, while she takes an explicit stance on this approach, further research could situate current gender roles in a political and economic context, for example, to discuss the role of colonialism and evangelism that have shaped Basotho gender roles (see for example Epprecht 2001) in the same way as it is done for HIV. Also, Block briefly mentions blaming women for transmission but does not discuss at length. As she is comfortable in both the anthropological and biomedical fields, it would be well worth discussion of gender-based violence and its effect on kinship and HIV. Block is concerned with her interlocutor’s perceptions of the past and how it influences the present. While it would be outside the scope of the book, I’m curious what the future look like for her interlocutors.

Overall, the narrative style of this book is engaging and makes it suitable for a wide variety of readers. The inclusion of both anthropological and biomedical approaches to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Lesotho makes this text equally valuable to students and practitioners outside of anthropology. Specifically, the sophisticated treatment of culture as intertwined (and co-creative) with HIV is an important antidote to the reductive treatment of culture as and either the cause of or barrier to eradicating HIV. This ethnography would be appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate students as it delves into core anthropological concepts such as kinship and social suffering while extending our understanding of current issues in Southern Africa.

References

Epprecht, M. (2001). 'This Matter of Women is Getting Very Bad': Gender, Development and Politics in Colonial Lesotho. University of Natal Press.

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