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## Symbolic Sexuality and Economic Work in Dominica, West Indies: The Naturalization of Sex and Women's Work in Development

*Bill Maurer*

**Abstract:** In this essay, I draw from a specific ethnographic example to elucidate the connections among gender, sexuality and work, and to argue for a method of analysis encompassing both the symbolic and the economic. Such an analysis requires the problematization of the distinction between sex as "natural" and gender as "cultural" in much feminist thought, and of the public/domestic dichotomy as it has been used to explain women's oppression. Symbolic meanings embodied in sexuality cannot be reduced to the gendered economics of production and reproduction, yet neither can production and reproduction be explained away or ignored completely by a symbolic approach. In the Commonwealth of Dominica in the West Indies, men's work and sexuality are linguistically marked and conceptualized as highly differentiated. Women's sexuality and work, on the other hand, are unmarked and undervalued. Parallel meanings are attached to work and to sexuality, and these parallel meanings inform an economic and symbolic system in which women's power over their own bodies and economies is undermined.

There has been a conflation of sexuality with gender in recent feminist writings dealing with the political economy of sex. Indefinite definitions and the compulsion to rely on the theorists of one's own discipline have resulted in the neglect of some of the relationships among sexuality, work and gender. In this paper, I argue that the conflation of sexuality with gender is a product of the "naturalization" of sex, and that this conflation lends itself to overly economic and heterocentric analyses of the relationship between sexuality, gender and work. An underlying hypothesis of this paper is that insights into the devaluation of women can be gained when we question our notions of sex and gender while analyzing women's work. I attempt to use a specific ethnographic example to combine the examination of cultural symbol with that of economic production toward the study of the

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subordination of women. Although efforts have been made toward just such an analysis, the naturalization of sex and conflation of sex with gender in these works allow for the neglect of the connections between the symbolic and economic realms in terms of the position of women, connections which may underlie some of the basic problems in overcoming women's oppression.

The paper is divided into five sections. In the first section, I explore the possibilities of separating sexuality from gender based on the argument that the naturalization of sexuality in feminist discourse is itself a cultural construct, and that sexuality thus needs to be problematized as culturally constituted. Next, I examine literature on work, sexuality and gender to demonstrate the conflation of gender and sexuality with which I take issue. I then review the literature on work and gender in the Caribbean, and argue that the reliance of previous work on notions of a public/domestic dichotomy is highly problematic, and contributes to the equally problematic conflation of gender and sexuality. In the fourth and fifth sections, I turn to the case of Dominica, paying attention to the construction of sexuality and work, and the ways in which these constructions parallel one another.

## THE NATURALIZATION OF SEXUALITY

By now, the adage that the cultural codes inscribed on biological sex constitute gender is pretty well accepted in feminist literature on gender and sexuality. Arguments against biological determinism in studies of gender have had a long history, perhaps beginning with Margaret Mead (1935) and coming down to us through de Beauvoir's classic statement that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 1953: 301). The distinction made here between biology and culture has indeed been useful in establishing the arbitrariness of gender, and in arguing against essentialist conceptualizations of "femaleness" and "maleness" (Oakley 1972). As Shapiro put it, the two terms "serve a useful analytic purpose in contrasting a set of biological facts with a set of cultural facts" (Shapiro 1981: 449). The political implications of this contrast continue to hold promise for feminist movements worldwide. Arguments about the "natural place" of women — in the family, in the home, in the economy, in reproductive activities — are continually hurled at feminists in an effort to delegitimize not only the political movements but women themselves.

In a recent paper, however, Cohen and Mascia-Lees (1989) note that the separation of biological "sex" from cultural "gender" has resulted in a neglect of the extent to which sex itself is culturally and socially constituted. They argue that the linkage of "sex" to "nature" "confounds our efforts both to understand fully the process of gender construction and to incorporate into our understanding of human sexuality the full range of human sexual experience" (Cohen and Mascia-Lees 1989: 351). In this, they echo

Haraway's assertion that "it is important not to make the mistake of thinking that sex is given, natural, biological and only gender is constructed and social" (Haraway 1986: 85). To do so only mystifies sex and nature as something beyond or outside of culture and human experience.

In naturalizing sex, so Cohen and Mascia-Lees continue (1989: 352), researchers link it to reproduction "as a matter of course." This begs the question of whether sex is "only or most fundamentally reproductive strategy" — a question which can only be answered if sex is disentangled from reproductive strategy. Further, "until it is determined whether or how the social construction of gender and the social construction of sex are the same or different, they should be kept analytically distinct" (Cohen and Mascia-Lees 1989: 352). Ultimately, Cohen and Mascia-Lees's analysis constitutes a critique of biological discourse and its construction of "nature," a construction which bears heavily on our notions of sex and sexuality. "To persist in conflating sex and reproductive strategy is to be seduced by the laser-like sophistication, precision and fine-tunability of what is today's leading biological evolutionary paradigm into believing that our sharp-edged pictures of nature are what nature is" (Cohen and Mascia-Lees 1989: 362).

In a similar vein, but from a different angle, Gayle Rubin (1984) also argues for the analytic separation of sex from nature and from gender. Here she retreats from the position she held in 1975, in which she argued that sex and gender were linked in a "sex-gender system," "a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity and in which these transformed needs are satisfied" (Rubin 1975: 159). In 1984 she writes:

In the English language, the word "sex" has two very different meanings. It means gender and gender identity, as in "the female sex" or "the male sex." But it also refers to sexual activity, lust, intercourse, and arousal, as in "to have sex." This semantic merging reflects a cultural assumption that sexuality is reducible to sexual intercourse and that it is a function of the relations between women and men. The cultural fusion of gender with sexuality has given rise to the idea that a theory of sexuality may be derived directly out of a theory of gender (Rubin 1984: 307).

Sexuality and sex, here taken to mean the same thing naturalized by various western discourses (biological and some feminist discourses, for example), must therefore be seen in light of specific social, cultural and historical practices (Foucault 1980). An analysis of the constitution of these discourses, and the ways in which they structure practices, would be necessary to untangle sexuality/sex from nature. Sexuality, thus disentangled, becomes open for discussion in social, cultural, political and historical terms. In separating sexuality from our notions of gender, the western bias toward naturalizing sex is made visible. Our analyses can then proceed self-consciously aware of this bias and the possibility that sexuality is not

constituted in all human societies in terms of reproductive strategy, "nature," and the dichotomy between homo- and heterosexuality (see Caplan 1987: 19-20). Once the bounds of our own discourse of sex and gender are taken account of, we may be able to go beyond them.

## **THE CONFLATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN WORKS ON WOMEN'S WORK AND SUBORDINATION**

What, then, would our analyses look like? Isolating the discourses of sexuality from those of gender for the purposes of analysis, determining the extent to which sexuality and gender are made distinct in the particular social, cultural, political and historical context we choose to examine, we may be able to elucidate the intersections of and relationships between sexuality and other domains constituting social, political and economic relationships, identity, and subjecthood. Our analyses would do for sexuality what Bridget O'Laughlin's (1974) groundbreaking work did for gender.

In her article on "why Mbum women do not eat chicken," O'Laughlin demonstrates the ways in which the Mbum Kpau of southwest Chad construct an ideology of nature and womanhood in which food prohibitions and ideas about women's incapability to perform certain tasks become "regarded as inextricably linked to the reproductive activities of women" (O'Laughlin 1974: 300). One of the important aspects of O'Laughlin's work is that it demonstrates, rather than assumes, the ways in which women's role in reproduction is conceptualized and linked to notions about work, food, and so on. As I will show in this section, however, many other authors attempting similar analyses fall into the naturalization of sexuality discussed above, assuming without proof the cultural link between sexuality and reproduction. I will focus on three authors whose works have been highly influential in studies of gender, sexuality and work, and who have shaped my thinking on these matters. In pointing out their shortcomings, I hope to build on the kinds of projects they have begun.

In her discussion of sex and gender, Maria Mies recognizes that "human sex and sexuality have never been purely crude biological affairs," and that just as gender must be examined in light of culturally and historically specific developments, so also must sex (Mies 1986: 23). She rightly points out the dangers in naturalizing sex:

By the dualistic splitting-up of sex and gender, however, by treating the one as biological and the other as cultural, the door is again opened for those who want to treat the sexual difference as a matter of our anatomy or as "matter" (Mies 1986: 23).

Her conclusion here, however, is that since both sex and gender are culturally constituted, they are essentially the same thing, and analyzable as

such. This move is crucial to her project of understanding women's oppression as "part and parcel of capitalist (or socialist) patriarchal production relations" (Mies 1986: 23). It brings issues of women's roles in biological, social and economic reproduction to the fore, and the ways in which these relations of reproduction figure in capitalist-patriarchal production relations.

Throughout her work, as a result, Mies deals only with those aspects of sex and sexuality which directly relate to reproduction of labor and relations and systems of production. In dealing with sexuality only in terms of these kinds of reproduction, however, she ignores the possibility that sexuality as constituted in different societies may have no relation to the reproduction of labor or systems of production whatsoever, or at least that the relationship between sexuality and reproduction may be different in different cultures. Her conflation of sex and gender leads her to an economism which allows her to be blind to differently constituted sexualities, and the ways in which these relate to relations of production and reproduction. The links between sexuality and the reproduction of labor and relations and systems of production need to be demonstrated instead of assumed.

Beneria and Sen (1981, 1982) present a useful analysis of the subordination of women in terms of women's socially and sexually reproductive activities, yet they similarly conflate gender and sexuality by ignoring what sexuality actually *is* or *could* be within a culturally specific system of meaning. In this respect, they contribute to the naturalization of sexuality. "The emphasis on reproduction," they write, "has contributed to an understanding of women's economic role, of the role of the material base of their oppression, and of its implications for policy and action" (Beneria and Sen 1981: 291). Indeed, their focus on women's reproductive activities, and on the neglect of such activities in development programs, has greatly advanced such a project.

Yet it is limiting as well. Beneria and Sen discuss women's domestic work, activities in production and reproduction, and issues around population/birth control as important areas neglected by development theories and practices, including the work of Boserup (1970). Emphasis is placed "on the role of reproduction as a determinant of women's work" (Beneria and Sen 1981: 290). With this emphasis, it becomes clear to these scholars that "the problems of Third World women do not arise from a lack of integration into the development process"; rather, women are *fully* integrated, but at the "bottom of an inherently hierarchical and contradictory structure of production and accumulation" due to their "primary responsibility for the reproductive tasks of childrearing and domestic work" (Beneria and Sen 1982: 161). This kind of reasoning, while extremely useful in critiquing development strategies, comes close to essentialistic thinking. Their term "reproduction" contains three elements at once — biological, social and

economic — and these three elements must be separated out lest the concept rest on notions of biological determinism.<sup>1</sup>

Women's role in reproduction does need to be examined, as Beneria and Sen argue, but must be problematized as well. To what extent are women's roles in reproduction naturalized from society to society, and to what extent are they naturalized by the type of analysis presented by Beneria and Sen? Beneria's and Sen's privileging of reproduction results in a blind spot where issues of sexuality are concerned; sexuality in their analysis becomes only reproduction. Apart from the aspects of sexuality which relate to reproduction, how is sexuality itself constructed? What of the erotic aspects of sexuality, for example, those which concern the expressive and "nonproductive" role of sexuality in human society? And what of the relationship between cultural conceptualizations of sexuality, which may or may not relate to cultural ideas about biological or social reproduction, and women's roles in economic production and reproduction?

In another article, Gita Sen presents a comparison of the sexual control of women in India and the United States, arguing that "the control of women's sexuality is inherent in women's status in reproduction and production and hence in women's subordination" (Sen 1984: 133). Her analysis is quite stimulating, and her focus on sexual control of women as it articulates to social and economic control is useful for the kind of analysis of Dominican sexuality and work I attempt below. Her use of the term "sexuality" is quite different from mine, however, and her notion of sexuality, like Beneria's and Sen's notion of reproduction, contains several elements which, if not distilled risk essentialism.

One of the main points of Sen's paper is that:

Women of the landholding classes are secluded and their sexuality guarded not only as a mechanism to recruit and control their labor to the productive and reproductive tasks of the family, but especially to ensure the paternity of their children. ... tensions over paternity represent an ongoing assertion by patriarchs of their control over children (Sen 1984: 134).

Women's sexuality is controlled to guarantee paternity, so that patriarchy within the household and the larger society are reproduced. Sen here uses "sexual control" in a very specific sense. As it stands, Sen's notion of sexual control seems to imply control over women's biologically reproductive capacities. Her norm is what the West labels "heterosexual." Women's sexuality is controlled in terms of when and with whom they are allowed to engage in sexual activities. The assumption here is that what women do they will do with other men, and that children will be the result — paternity is at issue. Sen's conceptualization of sexuality ignores women's (and men's) possibilities for sexual acts — what can sexuality *be* — contained within the realm of cultural discourse. I would maintain that the constructions of these possibilities within a culture and their regulation and control within a field



of conceptual categories constitute another form of sexual control which may also structure and help perpetuate patriarchal relations.

We are left, then, with the same questions posed by Mies' and Beneria's and Sen's works. Sex and sexuality are narrowed down to necessities of human reproduction. Yet how do the construction and meaning of eroticism and desire relate, if at all, to the subordination and economic situation of women? Anthropologists such as Ortner and Whitehead (1981) have attempted to analyze these aspects of gender and sexuality in terms of their symbolic meanings, yet these analyses reverse the problem and leave open the question of women's subordination as it relates to political economic factors. In light of the above concerns, it seems necessary to redefine our terms and reapply them to new sorts of questions that attempt to explain the relationship between the place of women in a system of cultural symbols and the place of women in a system of economic and social production and reproduction. In the following sections, I attempt to do just that.

### **WORK, SEXUALITY AND GENDER IN THE CARIBBEAN: DICHOTOMOUS TERMS**

The study of gender and sexuality in the Caribbean has mostly revolved around notions of the public/domestic dichotomy (following Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974) as it applies to women's and men's work and its valuation. Within this analytical context, gender relationships and the activities surrounding them can be seen in terms of two spheres of activity, the public and the domestic. Activities in the public sphere are those which "link, rank, organize or subsume particular mother-child groups," while those within the domestic "are organized immediately around one or more mothers and their children" (Rosaldo 1974: 23).

In much of the available literature on the Caribbean, women's and men's work are described in terms of interconnected networks through which economic and social exchange and support are transferred (e.g., Dirks 1972; Anderson 1986; Ellis 1986; Durant-Gonzalez 1976; Moses 1976; Berleant-Schiller 1977; Safa 1986). The public/domestic dichotomy is used, either implicitly or explicitly, to delineate these networks and the position of women and men within them. The arguments presented in this literature maintain that women's place in networks is within the sphere of the household, and that women, in conducting household activities, obtain a limited degree of influence in the public sphere through their affiliations with men (e.g., Anderson 1986).

However, as several authors have pointed out, the public/domestic dichotomy softens when women's labors and women's activities within the public sphere are examined (e.g., Barrow 1986; Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow 1977; Gussler 1980). Many women's activities, the purpose of which is to maintain the household, are performed in public. This



public performance often has far-reaching public effects, "and the social system itself depend[s] on the ability of the female to be mobile, flexible, and resourceful, rather than tied to a specific structure or role" (Gussler 1980: 208). As Berleant-Schiller and I have demonstrated elsewhere, the social importance of Dominican and Barbudan women's "domestic" tasks such as marketing and laundering (as well as religious activities and kin-networking) "defines a social role that extends well beyond the domestic and into the public" (Berleant-Schiller and Maurer, forthcoming). Women's economic activities not only *affect* the "public" sphere, but partially *constitute* it, thus blurring the distinction between public and domestic.

Women's work for the household ought not be viewed as work solely affecting the household — we must examine the importance of so-called "domestic" activities to the political, economic and social life of communities before jumping to the conclusion that such tasks enacted in public are "domestic" simply because the actors are female and the activities contribute to household maintenance. Activities which maintain the household may also serve to maintain other institutions — from internal economies to the decisions of legislatures (see Barrow 1986; Berleant-Schiller and Maurer, forthcoming). I argue that the overlapping of the public and domestic spheres in Caribbean societies renders this analytic dichotomy almost useless in studying gendered relations of production and reproduction in this region.

Further, the use of this dichotomy to elucidate cultural meaning in terms of economic activity allows for the neglect of any role sexuality may play in the devaluation of women and women's activities. Rosaldo's initial formulation of the public/domestic dichotomy, resting as it does on the maternal role of women, is strongly rooted in western notions limiting sex to reproductive activities. In light of the above discussion of the naturalization of sexuality, then, the use of the public/domestic dichotomy is problematic on at least two levels: it naturalizes what should be problematized, and it assumes a dichotomy where one may not exist.<sup>2</sup>

Like research into women's and men's roles in the Caribbean region generally, gender research on the Commonwealth of Dominica has been limited by the use of the public/domestic dichotomy. What little literature exists suggests that women's and men's activities within networks result from environmental and economic constraints which inform "mating patterns" and "adaptive strategies" for survival with limited resources (Eguchi 1984; Gardener 1974; Cannon 1970). No mention is made of the devaluation of women's work or sexuality in these adaptive strategies, and any conceptual link between sexuality and work is ignored. Trouillot (1988: 255-261) makes note of women's activities in the banana economy, yet as I have argued elsewhere (Maurer 1988: 9-10), his work does little to untangle the relationships among *gender*, the work women perform, and the valuation of such work. Nor does his analysis address issues of sexuality. An examination of the cultural construction and valuation of women's and men's work and

sexuality in Dominica makes the connections between sexuality and work clear.

## WOMEN'S AND MEN'S WORK IN DOMINICA, WEST INDIES

Dominica is an island in the eastern Caribbean, located between the French islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique. Its inhabitants are English and French Creole speaking. It is one of the wetter and more mountainous islands of this region, and, in part because of its climate and difficult terrain, Dominica has never experienced large-scale plantation development in quite the same way as the neighboring islands. Instead of being characterized by large plantation-style holdings, Dominican agriculture is mainly carried out on small plot peasant farms. Various one-crop economies have come and gone, but none has ever been able to reach sustained levels of success (see Maurer 1988; Yankey 1969). At present, bananas are the chief export crop.

My data on Dominican agriculture and women's and men's work on Dominica were collected from May through November of 1987 with a great deal of help from local development organizations and the Ministry of Agriculture. During the summer months, I accompanied various agricultural extension and development workers (all Dominicans themselves) on their excursions out of Roseau, the capital city of about 8,000 residents, into the smaller villages dotting the coast. After I made more and more friends in Roseau and around the island, I hitched my way around the island or went with friends from village to village, conducting interviews with the people I'd come into contact with through the development workers and through my friends, their families, and my landlady (who proved to be my best connection). My interviews were quite informal, and most were with women agriculturists. This was in part a conscious decision and also a result of villagers' knowledge of my project focusing on women's work. I did not collect any detailed quantitative data on sex-differentiated work time or consumption patterns, and rely for the following discussion on anecdotal and other information collected during interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted in English, but a few — especially in the north and about three months into my stay, when I had more confidence in patois — were conducted in patois and some broken French (when my lack of confidence got the better of me!).

As a white male, my gender and race and their relation to the kind of data I received continue to make it difficult for me to make any kind of assertions regarding the validity of my data. In the beginning of my work, I didn't consider the effects my gender and race would have on responses to my questions. Through my landlady and her relatives, most people I met knew I was unmarried and had no "girlfriend back home." Yet for most as well, my connection to my landlady — a woman in her 60s, widely known around

the island, whose three children (all slightly older than I) had emigrated — was seen as very strong, and indeed it was a very close friendship. The strength of this relationship, and not so much my race and gender, I would like to think, legitimated my project for most of the people I interviewed. Because of this relationship, I think I was also not seen by men as a threat to any man's relationship with a woman, or seen by women as either a possible mate or someone who might be perceived (by men and other women) to be a threat to any woman's relationship with a man. Nonetheless, the power relations and hierarchies involved in being a white male in Dominica should be taken into account in reading the following representation.<sup>3</sup>

The average plot in Dominica is .5 to 2.5 acres. Inheritance of land is bilateral, and almost all small plots are maintained by family labor. To prepare a plot for banana cultivation, the male members of a family first will clear the land, sometimes using slash and burn methods, and often with the assistance of male friends or relatives. The clearing of a plot for cultivation can be a week-long task, particularly if the plot has never been worked before and if the workers have other plots to maintain in the meanwhile. A pick-axe, a plow or a heavy wooden *louchette* is used for digging and planting, and chemical and organic fertilizers are worked into the soil. This, too, is primarily the work of men.

Once the banana plants are established, their maintenance entails frequent applications of pesticides and fungicides. Both men and women carry out these activities, yet the men generally supervise. Weeding under the plants is a woman's activity. The harvesting of bananas is a joint effort and must be done carefully to insure minimal damage to the delicate fruits. This can be a painstaking process, and it is often the subject of many men's complaints about their work.

Many women work packaging the bananas for transport, usually at small makeshift "boxing plants" scattered throughout the island. Groups of men and some women come together to transport the boxed bananas, using motor vehicles, once every two weeks. Because the maintenance of banana plots does not require as constant attention as the maintenance of vegetable plots, many men are able to sell their labor to owners of the few large estates on the island, or to find some other paid employment. When talking of their work in agriculture, however, men emphasize the heavy labor involved and the many stages of activity in the growth and production of bananas. Men often complain about their work and their lack of leisure time, yet one can always find groups of men sitting around a game of dominoes or resting in the fields smoking cigarettes.

Most women, meanwhile, maintain small plots independently from their male partners to provide food for home use or sale at the local market. In fact, women do nearly all of the vegetable farming in Dominica. They are completely responsible for the planting, care, harvesting, and marketing of

their crops. Through marketing activities, women sustain not only the island's internal economy, but also maintain social networks and facilitate intra-island communication. News frequently travels through the Saturday market in Roseau, where women are by far in the majority. My landlady and I found out about a friend's nomination to town council at the market a good three or four hours before the nominations were made "public."

Marketing their produce can take women miles away from their homes where, with other women, they exchange not only food but information and obligations. The majority of Dominica's huckster trade to other islands of the eastern Caribbean is also carried out by women, who, like their counterparts on the island, carry food and news to other women and maintain networks. Groups of women occasionally will assist each other in tasks such as weeding or transportation of crops to the market, and children are also important participants in this labor. Women often raise small stock such as goats, rabbits, and chicken, and, in addition to their farming activities, are given full responsibility for the affairs of their household.

The average day for a rural Dominican woman begins as early as five in the morning when she must begin to prepare breakfast for her family. Many rural women cannot afford coal or gas for cooking fires and must gather wood in the bush and carry it back to their homes. This can take as much as three or four hours a day, although most women send their children off to gather wood continuously and need go out themselves only once or twice a week. Water for cooking can be a problem, too, as many villages' water supplies, especially further inland, are quite unreliable. In several areas women must walk as far as a mile to collect water and carry it back to their households. Other chores must be attended to, such as laundry, a difficult task which takes place at a nearby rivulet or stream, and is often done by groups of women collectively. Household activities such as cleaning, cooking, and handicraft or jam manufacture, in which many women are engaged, take up the entire day. For most rural women bedtime is near midnight.

In spite of the hard and long hours women obviously work to maintain their households and their marketing activities, many Dominicans do not put this work in the same category as the banana production of men (even though many of the activities involved in banana production are in the hands of women anyway). When asked what they do for a living, many women involved in subsistence agriculture, cottage industry or marketing will first mention their activities in banana production. Their household-oriented work, including the produce marketing vital to the island's internal economy, is not seen as "real work." These activities are not seen as important to status within the community as are the wage-earning activities of men. Women do take great pride in their vegetable plots, however, and recognize the plots' importance to the household. "The most important part of my work," said one woman, "is having a family, and I grow my own things — it's very

expensive in the market, and having the land I can do it myself." And yet, when asked to describe their work outside of the banana industry, most women will respond with the term "housewife." Men, too, express this sentiment. "Women are involved in that they are helping their men," said one male informant. Their "backyard" gardens are seen as complementary to and not separate from men's work.

Further, development programs until recently have been geared toward banana, not vegetable production (cf. Trouillot 1988; Maurer 1988). The attempts of women to succeed in new areas are often thwarted by community attitudes. For example, women's small stock production has traditionally been an important but small-scale affair. In one village a group of women decided to try their hand at raising pigs for sale to the surrounding villages on a large-scale basis. They had been given the necessary materials for the construction of a pig shelter by a local development agency, and in four months representatives from the agency returned to check on the group's progress. The wood and cement for the construction of the shelter was in the same place it had been left four months before. The women had seen the construction of the shelter as male labor, and had not been able to convince any men to help them build because the men had seen the women's attempts at large-scale cash production of small stock as "childish." Small stock production in Dominica is important, yet extremely devalued: "It's not work at all," said one man, "after all, it's just a matter of tethering your animal!"

Thus in the Dominican conceptual scheme women's work is undervalued. Men's work in agricultural activities is accorded higher cultural value than women's. Women's work in the agricultural sector, while made up of just as many if not more separate activities as men's, has little cultural value attached to it and is lumped together under the term "work around the household," even when such "household" work takes women miles away from home to the market, the river, or the forest or, if the woman is a huckster, to other islands of the eastern Caribbean. This work is also categorized as "household" work when such activities have far-reaching effects outside of the household — on the island's internal economy, on its economic relations with other islands, on intra- and inter-island communication and politics, etc. According to one male informant, a woman's real work is "when she goes out and helps her man in the field." Women's attempts to break out of this conception are thwarted by the belief that all women's activities are unimportant and childish.

Dominica presents an interesting case in that the relative levels of value attached to women's and men's work are not contingent upon a recognized "public/domestic" dichotomy, in which "real" work is located only in the "public." The marketing activities and small-stock production of women are certainly "public," and have wide-ranging influences on the political, social, and economic life of the island as a whole, yet are extremely devalued. The devaluation of women's work and its lack of differentiation within the

category "household work" result not from its location within a "domestic" sphere, the activities of which are limited to the maintenance of the household, but from its identification with women. The public/domestic dichotomy is thus in this case an inappropriate analytic tool for explaining the devaluation of women's work. Instead, the unmarked, underdetermined conceptualization of women's work may be seen in light of a similar conceptualization of women's sexuality.

## GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND EROTIC POTENTIAL IN DOMINICAN SOCIETY

In Dominica, as in the United States and elsewhere, people are labeled according to their sexual behavior and preference. The labels used in Dominica, however, are not as cut-and-dried as those in vogue in the U.S., and our gay-straight split, while acknowledged, is not adequate to deal with the complex system of meanings attached to sexuality in Dominica. In this section I examine the range of meanings attached to sexuality in Dominica and draw parallels to the meanings attached to work discussed above. I should emphasize that none of the categories described below are perfect types, and I have not explored the connection between these labels and the labeled individual's own notions of identity through being labeled. Rather, I attempt here to describe the conceptual vocabulary of sexuality in Dominica, to demonstrate the possibilities contained within this vocabulary for sexual expression. One final point is that it is impossible to determine the extent to which homoerotic activities occur in Dominica (just as it is impossible to determine the extent of heteroerotic activities). But one adult female informant put it this way: "You know, we wouldn't have words if it wasn't happening, and it's going on whether or not there's words!"

A word about data collection is in order here. While I had heard many of the terms discussed below tossed around in casual conversation and jokes, I remained uncertain about their precise meanings until I began doing work with high school students around the islands. Many of these students were invaluable informants, and our status as peers — many of them were only two or three years younger than I, and some were my age — eased the tensions involved in discussing sexuality so openly (tensions which operate in this country as well). Many of the anecdotes I'd collected previously then began to make sense.

Male sexuality in Dominica is seen as something of a spectrum. At one end are the *gwo gwen*. These men are considered exceptionally virile, and are known for their often violent sexual conquests. Translated, *gwo gwen* means "fat wheat," a reference to the man's supposedly abnormally large penis. At the other end of this spectrum is the *anti-man*, a man who openly rejects women's advances toward him and is outwardly adverse to any sort



of heterosexual union. Anti-man is one of the worst names a man can be called, and once, labeled as such, a man may face social ostracism.

Somewhere between these two extremes are several hazily defined categories of men. A man who is *soft* is subject for insults, yet these are usually mild. A soft man is one who sleeps with only one woman, who has fathered no children, who has fathered only female children, or who lets his female partner "push him around." I was told I'd be seen as soft if I let my landlady bring me to church every Sunday, for example. "Soft" is also used to describe male sexual dysfunction, especially impotence.

A busybody-ish man who would rather work around the house than in the fields is a *mako*. While this term often implies a preference for male sexual partners, this preference is not a prerequisite for being labeled mako. Some men who are called mako are known to have sexual partners of either sex. The line between soft and mako is ill-defined, yet mako is much more insulting simply because of the implication of housewifery rather than male sexual preference.

Two related terms which are used to refer to men who prefer male sexual partners exclusively are *makumé* and *tanti-man*. *Makumé* is also a term used among women to refer to the godmother of one's children, from the French "ma comere," or "my co-mother." *Tanti-man* is similarly derived from the French for "aunt." A *tanti-man* is so called, said one nine-year-old boy, "cos he's just like your auntie." Although male sexual preference is taken for granted in these types of men, it is not crucial to their definition as members of the community. They are accorded a position within the kin structure and as such do not face the social ostracism other outwardly "homosexual" men do. To say that one is a *makumé* or *tanti-man* is to give him the same position and status in the kin structure accorded a woman. Communities are, in the words of one Dominican observer of Dominican society, "very accommodating" toward *makumés* and *tanti-men*.

The identification of *makumés* or *tanti-men* with women effectively accords them the same sexual-erotic status as women. Although they engage in all manner of homoerotic activities, the fact that they, like everyone else, are sexual beings is not brought up except in the context of male-male joking behavior. Rather, their potential to be sexual is always implicit. There is no perceived sexual threat from a *makumé* or *tanti-man*, but there is a threat to the Dominican "normal" man in being identified as a *makumé* or *tanti-man* and thus emasculated. Hence male-male joking behavior and institutionalized homophobia do not take the form of physical or verbal aggression toward *makumés* and *tanti-men*, but rather are construed in terms of machismo and male sexual status.

There is one further twist to the meaning of *makumé*. Because a *makumé* is generally accepted in the community, some men will pretend to be *makumé* be in order to get closer to some particular woman or women.



According to one informant, "they put themselves in the position of women with the desire of getting them."

The categories of women based on sexuality are fewer in number than those of men, and all imply a preference for male sexual partners. As stated above, there is no way to gauge the extent of female homoeroticism in Dominica, but women friends I asked said it was as prevalent as male homoeroticism, if not more so. The term "lesbian" is rarely used, and when it is, it is used in a context implying foreign or exotic influence. Women who prefer female sexual partners are instead refer to as *zami*. *Zami* is the same word used to describe a pair of very close friends, male or female (derived from the French "les ami(e)s"). This conceptualization of women who prefer female sexual partners as desexualized "friends" in effect denies their sexuality and erotic potential. There is no sexual threat parallel to the threat to a man's masculinity in being labeled *makumé* in women being identified as *zami*. *Zami* who are "more than just good friends," while engaging in all manner of homoerotic activities, are not given the cultural recognition as sexual-erotic beings that *makumé* and other categories of men are. Male-male eroticism and male-female eroticism are thus accorded culturally recognized status; female-female eroticism is not.

Other words used to describe women in terms of their sexuality are *streetwalker*, *maquel*, and *malnom*. A streetwalker is a woman who acts like a prostitute, attempting to trap men unawares and steal them from their wives. She is expected to be sexually aggressive/sexually active, yet not sexually dominant. A *maquel* is the female equivalent to the male *mako*, without the sexual implications of *mako*. She is a busybody-ish woman who is given to voyeuristic behaviors and who sticks her nose into other people's sexual business.

A *malnom* is a woman who "acts like a man," as one female informant put it. This does not imply a sexual preference for women, however. Etymologically, the term is derived from the French for "bad (i.e., improperly formed) man."<sup>4</sup> In sexual relationships the *malnom* is not expected to be the dominant partner, and in fact her being labeled *malnom* carries few sexual-erotic connotations. She is a well-organized woman in some position of authority — characteristics associated with men in Dominica. The term is often used as a form of praise: women and men alike speak favorably of a woman who can handle what are considered the responsibilities of a man. Generally *malnoms* are seen as asexual, and many women who achieve *malnom* status do so only after menopause. *Malnoms* are thus similar to *makumés* in that they achieve the social position of the opposite "biological" sex in Dominican terms, yet unlike *makumés* their status as sexually erotic beings is denied. Some men will actually joke that they would never have sex with a *malnom* because, in the unforgettable words of one male informant, "Man, she might stick it in ME!" That this is said jokingly and receives a good laugh is evidence that it is not indicative

of a belief that the *malnom*'s erotic status is equal to that of a man, but quite the contrary.

Male homoerotic practices are discussed with a heavy infusion of homophobic leanings. No similar meaning is attached to female homoerotic practices. Further, the machismo and the perceived "homosexual" threat in being so labeled perpetuate the need for the constant discussion of male homoeroticism. While I was in Dominica, the two most popular West Indian recordings were "Don't Bend Down" and "Watch Your Bottom," songs which used references to AIDS and male-male sexual practices to reinforce the devaluation of "deviant" male sexual categories. Through such songs and jokes men who do not fall into any of the "deviant" categories establish their masculinity. The situation is quite different for women. The categories of women described above were not easily elicited from my informants. According to female informants, they rarely come up even in women-to-women conversations. Such "deviant" women are rarely discussed, as women are perceived as incapable of sexual-erotic "deviance" from a male-female sexual norm.

All of the terms used to describe women in terms of their sexuality assume either that women's sexuality doesn't exist (e.g., *zami*, *malnom*), or that women depend on men for the expression of their sexuality (e.g., streetwalker). The symbolic meanings attached to men's sexual preferences and levels of culturally defined masculinity are given cultural recognition in the form of the labels listed above, almost all of which have sexual meanings. Women's sexuality, in contrast, is almost never called into question as the cultural meanings attached to women's sexuality and eroticism are the same for all women regardless of sexual preference or practice. Women's sexuality, like women's agriculture, is thus linguistically unmarked. Furthermore, women's sexuality in its cultural context is undervalued just as is women's work. Just as women are seen merely as "helping men" in agricultural work and not contributing to economic production in any significant and meaningful way, so also women are seen as not contributing to sexual-eroticism without men.

Women's sexuality is thus perceived as a given, unmarked, uniform construct given little cultural recognition. Men's sexuality offers the possibility of deviance from the norm and a symbolic meaning for this deviance. Both men and women are engaged in a range of sexual behaviors. The terms used for women's varied sexual behaviors obscure both the range of women's behaviors and the social construction of these behaviors, as all the terms presume either a lack of sexuality or a sexuality defined only in relation to men, and naturalized as such.

The representation of men's sexuality as differentiated and women's sexuality as natural is mirrored in the cultural construction of work. Both women's sexuality and women's work are constructed as "extensions" of men's sexuality and men's work.<sup>5</sup> This articulates a cultural framework in

which women's power is undermined. The use of the public/domestic dichotomy as an analytic tool only muddles these connections, as does the conflation of gender with sexuality. When the distinctions between gender and sexuality are made, the conceptual scheme in which women and men perform as cultural and economic actors becomes clearer, and the roots of women's subordination in this context are more easily seen.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that the linkage of sex to nature in much feminist scholarship has resulted in a neglect of the cultural and social construction of sex. This neglect has led to a conflation of gender with sexuality, so that whenever we *do* look at sexuality, we see only what our own culture's conception of sexuality allows us to see: the "natural facts" of biological reproduction, which are translated into the "cultural facts" of the relations between men and women. This kind of thinking precludes questions of how sexuality could be culturally or symbolically constituted as separate from reproduction.

In the case of Dominica, once sexuality is made analytically distinct from gender, connections between the symbolic constructions of sex and the structuring of economic work are made clearer. In Dominica, conceptual vocabularies of sex and work are similarly structured: women's sexuality and work are understood in terms of linguistically unmarked norms; the vocabulary of men's sexuality and work is much broader and allows for cultural recognition of a range of sexual and economic experiences.

The focus on reproduction in some scholarship on women's roles in "developing" economies has come close to a kind of biological determinism, and has allowed for the neglect of the ways in which sex is differently constituted from culture to culture. Further, the focus on reproduction — wrongly taken to mean essentially the same thing across cultures — leads to a gross economism where women's sexuality is concerned. The relationships between sexual symbols and work are ignored because the only sexual symbols acknowledged are those tied to reproduction, even where such symbolism may not exist. The link between sexuality and reproduction is a cultural product of the West; we need to problematize our sense of this link before we can assume it.

## NOTES

1. For a similar discussion, see Yanagisako and Collier's (1987: 23) critique of Harris and Young (1981).
2. Indeed, as Yanagisako and Collier (1987) have argued, the notion of public and domestic spheres is analytically untenable, and the public/domestic, culture/nature, and production/reproduction dichotomies used in some feminist analyses "take for granted what ... should be explained" (p. 20); namely, how gender differences are constructed in the first place.

3. The hierarchies of power and domination in which my fieldwork and writing are implicated warrant more attention than I am able to give them here. Ong 1988, Mohanty 1988, and Trinh 1989 are useful for me in attempting to sort out these issues.
4. "Nom" in patois means "man," and is derived from the elision in the French "un homme." The vowel sound in this word and in "malnom" is not nasalized as it is in the patois word with the same spelling, "nom," which means "name."
5. I would like to thank Nancy Breen for helping me clarify this part of my argument.

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