

AIDS Rumours, Vulnerability, and the Banana Wars: A View From Dominica

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ABSTRACT: This article examines rumours about HIV/AIDS in relation to the recent shift in Dominica's economic status from an agricultural producer to a service provider. This shift has been the direct result of neo-liberal economic policies and decisions made by the international economic community. The virtual destruction of Dominica's agricultural sector has forced the country to develop its tourist sector. The increased reliance on tourism and emigration as sources of income has led to anxieties about contact and contagion; specifically, people have become acutely aware of the social and health consequences that would result from this economic crisis. Through a close reading of AIDS rumors circulating in Dominica in the late 1990s and through the present, we can begin to better appreciate the connections between experiences of colonial exploitation, slavery, racism, current economic globalization, the impact of economic crisis on health, and local reactions to HIV/AIDS intervention strategies.

KEYWORDS: AIDS rumours; Banana Wars; counter-epistemology; Structural Violence; public health

Introduction

On September 22 2009 I received a "Cause Announcement" from the First Nations and Aboriginal Rights Group via Facebook. The missive informed readers that many people in the village of Ahousaht, British Columbia had been vaccinated against the H1N1 influenza and within the week over one hundred members of the community had fallen sick. The author stated that, "On the face of things, it appears that seasonal flu vaccinations and/or antiviral medications are causing a sickness that is being deliberately aimed at aboriginal people across Canada." The notice continued by citing historical precedents – this had happened before – as evidence for its strong claim. The mainstream media was quick to dismiss the claims as "unfounded" and based on "conspiracy theory" and "rumour." The case reminded

me of the AIDS rumours that had been circulating in Dominica during the time of my fieldwork, and prompted me to revisit the ethnographic material collected then. In what follows, I intend to take seriously these rumours, not as statements of metaphysical truth, but as a kind of situated knowledge or counter-epistemology that can tell us something about the connections between experiences of colonial exploitation, slavery, racism, current economic globalization, the impact of economic crisis on health, and local reactions to HIV/AIDS and other pandemic intervention strategies.

Public health programs have done enormous good, but have also been met with skepticism. As the case of Ahousaht demonstrates, this skepticism may take the form of rumours about the motives of

the intervention. Amy Kaler (2009) has written a summary article focusing on the recurrent theme of sterility rumours and vaccination programs. Using reports of sterility rumours from public health interventions in Africa, Kaler argues that “these rumours are more than simply stories which are not true. The widespread rumour of sterility is a way of articulating broadly shared understandings about reproductive bodies, collective survival, and global asymmetries of power” (Kaler 2009:1719). Kaler introduces the concept of “counter-epistemic convergence” to understand sterility rumours. Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs (2003) have written a stunning analysis of Warao narratives and counter-narratives surrounding the outbreak of cholera in Venezuela and the tragic death of hundreds of Warao children, women, and men. They point out that public interventions that adopt “cultural reasoning” or any strategies that blame people with little social, economic, or political power do not help to prevent illness. AIDS prevention programs that focus on cultural or behavioural factors would be an example of this type of program. Briggs and Mantini-Briggs (2003) in their account of a deadly outbreak of cholera in Venezuela aim to “provide everyone who is affected by social inequality, stigma, and disease – that is all of us – with new tools” to cope with vulnerabilities to illness. It is my hope to contribute to this project by looking at Dominican stories about HIV/AIDS.

This paper will take seriously the rumours about HIV/AIDS that were circulating during my first two prolonged periods of fieldwork in the Eastern Caribbean nation of Dominica (August 1996–August 1997 and October 1997–May 1998). The rumours were connected to the shift in Dominica’s economic status from an agricultural producer to a service provider. This shift has been the direct result of neo-liberal economic policies and decisions made by the international economic community, specifically those that relate to the “banana wars.” To take these rumours seriously, rather than dismissing these narratives as “false” or as evidence of “conspiracy theories,” facilitates an examination of the socio-economic and historical context that gave rise to these widespread beliefs. In doing so, it is my hope that the counter-epistemic stories told by some of my interlocutors will

help to contribute to our understanding of the connections between colonial exploitation, slavery, racism, current economic globalization, and the impact of an economic crisis on the health outcomes of the affected population. It is also my hope to help to contribute to the creation of more sensitive and efficacious health initiatives in the future.

Context

On June 23, 2000 an agreement between the European Community and its member states and members of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of states was signed in Cotonou, Benin. This agreement, known as the “Cotonou Agreement,” will expire in 2020. The agreement temporarily extends the protection formerly afforded to ACP banana producers under Lomé IV.¹ However, most banana farmers in Dominica have little confidence in their economic future as is evidenced by the sharp and steady decline in banana production there. The Cotonou Agreement marked the final chapter in an ongoing trade dispute dubbed the “Banana Wars” by the news media. The “eight year standoff between the European Union and the USA over bananas” had dire consequences, especially for smaller Caribbean nations such as Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and the Grenadines. (Myers 2004:1)

My fieldwork in Dominica from 1996 to 2001 focused on AIDS awareness education and prevention initiatives. From the time of my first arrival in Dominica in August of 1996, anxieties surrounding the then current trade dispute between the United States and the ACP nations over the protected banana trade, were a frequent topic of conversation and surfaced in discussions about HIV/AIDS (Rose 2005). The dispute stemmed from a complaint made to the WTO by the US Trade Representative over the long-standing agreement that allowed ACP nations special access to their former colonial metropole countries through a system of quotas and protected price agreements for banana export/import.

¹ This is the name of the trade agreement that offered special, duty-free access for ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) bananas being imported into their former colonial metropole countries. In the case of Dominica and other islands that had been subject to British rule, this access was to the United Kingdom.

Around the world, people have “positioned the meaning of AIDS in relation to their structural positions in the local and global order” (Setel 1999:238) through various rumours and slogans that relate HIV/AIDS to asymmetrical and racist international relations. Paul Farmer (1992:230) has noted, “conspiracy theories have been a part of the AIDS scene since the advent of the syndrome.” Allport and Postman (1945) define *rumour* as “a specific proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present.” Rumours are unverified, orally transmitted narratives (Turner 1993:1). But rumours are more than incorrect or incomplete information. They are socially constructed, publicly performed, and publicly interpreted narratives. As such, rumours reflect and construct beliefs about how the world works at a particular place and time (Kroeger 2003; Fine 1992; Kapferer 1990). This article intends to treat “such local, disqualified forms of interpretation” (Palmié 2002:20) as “situated knowledge” – a counter-epistemology that challenges ways of thinking and points to the increased marginalization brought on by neo-liberal economic policies. In doing so we can learn about the way the world looks to post-colonial subjects who continue to have little power in the current global arena.

A (Lost) Window of Opportunity

In 1996, UNAIDS had reported that the Caribbean was a “window of opportunity” – HIV/AIDS rates were relatively low and it was believed that intervention strategies would be effective in preventing a health crisis in the region. The AIDS epidemic was not yet at crisis level and there was optimism that effective AIDS prevention programmes could be launched and a human crisis averted. At the same time, the United States Trade Representative had launched an official complaint against the preferential treatment afforded to African, Caribbean, and Pacific Bananas under the Lomé Protocol. Walking around Dominica I often heard snippets that alluded to the changes that the island nation was facing. At the hospital while waiting for my chest x-ray (a requirement for the VISA) a woman commented, “Imagine, you have to pay to make a baby now!” She

was referring to the newly introduced user fees at the hospital, a change made in response to IMF and World Bank demands. In Roseau, the capital, I saw a woman on a stool selling ripe bananas for 25 cents each. A man walked past her and commented loudly “What, we in the UK now? We have to PAY for banana?” As popular theatre workers and public health officials in Dominica toured the country providing AIDS prevention education, the populace was facing a massive economic crisis. The island was abuzz with talk about the two events – the arrival and increasing awareness of HIV (“de virus”) and the impending collapse of their primary economic base. Indeed, during the Dominica fieldwork period from 1996-2001, there were two widely circulating popular narratives concerning HIV/AIDS. These narratives went against the public health and AIDS committee’s efforts to provide AIDS education and prevention and reflected the people’s growing concerns about the impending demise of their economy as a result of the US-led complaint against Dominica’s protection of its principal export crop – bananas. The first narrative held that the United States, or the CIA, had manufactured the virus in a laboratory, with the intent of destroying the black (or poor) populations around the globe. Many Dominicans believed that condoms donated to the Dominican Planned Parenthood Association by USAID had been impregnated with HIV by “the Americans.” This type of rumour was not unique to Dominica. Setel has reported that the people he worked with in Tanzania also circulated a story that American condoms were impregnated with HIV (Setel 1999:240). In Dominica, this rumour was made even more plausible by the belief that the supply of donated condoms had been decreased or halted entirely after the “discovery” that HIV/AIDS could be transmitted through heterosexual contact. According to this narrative, once the virus had been introduced into the population, the Americans had moved to the second phase of their attack by ensuring that the virus would spread. Here is an example of a conversation on this topic:

Marna²: They used to send us condoms from the United States. The condoms went to town, to the

2 Following standard anthropological practice, the names cited here are pseudonyms.

family planning clinic on George Street. They told people to use them not to make babies – they said we were having too many babies.

Barella: And it was true sometimes in those days it was babies having babies. And girls getting thrown out of school. So we thought it was a good thing.

Marna: But then they got to know that the virus could be spread man to woman and woman to man. And then they stopped sending the condoms. It was then that they stopped sending the condoms. Remember in 1987 – was it? – that was the first time we heard about AIDS here.

Barella: Yes, wi. It was then that we realized we had the virus here and it was the condoms that had the virus in them. That is how the virus came to Dominica.

We continued our conversation for while, with me expressing concern and some doubt that this would happen. It seemed too cruel, I said. Then Barella said, “But you see what they are doing now, Dee? Now they are taking our banana and it was only banana we had to get us anywhere in life.” Marna chooped loudly and then said, “They trying to kill us is all.”

A second related belief was that information about HIV/AIDS disseminated by the news media and international development workers was a fabrication. The lie was concocted by “the Americans” (or an unnamed “them”), in order to trick black men into wearing condoms to thereby prevent the births of the next generation of Dominicans. People pointed out that USAID used to distribute condoms, through the Planned Parenthood Association, as a form of birth control. The distribution of free condoms, I was told, was halted once it became known that HIV could be spread through heterosexual contact. The variation of this narrative outlined above suggested that the imported condoms themselves had been “infected” or “dirty.” These ideas fit a narrative wherein “Americans” wished to decrease the birth-rate of Dominicans – a future-oriented genocide. Again, this idea that AIDS does not exist is another common theme in AIDS rumours in the developing world. A commercial sex worker in the Dominican Republic town of Carrefour expressed the following beliefs when asked about HIV/AIDS:

“AIDS!” Her lips curl about the syllable. “There is no such thing. It is a false disease invented by the American government to take advantage of poor countries. The American president hates poor people, so now he makes up AIDS to take away the little we have.” [Selzer 1987:60]

Here is an example from Dominica. Although this conversation was a bit tongue and cheek, it provides a clear example of this type of narrative:

Jacko: They do not want us anymore. They don’t want us to have children. So they tell us there is this thing, the virus, and the condom will protect us from it. But you see, there is no virus. It is not true. We are made to think that we are protecting ourselves but really we are doing their work for them. They don’t have to kill us. No more babies – no more Dominicans, you see? And you see they do that to their own too. Everywhere them want to do that.

Me: Who?

Jacko: You know them. Just look around. Just look at what they are doing to our bananas. Just look at them go on the boats to take the ganja. Just look, wi, just look.

The views he expressed to me that afternoon provide a very clear and concise narrative that links life, livelihood, and way of life. As in the conversation with Marna and Barbella, the narrative provides a poignant, and as I hope to now show, astute reading of global asymmetries and realities crystalized for the people on this island with the banana wars. Put another way, while these rumours pose difficulties for AIDS education and prevention initiatives, particularly those that emphasize condom use as a form of protection, but, (as Treichler has pointed out):

We can do other things with theories of AIDS than seek to eradicate them or, more pragmatically, circumvent them. As we look over the meanings that AIDS has generated as it moves among subcultures and around the globe, we can ask different kinds of questions. Who are cast as villains in a particular account of AIDS? How does a given account resonate with different constituencies? What’s in it for its adherents? The widespread belief that AIDS is

a deliberate experiment conducted on vulnerable populations is an example. In sub-Saharan Africa, the idea is common that AIDS is the latest effort by white global elites to control the reproduction of people of color. [Treichler 1999:221]

The widespread notion that AIDS is an American invention “often reveals an unwelcome narrative about colonialism in a postcolonial world” (Treichler 1999:103). In Dominica, this narrative was tied to the processes of globalization underway there during the fieldwork period. My last example from fieldwork is not an example of AIDS denial but rather an example of one of the ways AIDS was understood as a syndrome tied to global inequality. The example is taken from a community theatre workshop held at the Roseau Waterfront Workers’ Union Hall in November, 1997. The skit was a dramatization of the discussion that followed an AIDS prevention talk given by a public health nurse. It was one of several skits that evening, but one that is illustrative of a point. Since participation in these health workshops was voluntary it is reasonable to assume that the participants that evening were people who believed that HIV/AIDS did indeed exist. The dramatization was set between two households and a party. There were no props, but the scenes were indicated through dialogue and the movement of chairs in the space at the front of the hall. The characters were two mothers, portrayed by my middle aged Dominican women, two daughters portrayed by younger women and a young man. The man, we were told, worked for a well-known cruise line:

Two young women are talking about a party they plan to attend. One goes home and her mother asks her to sit down. “Lisa, come and sit with me a minute. I need to talk to you about something.” The daughter sits and her mother tells her that she is hearing more and more about this virus, HIV. She tells her daughter that she must be very careful. If she goes with somebody, she must be very sure about him and should use protection. The daughter assures her mother that she will take care of herself and asks permission to go to a party with her friend. The mother says okay and tells her that she must be home by midnight. Then the action moves to

the other side of the “stage,” where Lisa’s friend is telling her mother that she will be going to a party. The mother has no comment. The young women go to the party where they meet with a friend, a handsome young man who works on a cruise ship. After the party, both girls return to their respective homes. Lisa’s mother is waiting up for her, angry that she is late, but happy to see her home and safe. The other mother is asleep or absent. The next day Lisa’s mother sits her down for another talk. “Lisa I heard something and I’m afraid.” She asks her daughter if she was at the party with the “handsome fellow from Fascination.” “You know Lisa, de boy is travelling north and south and east and west and they say he has de virus.” She gives her daughter fifty dollars to “take de test and put my mind at ease.” Lisa gets her friend, who was the one with the “fellow” and brings her to the clinic for an HIV test.

This performance highlights the sense of Dominica as an island and the connection between poverty, tourism, and HIV/AIDS (Lisa’s friend agreed to go with the guy because she wanted Nikes for Carnival) in the transmission of HIV/AIDS emerges.

In order to understand how the rumours and assumptions described so far hold credence in Dominica, we need only look at the country’s history and its current position in the global economy.

Colonial Legacies and Racism

Ignoring the past not only harms understanding of the present but compromises present action. [Bloch 1993:61]

For nearly 300 years, African bodies were purchased, kidnapped, transported, and sold as chattel. Slave traders stripped and displayed the Africans on blocks so that plantation owners or their agents could choose strong, healthy people to work as slaves on their plantations. On the plantations, slaves were forced to do strenuous labour and were subjected to corporal punishment, rape, and, occasionally, murder. The white elite displayed anxiety over African bodies, sexuality, and the “purity” of the white race – at least as far as relations between African men and European women were concerned (Beckles 1999; D’Emilio and Freedman 1997). Plantation owners also exhibited

concern and control over the Africans' reproductive capacities. Thus, African bodies were subjected to scrutiny, legislation, and maltreatment in regard to both their productive and reproductive lives. Although none of the Dominicans that I spoke with referred to slavery when discussing HIV/AIDS as an American-invented tool for genocide, certainly all were aware of its legacy. For many Dominicans, satellite television, stories from friends and relatives overseas, and personal travel have reinforced the fact of racism.

People who believed that HIV/AIDS was a fabrication – a virus invented in an American laboratory to eliminate the black race or a lie concocted to trick black men into using condoms and preventing Dominican births – often pointed to contemporary racism in the United States. Dominica has high rates of emigration, and the most common destinations outside the Caribbean region are the United States, Britain, and Canada. Many Dominicans have lived in one of these countries or have relatives who do. Posters of Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., don the walls of many public places. With satellite television, many Dominicans saw the Rodney King beating. As one interlocutor commented, “You see what they do to their own. Imagine what they would do to us.” However, by far, the most common association between HIV/AIDS and genocide was rooted in the looming crisis in the banana industry.

AIDS Rumours and the Political Economy

Dominica's agricultural economy is historically rooted in the slave-based plantation system of the French and British colonial regimes that controlled the country at one time or another. During the Plantation Era, the period of slavery, estates practiced monocrop agriculture for export to Europe and America. Slaves were given some basic provisions that included salt, salt cod or smoked herring, rudimentary clothing or fabric, and a ration of flour. They lived in chattel houses that they built themselves and were given a small plot of less desirable land on which they were required to grow the bulk of their own food, in addition to labouring in the fields. Any surplus remained the property of the slave who could then sell it at the marketplace on Sundays. Some people were able to purchase their freedom this way;

others used the monies earned to purchase fabric to make dressy clothes or for foodstuffs or entertainment (Honychurch 1995; Rose 2009a; 2005). Today, people still refer to certain food items as “provisions.”

Following the British Empire's emancipation of African slaves on August 1, 1834, newly freed slaves left the estates and established squatter settlements. Many freed men and women cultivated their own small plots, selling any surplus in the local markets. A marketing system was already in place as a result of the Sunday sales of surplus crops described above (cf Honychurch 1995). Archival sources highlight the reluctance of newly freed slaves to engage in contract labour for former slave owners. Indeed, much of Dominica's economic history in the period immediately after emancipation describes the numerous strategies employed by the colonial government and the planter class to try to force the new peasant class into wage labour for the estates. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1988) has argued that the development of a peasantry in Dominica was a form of resistance that enabled people to maintain a level of independence by limiting their engagement with the cash economy. Former slaves continued to produce for subsistence, selling the surplus in the local market. The colonial government, mainly through the imposition of taxation, forced many individuals into wage labour on estates where they produced crops for export to the United Kingdom. Despite significant historical changes – for example, the shift from slavery to independent producers or wage labourers – the majority of the population remained in agricultural production, and Dominica has continued to export tropical fruits through both inter-island and international trade. Farmers also produce a surplus to sell to local hotels and in the Saturday markets in Roseau and Portsmouth. Early in the last century, bananas became the prominent export crop.

The economic crisis caused by the collapse of the banana industry was seen as a direct attack by the United States on the Caribbean. Indeed, many people did not even mention Chiquita, the multinational responsible for the complaint, but pointed directly to the United States. Television, newspapers, and conversations in public places spread the news that the US Trade Representative had lodged the

complaint against the protocol protecting ACP bananas. For Dominicans, the banana industry represented more than potential economic security. It enabled many Dominicans to retain an independent lifestyle as peasant farmers. In short, it represented a form of freedom through the ability to retain a degree of independence from wage labour and the capacity to continue to grow subsistence crops while maintaining a reliable cash income. Secondly, despite the relative independence afforded to individual farmers, due to the country's reliance on a single crop (bananas) and, for the most part, a single market (the United Kingdom), the decline in the banana industry has been an economic disaster for the country (Rose 2009a:87-97). The economic crisis has meant increasing reliance on tourism and emigration; I will elaborate on these effects in the final section of this article. Throughout the AIDS prevention workshops that were the focus of my fieldwork, Dominicans repeatedly associated poverty, tourism, and emigration with HIV/AIDS.

The Crisis in Dominica's Banana Industry

Dominica is the poorest country in the English-speaking Caribbean and was so even before events in the world economy stifled their principal industry. Most Dominicans I encountered became angry when they heard reports of their country's poverty. Many of them told me, "We may not have money, but we have food." Twiggy, a young man who was about to attend college, asked me why Europeans, who have so much money, allow some to die of rickets and scurvy just for want of fruit. In Dominica, he assured me, such a thing could never happen. Despite its relative poverty, people in Dominica boast a high life expectancy and enjoy healthy diets, thanks to an abundance of fish, rainfall, and fertile land. In 1995, the new government responded to structural adjustment demands by introducing user fees at hospitals. Prior to that, most people had access to adequate health care services. Dominicans also share an ethos of caring. When a person (especially a child) requires health care that exceeds the capacity of Dominican facilities, community members collect money, and a few wealthy families contribute the balance to meet the costs of sending the patient overseas for treatment.

At the time of my fieldwork, 67 percent of the labour force was employed by the banana industry – primarily as peasant farmers, packers, truck drivers, or employees of the Dominican Banana Marketing Association. Many Dominicans engaged in multiple occupations. Some bus drivers doubled as tour guides when a cruise ship was in port, and many men also worked informally in this capacity. The tourist sector was a growing source of employment, hiring tour guides, taxi drivers, hotel workers, bartenders, servers, cleaners, receptionists, and souvenir vendors. The government and service sector were also major sources of employment. Women dominated in the marketplace and comprised the majority of the hucksters. They also sold sweets and snacks from street side stalls or from windows in their homes, took in laundry, and ran the majority of the island's rum shops and snackettes. There was also a small sector of professionals, including lawyers, doctors, engineers, and one psychologist. However, as noted earlier, the major economic sector was agriculture (Rose 2005).

Why Bananas?

Prior to 1930, the Dominican banana was not an export commodity. Bananas were consumed locally, and banana trees were used as shade trees for the principal export crops of cocoa and limes, which needed protection from the sun when immature. There was, however, a small scale inter-island trade in bananas shipped from Portsmouth, the major city and port on the northwest side of the island (Mourillon nd:9). However, in 1928 and 1930, Dominica was hit by hurricanes that destroyed the lime orchards, effectively putting an end to the lime industry because lime trees take up to eight years to resuscitate. In 1931, Mr. A.C. Shillingford found a market overseas and began to ship the Gros Michel banana to Liverpool on Leyland Line steamships.

The industry faced many challenges, however. For one thing, Dominica lacked sufficient roads, making it difficult for small holders in remote areas to get their produce to port. Another problem was that the Gros Michel variety of banana was susceptible to Panama disease. By 1937, the Canadian Banana Company was accepting only high-grade bananas free of scars. World War II brought problems in

shipping, which stopped altogether in 1942 after the Canadian National Steamship boats were destroyed by enemy action. The British government stepped in with a wartime subsidy to “relieve small-holders, who had been depending exclusively on bananas for a livelihood” (Mourillon nd:13). These trends – the demand for high-quality, unblemished bananas and the granting of subsidies to ensure Dominican small-holders continued to produce bananas – remained in place until the World Trade Organization (WTO) ruling in 2000.

One of the factors that led to the adoption of the banana crop as a staple export was that there was an existing market in Europe and North America. From a geopolitical and economic standpoint, a number of factors combined to create this market. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the new mass transportation technologies of steamship and rail, along with the availability of cheap land and labour in the tropics combined to make the banana a viable economic investment. The processes of industrialization, the development of mass markets in Europe and North America, and the rise of multinational corporations led to the exploitation and consumption of this new commodity (Nurse and Sandiford 1995:1). Another factor was the weakening sugar industry (Nurse and Sandiford 1995:26). The presence of an existing market and the decline of another major export crop were significant factors in Dominica’s turning to bananas for export – but there were other reasons as well.

From an ecological standpoint, the banana is a viable plant because it is perennial, it grows well on steep slopes, its canopy provides shade for other plants that are grown between the rows of banana trees, the refuse from the tree provides mulch, and it has a relatively high yield per acre (Nurse and Sandiford 1995:16). Another important benefit of the banana tree is that it has a short nine-month gestation period, so growers can quickly rehabilitate it after hurricane damage (Nurse and Sandiford 1995:78). Thus, the crop is well suited to Dominica’s ecological niche. Finally, since the majority of Dominica’s banana producers are smallholders, they produce for their own subsistence, as well as for the market. “Fig” or green bananas have been and continue to be a staple in most Dominican’s diets and

are served in some households as a side dish with all meals. Nurse and Sandiford point to the peasant farmers’ subsistence ethic of “safety first” and “risk aversion.” As we have seen, an established market for bananas was already in place. As a perennial, the banana crop gave farmers a regular biweekly income (Nurse and Sandiford 1995:79).

Dominica’s agricultural sector has been dominated by smallholders with 78 percent of the farms being less than 5 acres and fewer than 1 percent over 100 acres in size (Thomas 1996:247). Although the “Cotonou Agreement” (2002) promised a temporary reprieve for banana producers, most farmers in Dominica have little confidence in its effectiveness, as evidenced by the sharp and steady decline in banana production there. As Campbell notes:

Although agriculture remains the leading contributor to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the relative strength of its contribution in the 1990’s is much lower than in the 1980’s (IICA, 1997). ... Between 1988–1999 the banana industry of Dominica recorded a 63 percent decline in production and a 62 percent decline in export value. There was also a corresponding decline in the number of farmers and acreage under bananas. Many farmers have abandoned their fields, especially those dependent on labor. Rural employment has fallen and there is evidence of declining livelihood among rural households as a result of falling financial resources that engenders a reduction to access of goods and services they previously enjoyed. At the national level, Dominica has now moved from a position of net exporter of agri-food products to net importer ... and it is very likely that this situation will continue because of the openness of the economy and the changing food habits of the population. [Campbell 2001]

The decline in banana production marks a significant change for Dominicans. For most of its recorded history, Dominica has been the provider of agricultural crops for metropole countries. Dominican farmers have also grown the bulk of their own subsistence crops. Since emancipation, much of this farming has taken place on independent peasant farms, and a culture has emerged that is based upon relative independence from the cash economy, self-

sufficiency, and an ethos of respect and caring (Rose 2005; 2009a:71-79). The crisis in the banana industry, therefore, marks more than an economic disaster. In the economic realm, there have been five interrelated results. There has been an increase in poverty levels; farmers and their families have been forced to emigrate in search of economic opportunities; land is increasingly alienated from the agricultural sector; and there is an increase reliance on imported goods. Anthropological and epidemiological evidence shows a correlation between these outcomes and the growing tourism trade. These studies also indicate that “poverty seems to favour rapid sexual spread of HIV” (Farmer 1995:3). Finally there is ample evidence linking tourism and HIV/AIDS (eg Farmer 1992; Padilla 2007). Thus, AIDS rumours in Dominica are “undisciplined stories” that deserve our attention.

HIV/AIDS and the Political Economy in Dominica: The Current Situation

According to a recent IMF report, rates of poverty in Dominica have increased significantly with 29 percent of households and 40 percent of the general population living in poverty, an increase of nearly 2 percent between 1995 and 2002 (IMF 2004). Alarming, 11 percent of households and 15 percent of the general population live in indigent poverty, and an average of 50 percent of Dominica’s children live in poverty. In rural areas, one in every two households is poor. More than 37 percent of households in Dominica do not have access to piped water, and 25 percent of households have no access to toilet facilities. The situation is expected to worsen as the population faces increasing unemployment, which increased from 15.7 percent in 1999 to 25 percent in 2002. Along with poverty, the report mentions a rise in the number of cases of persons affected with tuberculosis – an indication of a corresponding increase in HIV/AIDS infections. Another development report on the socio-economic conditions in Dominica states, “Teenage pregnancy and reproductive health patterns of unprotected sex and gender-related issues have also been cited as problematic for Dominica. Dominica’s current health situation sends a clear signal that HIV/AIDS prevention and education is becoming increasingly vital” (UNDP 2007).

The report concludes that Dominica is facing an economic crisis and that the country’s “medium-term economic future rests on fiscal stability, tourism, and growth within the agricultural sector (specifically banana output).” The report links “social outcomes” to the fate of the banana industry, but pessimistically adds, “Decreasing preferential access to the EU market for bananas and hurricane-related crop damage has made it difficult for Dominica to assert its position on the future of an uncertain banana industry. Dominica’s banana exports fell by 38.5% to a record low of 10,563 tons in 2003. Dominica’s attempt to diversify the agricultural market by a scarcity of agricultural labor, investment capital, and transportation costs.” The scarcity of agricultural labour is tied to the numbers of banana farmers who have left the country in search of economic opportunities elsewhere. Finally,

In the near to medium term, tourism is expected to be the principal driver in the economy. While Dominica’s tourism earnings averaged 18% of GDP compared to an average 29% in other islands, tourism contributes over 30% of Dominica’s foreign exchange earnings, three times the current earnings from bananas. In order to expand its tourism industry, Dominica will need to develop a coherent marketing strategy to promote its niche market – rainforests, waterfalls, volcanic sites and coral reefs – to the growing international eco-tourism market.

Rumours or Predictions?

In 1996, UNAIDS referred to the Caribbean as a “window of opportunity” referring to the perceived ability of development and health workers to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS in the region, averting a pandemic such as that found in sub-Saharan Africa. Today the Caribbean has the second highest number of HIV/AIDS cases per capita in the world, and is ranked as the most affected sub-region in the Americas (Bryan 2007:60).

The intent of this article has been to focus attention on AIDS rumours as commentaries about the political and economic situation in Dominica, rather than to examine the profile of HIV/AIDS in the country. AIDS workers, local commentators, and development agencies all recognize the population’s

likely vulnerability to the virus. The concern is supported by ethnographic evidence and epidemiological analyses of HIV/AIDS in the region which, at least since Paul Farmer's (1992) groundbreaking work on the AIDS pandemic in Haiti, clearly demonstrate the link between poverty, tourism, and HIV/AIDS in the region (Farmer 1992, 1995; Forsythe 1999; Figueroa and Brathwaite 1995; Padilla 2007). In November 2006, Dominica's HIV/AIDS Unit launched its "Know Your Status" campaign to encourage voluntary HIV testing in the country (Laurent 2006). A report issued by the European Commission in December 2008 states that "Dominica is reported to have the second highest seroprevalence rate in the English-speaking Caribbean" (European Commission 2008). Even more alarming, reported figures do not necessarily reflect the HIV status of those many Dominicans who have migrated to more popular tourist destinations in search of work. Of 306 HIV positive persons living in Dominica in 2006, only 24 were getting ARV treatment and only 32 were accessing any form of health care (OECS 2006:6). Further, AIDS prevention and health outreach programs have been cut (European Commission 2008). The actual level of the problem is uncertain. What is certain is that the crisis in the banana industry has thrown an already impoverished nation into a widespread economic crisis with dire social, cultural, and health outcomes.

Structural violence renders populations vulnerable to certain types of illness and members of these communities are well aware of their historical, economic and political marginality. In the 1990s this awareness manifested in AIDS rumours circulating in vulnerable populations around the world, particularly in the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Southern United States. Today it is surfacing in narratives about the H1N1 flu strain. Rumours of vaccinations causing sterility are also widespread (Kaler 2009) and linked to conditions similar to those described above for Dominica. With news of a potentially efficacious HIV vaccine on the horizon, the implications of this material for health initiatives need be taken seriously. Programs that use "cultural strategies" are also of questionable value. Although it was not the focus of this paper, AIDS initiatives (foreign run)

that pointed to Dominican cultural attributes (the common practice of men having multiple girlfriends, the difficulty some Dominican women reported in consistent condom use on the part of their partners) were simply dismissed out of hand: "We've always been this way, AIDS just came now." The discourse of public health workers, AIDS prevention and awareness activists, and Dominican media usually pointed to a link with a foreigner – HIV positive persons were reported and talked about only when they were people who had returned from another country with the virus, the first recorded case was always described as referring to the test results of a "foreigner who brought the virus to the island." Rather than understanding these narratives as a form of resistance or in any other way determined by the voice of outsiders, I am trying to make a case for taking these as commentaries or a kind of counter-epistemology about past relationships – colonialism, slavery, racism and the like, and their continuation in the form of neo-liberal economic policies that are, once again, catered to the needs of those in power, those who are structurally associated with the global north.

To sum up, shifting position in the global economy – from agricultural producers to pleasure providers – constitutes both dramatic change and continuity. The conditions of survival are still predicated upon the demands and desires of the developed North. Finally, the link between AIDS and tourism in the region has been well-established (Farmer 1992; Padilla 2007). Yet development initiatives consistently insist upon tourism as part of the region's solution to widespread economic crises. AIDS prevention education is indeed called for in this context, yet education initiatives that emphasize cultural practices and promote condom use will only be of limited effectiveness as the AIDS narratives discussed above indicate. Rather than dismissing these stories as mere "rumour," we should perhaps pay closer attention to the critiques of global geopolitics and economics embedded within these narratives. What is really called for in terms of global change is likely beyond the province of mainstream development agencies, yet I am certain that the farmers and former farmers in Dominica would have some useful suggestions.

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