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**Book Review: *The Moral Panics of Sexuality* edited by Breanne Fahs, Mary L. Dudy, and Sarah Stage**

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*The Moral Panics of Sexuality*. Edited by Breanne Fahs, Mary L. Dudy, and Sarah Stage. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 280 pp., \$85.00 (cloth).

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This groundbreaking book centers on contemporary and historical moral panics over sexuality. The edited volume of fascinating essays presents a picture of how sexual panics are deployed by a supposed “moral majority” to detract public attention away from crucial issues. Such collective panics, couched in discourses of morality, are deployed for political gain, exerting social control, and asserting power by marginalizing and suppressing so-called non-normal sexualities. The book successfully demonstrates how moral panics function as a tool of the powerful to incite mass hysteria and ignorance. With its wide-ranging collection of essays from multiple disciplinary perspectives, the book also illustrates how diverse the process and targets of sexual panics can be.

The array of essays in this book is original and refreshing to read, presenting new frameworks for understanding age-old cultural discourses of sexuality as well as recently emerging moral panics. Part I, “Female Desire,” includes chapters on vagina dentata and vampire stories. Part II, “Creating Norms,” includes chapters related to childhood sexuality, campus menstrual activism, and the popular show *Glee*. Part III, “Colonial Erotics,” includes chapters about cannibalism in nineteenth-century travel writing and cyber pinkwashing. Part IV, “Tactical Panics,” contains chapters about an early twentieth-century woman sex researcher and a gay Republican congressman. Part V, “Critical Panics,” includes chapters on disability sexual justice, hormonal menstrual suppression, and bareback pornography.

Chapter one delves into the cultural myth of vagina dentata and uses this trope as a way of demonstrating how current sexual panics and moral outrage are nothing new. According to author Michelle Ashley Gohr, stories about castrating vaginas with teeth have been found throughout history across thousands of cultures. Her interesting cultural analysis moves

past the typical psychoanalytic analyses of the vagina dentata myth and instead uses the lens of social panics, understanding the trope as a result of masculine anxiety about female power and sexuality. She uses examples not only from contemporary times but also from various ancient cultures as well as the Middle Ages, when Christian authorities labeled “witches” as deviants using the vagina dentata myth to paint them as symbols of female sexuality gone wild. Gohr shares examples from contemporary society to illustrate how the vagina dentata trope is pervasive in science fiction, video games, and films. A variation of the vagina dentata myth is even used as a justification for female genital mutilation. She concludes that “myths and ideologies that have persisted for centuries that have successfully stigmatized, marginalized, and obscured women’s bodies and sexuality will be used again and again as a powerful conservative tool” (p. 41). This speaks to the impact of this anthology in resisting the hierarchies and hegemonies produced by the moral majority’s collective hysteria by bringing to light their pervasive sexual panics.

In chapter eight, Sarah Stage tells the story of social scientist Katherine Bement Davis, born in 1860, who worked as a sex researcher in the early twentieth century. Davis was a social scientist and PhD who allied with John D. Rockefeller Jr. and gained his support as a social reformer around the moral panic over white slavery or prostitution. She was on the board of his Bureau of Social Reform and conducted research under its auspices. Other researchers and politicians associated with Rockefeller Jr. drew on the moral panic over female sexuality to undermine Davis’s work and character. They launched campaigns to attack her competence as a scientist and professional. Nonetheless, Rockefeller Jr. continued to support Davis and funded her pioneering study of women’s sexuality, which was the first to focus on so-called normal women rather than those deemed criminally or psychologically deviant. Her study was controversial and was considered “unsavory,” having demonstrated that “normal” women, such as college students, engaged in behaviors like masturbation. The ensuing moral panic over female sexuality was then used by Davis’s opponents to push her out of her position and erase her accomplishments from the historical record. Davis’s story, among other essays in the anthology, demonstrates how moral panics over sexuality function as regulatory processes that legitimate social hierarchies.

Drawing its title and inspiration from a 2011 conference at Arizona State University, this book succeeds at presenting historical and cross-cultural instances of sexual panics with chapters that inform each other. The collection of essays moves queer, disabled, transgender, of-color, and

other identities from the margins to the center. As is perhaps inevitable in a diverse anthology, the chapters vary in their relevance to the central aim of the book. Yet, overall, the book succeeds at its aim of presenting narratives of resistance to the marginalization, suppression, and violence brought about by moral panics of sexuality that obfuscate knowledge and silence critical discourse.

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