

*At Risk: Indian Sexual Politics and the Global AIDS Crisis.* By Gowri Vijayakumar. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2021. Pp. xv+258. \$85.00 (cloth); \$26.00 (paper).

Swethaa Ballakrishnen  
*University of California, Irvine*

Gowri Vijayakumar's book *At Risk* maps the management of the AIDS pandemic across time in two global sites—India and Kenya—to produce a rich account of the “shifting terrain” (p. 12) of state crisis response and its “everyday implications” (p. ix). Using in-depth interviews across levels of analysis (50 with AIDS experts, 82 with activists and HIV peer educators in Bangalore, and 21 in Nairobi and Mombasa; p. 10), participant observations of drop-in centers run by community organizations, and textual analysis (medical journals, opinions, newspaper articles, and institutional websites), the book sheds new light on how the global crisis was imagined, handled, and inherited by its two primary sites, as well as how its performance was made visible to global audiences. At its core, Vijayakumar considers these sites within a field of “hierarchical and temporal relationships” (p. ix) to argue that the crisis reinforced existing inequalities while also producing—in a limited way—certain unintentional possibilities for peripheral actors. In particular, the book argues that while HIV drop-in centers became “sites for reproducing forms of gendered respectability reinforced by class and caste” (p. 8), the larger crisis also “transformed, temporarily, the terrain on which sex workers, sexual minorities, and transgender people engaged the state.” In mapping this unique relationship “between struggles over AIDS and sexuality within India and their representation in the global field” (p. 11), Vijayakumar makes contributions to multiple literatures, but I focus on three interrelated strains within them for the purpose of this review: risk, transnational postcoloniality, and sexual crisis.

Scholars studying crises have suggested that catastrophic conditions and their management are tools for the state to renew its positions of power (e.g., Saptarishi Bandopadhyay, *All Is Well: Catastrophe and the Making of the Normal State* [Oxford University Press, 2022]). Similarly, India was “at risk,” Vijayakumar argues, of “becoming *like Africa*” (p. 3), and this justified the state's containment of its minority citizens and its legitimate intervention in their gendered and sexual lives. Particularly, in operationalizing Africans and sex workers—actors who were “stereotyped as hypersexual and dangerous” (p. 29) or, in the case of Indian sex workers, conflated with lower-caste status (p. 42)—as the source of this risk, it normalized exclusion and surveillance in the name of nationality morality. Other scholars have made similar observations about institutional legitimacy weaponizing ideal or respectable (cis/class/caste appropriate) womanhood to further alienate precarious minorities (e.g., Sharmila Rege, “Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of ‘Difference’ and towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 33 [1998]; Anjali Arondekar, *For the*

*Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* [Duke University Press, 2009]; Durba Mitra, “Indian Sex Life,” in *Indian Sex Life* [Princeton University Press, 2020]; Kalpana Kannabiran and Swethaa Ballakrishnen, *Gender Regimes and the Politics of Privacy: A Feminist Re-Reading of Puttaswamy vs. Union of India* [Zubaan, 2021]). Instead, it is the construction of this threat—“like Africa”—that frames the significance of Vijayakumar’s claims. This comparative construction of legitimacy is crucial because it sheds light on a mechanism not often explored in transnational sociological work: the ways in which power dynamics *between* Global South sites reinforce the power and position of the West. As Vijayakumar notes, the anticipated threat of becoming Africa was never fully realized, but the specter “racialized discourses of modernity, morality and civilizational advancement” between the two countries (p. 20). In revealing the ways in which AIDS experts positioned India as a model type to Africa (pp. 150–51) by quantifying without political context the extent of its “success” (chap. 7), *At Risk*, in addition to being an ethnography of risk, frames an empirically rigorous portrait of the ways in which colonialism—like capitalism—reinforces elite status by pitting peripheral actors against each other.

Similarly, the book’s focus on the risk and response to a *sexual* crisis is pertinent. Implicating sexuality was central to India’s capacity to contain its threat because its target population was already precarious, but also because such containment could signal “fundamental concerns about Indian sexuality on the global stage” (p. 6). This adds to a growing literature on how institutions with power repurpose gender to inform their own agendas (e.g., Poulami Roychowdhury, *Capable Women, Incapable States: Negotiating Violence and Rights in India* [Oxford University Press, 2020]; Swethaa S. Ballakrishnen, *Accidental Feminism: Gender Parity and Selective Mobility among India’s Professional Elite* [Princeton University Press, 2021]; Srila Roy, *Changing the Subject: Feminist and Queer Politics in Neoliberal India* [Duke University Press, 2022]), but moving beyond traditional critiques of the crisis as a site of biomedically justified sexual oppression (e.g., Paul Farmer, *Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues* [University of California Press, 2001]; Celeste Watkins-Hayes, “Intersectionality and the Sociology of HIV/AIDS: Past, Present, and Future Research Directions,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 40 [2014]: 431–57), *At Risk* deftly turns the conversation in a more subversive—and productive—direction. Vijayakumar traces how prevention programs served as sites to build new versions of selfhood and the possibility of stability and solidarity between unlikely allies (chap. 5), and because the crisis lent an urgency to shared claims, new actors were offered unprecedented claims to the state and stakes within institutions. This complexity to the narrative—of transpeople demanding visibility or sex workers being directors—complements other scholarship that views sexual crises as also possible sites of identity formation (e.g., Aziza Ahmed, “Rugged Vaginas and Vulnerable Rectums: The Sexual Identity, Epidemiology, and Law of the Global HIV Epidemic,” *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 26 [2013]: 1) and affords new ways of thinking about the intersections between the sexual

and political by reminding the reader of utopic possibility inherent in all introspective attention. Unsurprisingly, the rewards to these “at-risk citizens” started to fade alongside the urgency of the crisis itself (chap. 8), but Vijayakumar’s temporal narrative urges us to consider the meaning of precarious life when it also offers promise.

*At Risk* expands the possibilities of decolonizing American sociological scholarship (Gowri Vijayakumar and Smitha Radhakrishnan, “Sociology of South Asia: In Waiting for the Revolution,” in *Sociology of South Asia* [Palgrave Macmillan, 2022]) to build theory from global sites that have implications beyond their immediate coordinates. Particularly now, as we emerge from the reluctant aftermath of another global pandemic, and—perhaps unrelated—deal with new sexual crises produced by the state that implicate gendered bodies, these findings feel atemporal, omnipresent, and urgent.