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# SCRIPTABLE

A Bispectral Review of Recent Books



Robert Tenor, editor  
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## EDITORIAL

[Scriptable](#) is an irregular review of what was once called the belles-lettres, where we essay upon a wide assortment of current books and articles with an eye open for “the beautiful jumble of discordant congruencies” derived from the authors and titles under discussion. We cast a wide academic net through the social sciences and humanities, with a strong orientation toward current events, social theory, religious and cultural studies.

With this number we move away from simple reportage of current scholarship to something more ambitious. The body of each issue includes editorial essays examining themes inspired by the works under consideration. Our [Annotated Bibliography](#) will review, list and link the titles under discussion, providing a faithful summary of its content and audience.

Our purpose is to inform and entertain. Through the review essays we hope to visit new and timeworn places through unsettled ideas in currency newly minted. Perhaps to see the outlandish as intimate and to show up the familiar as stranger than before thought.

Each issue should surprise.



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## **HUMANS ON THE RUN: OF EXILES AND ASYLUMS** by Kumar M. Tiku [Oxford University Press, 9780199484812]

Excerpt: Large swathes of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa are in the grip of religion, radical jihad, and an undying fealty to martyrdom. Where this will take us and how long it will be before violent political conflicts end are questions that no pundit would wager his money on. For years, conflicts have been the staple of the hourly news that we consume in print, on air, and online. the Twitterati

and other inveterate instant messengers thrive on manufacturing dissent and mobilizing street anger. Somewhere in that space, every once in a while, we hear and see the homeless hordes. I belong to the multitude which comprises the conflict nomads of our times.

Well over a dozen countries today are steeped in race, class, and religious revolutions that, sooner or later, erupt in violent conflict, creating conditions for mass abandonment and homelessness, with millions forced to move multiple times within and outside their countries of origin in search of a semblance of peace, order, and stability. This book is not an attempt at making sense of the conflicts that have convulsed the world with increasing force, fury, and frequency, particularly in the last three decades or so. Nor does it strive to look behind the scenes for possible clues about international intrigues, and domestic class or power struggles.

This is a book of stories, pure and simple. In laying it out as it is, through a mosaic of mostly first-person accounts, the book provides clues into human lives that pass through the many and variegated tests of sustained conflict, migration, and multiple physical displacement. Through the stories, we begin to see the metamorphosis of once calm and orderly lives and the hard choices migrants face when they decide in favour of survival and self-preservation over threats to their lives, honour, and that most primeval of all human needs—freedom. We begin to see what happens to a person uprooted from the ecosystem called home.

The stories that you find in the pages that follow are an attempt at preserving memories of several microscopic journeys embarked upon by people, often under conditions of utter and complete hopelessness. In their own voice, individuals in flight, long disconnected from the certitudes of a settled, anchored existence, map their journeys when moving to the next village, town, city, country, or continent, in the hope of beating certain death, sustained denigration, and systemic abuse.

Serendipity, passion, and planning have all played a role in helping me listen to and narrate these stories. When I first felt the itch to make sense of conflict-scarred lives lived in perpetual homelessness, I had in my sights my own experience as an unrecognized, and not very recognizably displaced, Kashmiri person in India. For though forced into a lifetime of shaming homelessness, I was not living in a so-called `camp, nor was I a recipient of the government dole, be that in the form of measly financial relief or any subsidized food stamps. Clearly, I did not fit into the archetype. Nevertheless, living amidst a family whose very existence in its years away from home was shaped and defined by the searing memories of sudden and forced migration during those dark and apocalyptic months in 1990, there indeed was material for not one but several stories from just my family alone. For thousands of Kashmiri Hindu families such as mine, the last quarter century has passed in juggling the demands of survival with the trauma of rejection and apathy that the community has faced in its splendid isolation as a castaway minority of a professedly secular republic.

My first United Nations (UN) assignment outside India took me to Afghanistan, where I spent just under five years, listening to myriad broken men and women who had lived to tell the stories of their shattered and scattered lives, and their constant search for a place safe enough to bring up their children. The stories that got to me more than others, I pursued to the very end, tailing those characters like a shadow through all their journeys, observing and processing changes in their psychosocial lives as perpetual journeymen with each setback and triumph. Some of those stories are a part of the collection in your hands.

Afghanistan was the first real pit stop en route to my ten-year-long professional journey through several conflict zones. Here, I made some lasting friendships with fellow UN travellers from conflict-affected Sri Lanka. I came face-to-face with Sri Lankan Tamil doctors and other aid workers who had harrowing tales to tell. I hope the two stories in this volume do justice to their remarkably resilient and textured lives.

Sudan was next. Depredations in Darfur, arising from differences among the Arab and non-Arab ethnicities, have left a whole people asunder and hundreds of thousands in a state of pitiful homelessness. By far, the bigger story during my time in Sudan was the impending referendum when the predominantly Christian South would take a call on staying with Sudan or having a country of their own. On 15 January 2011, the South Sudanese people spoke as one in favour of an independent nation.

I was there when Sudan split in two and the world's newest country, South Sudan, was born in the name of seemingly unreconciled religious and cultural differences. The euphoria of independence proved extremely short-lived. The lust for power among leaders of the two dominant ethnic strands of South Sudan, the Dinka and the Nuer tribes, has led to a civil war that has already claimed a heavy toll of life and forced millions to seek refuge in neighbouring Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. Ethiopia, in particular, despite its own endemic poverty, has shown uncommon compassion and statesmanship in opening its borders to millions of people from more than one distressed country in its neighbourhood.

When I visited Ethiopia in the summer of 2015 to see first-hand this magic of a poor country with a rich humanitarian record, the streets of Addis Ababa were teeming with refugees not just from South Sudan, but also with people fleeing conflicts in Yemen, Eritrea, and the Congo. You will read about many of them in this book, as they speak about their current conditions and past lives.

After a second assignment in Afghanistan came the opportunity to serve the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Syria. More than a third and close to half of the population here is without a home. The sheer scale of human tragedy that has visited this once beautiful and historically rich land is beyond all human imagination. For fifteen months, I travelled across the length and breadth of Syria as part of the UNICEF effort to deliver humanitarian aid—potable drinking water, basic supplemental nutrition, vaccination kits, school bags and textbooks, and medicines—to locals, many of whom were held in siege as human shields. I met and spent time with children and their parents in Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo, once neat and orderly cities that, for six years now, have been visited by war, bombs, and damnation, and resemble vast ruins. I met countless mothers of the hapless children in these cities who were living in refugee camps and unfinished buildings, trying to soothe the frayed nerves of their little ones and stay sane in the face of relentless, heavy bombardments, and, of course, getting used to a life of perpetual migration, from one neighbourhood to the next, often one city to the next, and in so many cases, one country to the next. Small wonder then that Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey host close to half the Syrian population between them today.

In the northern part of Iraq, in the valley of the Dohuk governorate that falls in the historically charged semi-autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, I chanced upon camps upon camps of the Yazidi community. A small religious minority with its own distinct cultural practices and way of life, the Yazidis mostly inhabit the area of Mount Sinjar of Nineveh province. Radical extremists that had declared a caliphate from Mosul in Iraq to Al-Raqqa in northern Syria (and which now is close to unravelling, what with major Iraqi advances in Mosul and more determined air and land effort to beat the group into submission in Syria) made Yazidis their early prey, committing unspeakable atrocities and hounding them out of their habitat and forcing themselves upon countless Yazidi women. The savagery that this beleaguered minority has endured has been captured on primetime global news shows and in the press. Accompanied by Sarwa Qadir, a highly sensitive Kurdish colleague, I sat down with one middle-aged Yazidi woman to make sense of her life and experiences at the hands of the terrorists and her journey to a refugee camp, as a young, vulnerable woman, mother of a small brood of children, and homemaker.

What motivated those journeys made by people across multiple geographies, cultures, and time zones? What kind of memories of a place that an individual calls 'home' refuse to disappear and define the idea of identity long after the person was forced to abandon it? And what is at the heart of the undying and near-universal yearning to 'go back' to the place that is home—a metaphysical counterpoint to the daily ravages and indignities of forced nomadic life of sorts?

The stories, covering a wide cross-section of humanity and nearly every part of the world in conflict, attempt to answer those questions. Together, the stories paint a picture of the human as a homeless creature on the run. The stories largely conform to a template of storytelling that I designed at the start of this documentation project. For places and case studies that I could not directly visit, I relied on some brave and exceptionally gifted storytellers. These fellow collaborators in this project agreed to follow my story template and contribute their original writings for this collection.

The tapestry of individual voices within the pages of this book shines the spotlight on migrant lives, encompassing a *mélange* of human experiences through multiple migrations, experiences that range from the tragic to the sublime, with many shades of grey in between. When all options for safe survival are exhausted within their own homes, people move to the next neighbourhood, then the next proximate village, town, or city, and as we have seen with alarming frequency in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, to the next country that holds out a promise of calming the storm in their lives, the storm borne of brutal, barbaric, violent events that threaten to rip apart nation-states and their social fabric built over a millennia and more of settled existence.

In my neck of the woods, by the time the last Soviet soldier pulled out of Afghanistan in February 1989, over 3 million Afghan men, women, and children had come to make peace with a refugee life, mostly in Pakistan and Iran, with all its attendant deprivations and indignities. The refugees were followers of the same religion, inhabitants of the same land, and raised in its manifold blessings, separated and cleaved by a conflict that fed on ethnic differences among the various stocks of people that comprise the great rugged landmass of Afghanistan.

Egged on by their respective allies in the Muslim world, the Pashtun, the Tajik, the Hazara, the Uzbek, the Aimak, and the Turkmen Afghans unleashed a civil war on each other and their land of birth; it went on for decades, resulting in the most monumental population displacement in history at the time. Young boys of all ethnicities were given to war as fat to fire. The seemingly never-ending wave of slash-and-burn methods has taken the country back to an age of anarchy and left most of its public infrastructure pillaged and destroyed. Not a single family in Afghanistan, whatever its ethnicity, has been untouched by the brutality of war.

The war has trundled on, albeit with added ferocity and different methods and objectives. Children continue to pay the price in terms of a stolen childhood. Reconciliation projects, gently initiated by the international community, have for the most part been dead on arrival. Lack of trust in each other and in the state in Afghanistan is as apparent today as it was when I first set foot on its soil a decade ago.

Kashmir, the conflict-affected part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir in India, was to follow Afghanistan in its manic urge for self-destruction. By 1990, an uprising, violent in its methods and decidedly communal in its tone and tenor, had convulsed the length and breadth of Kashmir. The state and civilian authorities, missing in action at the best of times, capitulated as the frenzy overtook the street. *Azadi*, the stock-in-trade of the largely educated and jobless youth who led the loose, rag-tag guerilla movement for change, seemed just a push and a heave away. The movement targeted flags and other totems of state authority, unfurling its own flags in busy market squares. This was accompanied by targeted killings in cold blood of prominent persons from the minority Kashmiri Pandit community. The killings met with their intended objective as fear, cold and unspoken, ran

through the relatively minuscule community. As local media reported on the killings, the question in every Pandit home was, who next?

Anyone who has been a minority of any form or typology would know well how fear breeds panic. One by one, in the dead of the cold winter nights, the Pandit families left their homes in a panicked rush. What was at stake was not just the life, limb, and liberty of the men but also the honour of their women. I belong to the Kashmiri Pandit community whose origins in Kashmir date back to several millennia before the advent of Islam in the Valley. Mine was among the nearly hundred thousand families that caved in to the fear and somehow made it to the safer, though many times more uncertain and unfamiliar, parts of India. This book of stories stems from my own tattered identity as a Kashmiri.

Among the first crop of boys to initiate a paradigmatic shift in civil resistance in Kashmir was Ashfaq Majeed Wani, a fearless young soul oozing bravado. Wani was only 21 when he was picked by Syed Mohammed Yusuf Shah, the Pakistan-based chief of Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, to be his polling agent in the 1987 elections to the Jammu and Kashmir state assembly. The elections were said to have been blatantly rigged, as Shah, now better known as Syed Salahudeen (ostensibly after the 12th-century first sultan of Syria and Egypt who led a military campaign against the crusader states in the Levant) found himself on the losing side against a leading light of the then ruling dispensation. Soon thereafter, young Wani decided to take to armed methods to vacate purported Indian misrule in Kashmir. In leading a crusade of sorts, Wani was asserting his right to a home that was undefiled by the hands of what he perceived as an 'external' occupier.

A leading light of militancy in Kashmir, Wani was a year junior to me in college in the early 1980s. I knew him up close as a rakish young teen often surrounded by slightly brazen teenyboppers who were never above making a racket in the college canteen and were usually spoiling for a fight with fellow baddies on the campus. In my term as the president of the students' union at the Gandhi Memorial College in downtown Srinagar, on more than one occasion, I had to use my traction with the college management to have a rustication memo against Wani annulled. We became close and even joined forces as one team to compete in an inter-college athletics event held in the University of Kashmir, where à la Milkha Singh, he ran barefoot and won the race hands down.

In time, Wani found his machismo, athleticism, and fearlessness getting harnessed for the cause of liberating Kashmir from the so-called occupation by India. His naturally subversive instincts, always in full display during our college days, became the stock-in-trade of the militant creed as he took on the mantle of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), the first among the pro-independence insurgency movements that caught popular imagination in the early 1990s in Kashmir. He galvanized large sections of Kashmiri youth for the cause of azadi. A symbol of freedom and courage for the younger generation, his daring attacks received fulsome coverage in the Srinagar-based Urdu media. Local legend had it that Wani had crossed over to Pakistan and returned fully trained in the use of small firearms and motivated to lead an armed struggle for independence of Kashmir from India. He was part of the dreaded HAJY quartet of the JKLF that also comprised Hamid Shaikh, Javed Nalka, and Yasin Malik. Ashfaq Majeed Wani was killed by security forces in March 1990, at the age of 23. Millions turned up on the streets of Srinagar to eulogize him and mourn his death.

Two-and-a-half decades later, Burhan Muzaffar Wani, another young Kashmiri boy from the rural outbacks of the southern part of Kashmir valley who embraced the militant cult, captured the imagination of the world, as his namesake predecessor had done. His death at the hands of the security forces became a nonpareil symbol of popular resistance in Kashmir. Burhan Wani rose to be a leading light of the pro-Pakistan militant organization Hizbul Mujahideen. A product of his times, he harnessed social media to the hilt to re-unify the new generation of Kashmiri youth in its civil resistance methods against the Indian state. A common thread that ran through these two lives was



their uncommon youthful zeal and a pious determination to lead the march of Kashmiris from perceived Indian oppression into an idyll of freedom and dignity. Even as thousands of young lives have been snuffed out in the violence in Kashmir over the years, these boys were among just a handful to receive public adulation of such magnitude.

This book is a compendium of human displacement caused by conflicts in the last 25 years or so. These have been the years during which I have moved from being a man with a home to an uprooted, upended, homeless person of the world. During these years, I have grown from being a young, green, and full-of-beans individual to a grey, middle-aged person, displaced, dispossessed, and weary from the daily gripes of dystopia. This book has mined a sliver of that memory from many different parts of the globe where conflicts have boiled over and resulted in a mega-scale movement of ordinary citizens, living a once-normal life, to conditions of progressive dehumanization.

This has been a time during which I have raised a family and sired a child who, at 23 years of age, is a made-in-Delhi, second-generation-homeless adult, blissfully disconnected from her roots, the same rootlessness that is a source of abiding helplessness for her anguished parents. Disconnected from home and its essential moorings, they often wonder aloud about how their daughter and future generations of this exiled tribe might describe themselves in the years and generations to follow.

The loss of the land into which my forebears and I were born is a stab whose pain refuses to be dulled even after a full quarter century in displacement. During all these years, our dinner-table discourse has unfailingly centred around how it was back home, and inevitably led to opening each night the gnawing wounds of memory as the mind reels back into that shaming experience of being kicked out of my own home by frenzied zealots who implemented with clinical precision the project of setting man against man, and splicing our shared land and heritage.

The Constitution of India, that ultimate arbiter of my destiny as the citizen of a free, secular, and democratic republic, in that part of the country at that point in history, stood like a mute witness to the forces of division, unable to stop the rage and fury of a mass hysteria of separation that was in the air, much less, able to show the light towards a future of mutual coexistence. So many years on, what has changed?

Home was not just the house that I grew up in or the street that I played on. Nor the hills that stood like silent sentinels, watching over my beautiful vale and its inhabitants in almost divine care. Nor the scintillating and many-splendoured lakes, springs, and rivers and their calming waters that would flow by unhurried, but sustained the whole ecosystem and imbued the Kashmiri character with a certain composure and a poetic heart. Nor even the majestic chinars that had for ages embalmed innocent lovers and lent leafy shade to travellers and vagrants alike.

Home was not any one of those attributes of the space called Kashmir. Home was the person that I became when these elements came together to shape and make me. Away from Kashmir, my home, I mourn the loss of that person inside that deserted me bit by bit as survival and adaptation in distant lands and alien cultures took centre stage. Now while the conscious self may have moved on, as indeed may be the case with the Kashmir of my youth, the home that I left behind, the search for an elusive habitat that I can truly call home continues to shape my dreams even after a full score and seven years in exile.

While the days are spent in the lethal grind of humanitarian jobs, some of which took me to the most conflict-ridden hotspots of the world, the nights have almost perennially been occupied by a decidedly different landscape. My nights are consumed with dreams of the land I was banished from, for no reason other than being on the wrong side of the religious and political divide. The impact on my senses has been at once calming and unsettling as I battle the juxtapositions of a daily life in

displacement with my nightly life in a calming, imaginary homeland. It is a barely concealed psychological disturbance that's perhaps a fit case for some much-needed psycho-social help.

The émigrés, who accounted for but a minuscule 3 per cent of the population of the Kashmir Valley that is predominantly populated by the Sunni Muslims, testify to succumbing to fear triggered by a handful of targeted and spectacular killings, and radical intimidation in the form of incendiary communal slogans emanating from mosques, particularly so in neighbourhoods with Hindu presence.

In the city of Srinagar, for centuries we lived in clenched proximity with our Muslim neighbours across countless localities. Vichar Nag, Raina Wari, Sathu Barbarshah, Nai Sadak, Badyar, Habba Kadal, Bana Mohalla, Chinkral Mohalla, Fateh Kadal, Ali Kadal, Nawa Kadal, Safa Kadal, Chatta Bal, Kak Sarai, Karan Nagar, Bal Garden, Jawahar Nagar, Raj Bagh, Indira Nagar, and Shiv Pora were some of the neighbourhoods in Srinagar that the Pandits inhabited in visible and, in some cases, sizeable numbers.

In those three brutal months of 1990, however, these neighbourhoods were emptied of their presence almost completely. The killings of a handful of notable members of the community in the Valley, among them an elderly judge and a senior political party worker of the Bharatiya Janata Party—a leading political party that is in power in India since the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, and a partner in the current governing dispensation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir—and a notable youth worker, had already hit the mark in injecting a deep sense of uncertainty, fear, and a sense of 'who next?' among the minuscule Pandit community.

The killings were complemented by a targeted campaign by the ideologically driven toughies that made use of the loudspeakers in the neighbourhood mosques—the same amplifiers that the muezzin used to call the faithful to prayer—for blaring out manifestly provocative slogans calling upon Hindus to participate in the project of ushering in Nizame-Mustafa (the rule of Allah). It is instructive and no less ironic to recall that even in those heady days of azadi—a sentiment that professedly represents the pure desire for liberation of Kashmir at once from the clutches of India and the embrace of Pakistan—the movement fell back on religious bigotry to advance their message among the masses.

This became a regular feature of those cold winter months. As the loudspeaker threats grew in force and frequency, they served their intended purpose in sowing a deep sense of fear among the Pandits across all 10 districts that make the Kashmir part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Unable to cope with the sweeping radicalization of the Muslim mind and a rising crescendo of secessionism that had taken over the Kashmir Valley, in a matter of months, Kashmir witnessed the exodus of the Pandits from their homes across the Valley.

The scale of intimidation targeting the Pandits recalled the depredations unleashed by Sultan Sikandar Butshikan, the seventh Muslim ruler of Kashmir, by most historical accounts a rabid iconoclast who ruled in the late 14th century and presided over the massive desecration of Hindu temples in Kashmir. The ruler is known to have ordered mass conversion of the Pandits to Islam as well as caused large-scale migration of the Pandits to the plains of the northern mainland of India.

Just imagine: the Pandits who represent the warp and weft of a distinct tapestry of the life of Kashmir were scared out of their wits and forced to run away to safety while their neighbours and their countrymen alike merely looked on, or simply looked away. The Kashmiri Pandits—with no Kashmir for a home any more—in a bit of a hyperbole, use words like exodus and ethnic cleansing to draw attention to the wholesale forced flight from their homes and centuries-old habitat. Today, barring an odd family that bucked the tide of migration, the Pandits are practically written off from the Valley. With no real initiatives of genuine reconciliation forthcoming, their prospect of returning to their home seems bleaker than ever.

The Muslims among whom I was born and raised are among the finest specimens of the human species. We drank from the same rivers and shared a social camaraderie and togetherness that only the uniquely syncretic culture of Kashmir could nurture. The best that can be said about the perceived Muslim betrayal of the Pandits in the days leading to their mass flight out of Kashmir was that the ordinary Muslim approved of the militant creed almost willingly, to express, as it were, his strong disenchantment with a prolonged period of inept 'elected' rule that, in effect, was a travesty of good governance in every way.

For the motivated young militants of the time, turning the tables on Delhi, the Indian capital that is perceived in Kashmir as the seat of all intrigue, meant support for 'independence' from the puppet rule in the state, even if that came with the price of dispensing with the Pandit community that was integral to the Kashmiri way of life. The seeds of an Islamic enclave within the borders of a secular republic were well and truly sown. Twenty-seven years went by in a trice, without anyone so much as noticing either the flight of a whole people or indeed the progressive communalization of a political conflict. In this time, Pandit homes got pillaged, torched, or sold, and bit-by-bit all traces of the Pandit way of life in Kashmir became nothing more than a memory.

After several false starts and stops trying to find our moorings in Jammu, the nearest town that promised a respite from the haunting fear of terrorism that had overtaken my valley, we dropped anchor on the outskirts of Delhi, an ever-expansive city of hope, opportunity, and freedom, where work was easier to come by, and with the perspective that only time and distance provide, memories of fear and the flight from our homes in Kashmir would hurt less, giving way to the cut and thrust of everyday existence of an average metropolitan life.

In the fullness of time, my work with the UN took me to some of the conflict hotspots of our times that grabbed global attention—Afghanistan, Sudan, Syria, and Iraq. I spent a decade of my life in these countries, my ear to the ground, making sense of the lives of people who had experienced and survived the many ravages of displacement and lived through several false starts to their lives that often never got going. Millions of forced migrants around the globe nurture the very same dream that I dream—of returning to their home one day, when injustice, violence, and terror will give way to reason, sobriety, and fair play. For many the dream never materialized. Others returned from years of escape and exile only to find ashes where once their homes stood. Through those years in the field, I stood witness to the depths of human misery, impoverishment, and helplessness, but also to countless stories of resilience, triumph, and hope against all odds.

Back in the winter of 2014, during my visit to Aleppo in northern Syria as an aid worker, I visited a large shelter hosting children and families displaced by the ongoing conflict. The conversations turned inevitably to their worries about winter. Like young Ibrahim, who I met in a temporary shelter in western Aleppo, hundreds of thousands of conflict-affected children and families in Syria were bracing themselves for the descent into freezing winter temperatures. With more than 6.4 million people—including 3 million children—displaced from their homes at the time, many lived in temporary shelters that could provide scant protection from the cold and limited heating and availability of hot water for bathing.

Often these shelters were no more than open, unfinished buildings, without doors or windows, and sometimes lacking even external walls. Families made do with polythene sheets to cover holes and stave off icy winds. Up to eight people would be squeezed into one or two rooms. In the northern regions of Syria, temperatures regularly plummet to sub-zero levels, exposing children to the risk of respiratory infections and other communicable diseases. With health services in the country stretched to the limits, the risk for sick children of being left unattended during the long winter months was present and clear.

Approximately 4,000 families were living in the shelter I visited in western Aleppo and many were already beginning to experience the harsh realities of winter. With night temperatures having dropped appreciably across northern Syria, these families were ill-prepared to protect their children from falling sick—or worse. Most families, having migrated from the eastern side of the city, were in desperate economic straits and coping with the worst living conditions imaginable.

One family living in an incomplete building whose sides were open to the elements were dreading what lay ahead.

This winter is going to be unimaginable; said Monaf, a father of three children aged between 7 and 11. 'I shudder to think how my children will survive this winter:

Lina, who lives with her three children at the shelter I visited, had limited means to prepare for the winter ahead: 'Being prepared means winter clothes for my children, warm bedding, and heating in the house,' she said. 'This is how we used to prepare before the war forced us to leave our homes. As a single mother, and without work, I cannot afford to look after the needs of my children. I worry all the time if my children will survive this winter:

In Afghanistan, over a five-year horizon, I travelled across a dozen provinces and made connections with returnees making sense of their existence and contemplating the future of their children with a gnawing sense of concern and hopelessness as war raged on in the country. In the world's youngest nation, South Sudan, I saw how a people that fought for and won their freedom from the Muslim-majority Sudan found their dreams turned to dust as power-hungry satraps of the newly independent country stoked ethnic fires that resulted in an epic displacement of the newly free citizens who have now run away in droves to neighbouring Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia. A calamitous famine has made a tragic situation worse and a continuing civil war in the country borders on genocide.

In place after place, I became aware of how the triple whammy of a travesty of justice, severe exploitation, and terrorism of one kind or another leaves ordinary people with no option but to move. The familiar scenario of the sway of radicalized armed thugs, either from shadowy militant organizations or belonging to the state machinery, got repeated in different places. People got displaced, moved back, and then moved all over again. In the harshest of settings imaginable for survival, children and women survived—often by selling their bodies or through labour—in the absence of male members who were either consumed by conflict, passed from this world way before their time, or were enlisted in their countries' armies. Sustained threats of physical assault hastened the movement of people in most cases. Weak and failing states largely stood by without being able to make a material positive difference to the lives of their displaced and abandoned citizens and state subjects.

The stories birthed by conflicts and forcible displacement are too vast and too many to be packed into one book. As conflicts grow in numbers, force, and intensity, so does homelessness.

What you now hold in your hands or see on your screens is a book of stories by people done in by wars and protracted conflicts. Taken together, the stories should help us understand what it means and takes for a person to be on the run and live and still hope for elusive calm and peace when war comes to our land, increasingly without notice.

In speaking to me and my fellow contributors, a total of 25 exiles, refugees, and asylum seekers across more than 10 countries have opened up and shared a sliver of their lives. Each story is a microcosm of the gargantuan homelessness and displacement challenge of the country that the person represents.

As you soldier on through the pages of this book, it is my hope that the stories will leave you richer in understanding the experience of homelessness and stronger in your resolve to be a part of the solution.

Because, as the cliché goes, tomorrow might be too late. <>

**SONG OF SONGS: A POEM** by Sylvie Baumgartel [Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 9780374268039]

**A debut poetry collection from a writer whose vivid verse explores the connections and relationships that make us human**

Sometimes I like to feel sexy. Sometimes I don't. Sometimes I like to be very plain. Invisible almost, hiding in plain sight. I want to hide and to be found.

In the spirit of the biblical Song of Solomon, Sylvie Baumgartel's **SONG OF SONGS** takes the subjects of love and worship, and brings them to the desperate, wild spaces of domestic life. With a voice at once precise and oneiric, Baumgartel explores the landscapes of sex and desire, power and submission, in this groundbreaking book-length poem that forces us to question the bounds of devotion. An ambitious and vivid debut, **SONG OF SONGS: A POEM** is a work of breathtaking honesty, couched in language few of us are brave enough to speak aloud.

There are things we don't talk about. They come in two categories: the mundane and the explicit. That which will bore, that which will corrupt. Waiting for lotion to soak into your legs, the desire to give your entire body over to someone else. In her debut book of poetry, **SONG OF SONGS**, Sylvie Baumgartel strays from neither.

Drawing on the biblical Song of Solomon, Baumgartel brings the themes of love and devotion into a new space—one of desperation and domesticity, wildness and wonder. All seventy-three pages of Song of Songs take place in the speaker's home. We are in her head as she masturbates, as she hangs laundry to dry, as she eats chickpea salad. We're with her as she panics about her acute awareness of her own breathing, ponders whether she has multiple personality disorder ("Nope, I don't, just looked it up"), and asks how people only, just now, have discovered the reason for the holes in Swiss cheese.

More than anything, we're there for her devotion to a single "you." "For you," "because of you," "you." Everything the speaker does is for this unidentified person, her every action at the service of another. Over the course of Song of Songs, Baumgartel forces us to question the bounds of devotion. What is the meaning of a life lived not for oneself but for another? Can power be found in submission? Song of Songs is a book-length poem about sex, connection, and relationships—but not in the ways we usually speak aloud about them.

Excerpt: I walked in the door, took off my coat, took off my sunglasses, set them down with my keys, took off my shoes and socks, my jeans, my shirt, my bra and underwear, set them all on the chair by the door, walked into the house naked, went to the fridge, got my cucumber, went to the bathroom, lay on the floor by the warm heater, kissed the floor, said your name, said it again, looked up at you, slipped the cucumber inside and went all the way up deep, said your name, cucumber in and out all the way, all the way in, all the way out, my cunt lips sliding on the cucumber, you, you, you, then you were pissing on my face, which made me so excited I came came came. Then I was hungry. I ate naked in my kitchen. I looked at the clouds. I did some yoga. I took a shower. I combed my cunt hair. I roasted red peppers. I peeled and made cucumber salad with the cucumber since that was its last go of it. Was I curled at your feet while you watched the news?

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You're a prehistoric snake unhinging your jaws and gripping my flesh with your extra row of teeth before you swallow me whole. I'm coming as you swallow me down your throat down your body coming inside you.

I'm still coming, coming from your licking wolf tongue and your wolf howling. My knees are up by my ears so I can show my master my cunt. Here it is. I'm showing you. It's still coming for you. I'm your slave. All I can do is come for you. I am your abject slave.

I'm now a girl who walks into a room and looks around for all the objects that can fuck her.

The more I let go, the bigger you become. The bigger I become.

Now I'm in a group of people, and you're eating me. My heart is sliding down your throat. Love is my desire to please God.

Here are my shoes. Shoes worn out from crawling and kneeling and crouching and squatting and shoes worn from posing and crawling, bending, posing, kneeling, squatting for you,

waiting for you, waiting and praying up to you, squatting for you. They are shoes that are worn from worship. The worship I do, the worship I am, for you.

Nothing matters but being yours. Nothing can hurt me or separate me from you. I dressed up for you and made you lunch. I came for you on my kitchen floor, the apron string gagging my mouth. I am closing my open eyes for you.

I'm singing to you. It's foggy. I'm singing to you from the fog. This is my fog song.

My fingers exist to rub my cunt for you. My brain exists to think of ways to please you. My sweat exists to make my body all slippery wet for you. My nerves exist to shiver for you. To tremble from you. My cunt hair is to grow out for you. It's softer today, not the freshly mown lawn it was yesterday. Softer and longer for you. For you to grab and yank and pull. You can lead me around by my cunt hair.

You are calling me. I am called to be yours.

You are God in my heart and you are God in my cunt. I exist to serve and to worship you, the God in my heart and you, the God in my cunt. I feel how big you are. I feel your power. I feel your greatness. I feel your immortality...

\*\*\*

Master I'm desperate for you I'M DESPERATE FOR YOU TO FUCK MY ASSHOLE AND BE DEEP INSIDE ME SO DEEP INSIDE I CAN'T FEEL ANYTHING OR SEE ANYTHING OR SMELL ANYTHING OR HEAR ANYTHING OR KNOW ANYTHING ELSE BUT MY MASTER COMPLETELY TAKING ME OVER COMPLETELY AND ABSOLUTELY I'M DESPERATE FOR YOU TO PISS ON YOUR SLAVE'S TITS AND IN HER MOUTH FOR HER TO DRINK and then to gag her and blindfold her and do EVERYTHING to her and IN her and ON her and make her BEG for more because you are her life and her blood and her dreams and her wet and her shining light and her God and master and she lives ONLY to please you and she loves you more than anyone has

EVER loved anyone. You are her universe. You are my owner and I exist to please you. I was born to love you. My ass exists to be whipped red by you. My voice exists to beg you for more.

\*\*\*

I give you my life and my body and my servitude and my slavery and my love—all of my love—and all of me to you, in gratitude for being my God and my owner.

Right here where these poppies are now blooming for you, I came without hands for you for the second time. I was parked here, you were talking to me, and I was on all fours bridging across the front seats, my forehead pressed into the passenger door. I came gasping for you.

I was crawling for you across a big desert. I crawled up a giant pyramid. I sat on the very top with my legs spread so the point of the pyramid was in my cunt. I looked up at you. You shot lightning down my throat and I came with your lightning pulsing in my throat while I fucked the pyramid.

I laid an egg from your lightning in the desert sand. Out came a jungle and a rainbow...

I shat in the sand for you and covered it over for you.

I'm slowly kissing your mouth. Your lips, your tongue, top and bottom, the insides of your cheeks, your gums your teeth your tongue your throat deep deep down your throat. I'm kissing your ears. Sucking gently and slowly on your earlobe, then slowly licking up and around your ear. Slowly. I'm kissing your chest. Your asshole. My anaconda tongue is licking and going in and out of your asshole while I'm kneeling to you praying to you adoring you.

\*\*\*

I just came for you standing up, half bent over with a vibrator, wearing a housedress and high heels. I'm wearing lipstick for you. Do you like lipstick? If not, I'll wipe it off. I'm cooking you risotto Milanese for lunch. My floor has lipstick on it from kissing it and saying your name. And again on the doorjamb. With my dress off but heels still on. I licked the wall. And I cried. I came on your shoulder. I walked in the door and came for you again with my tongue out saying your name and grunting with my hips moving.

I came for you last night before bed, squatting in the kitchen in high heels and a towel, against the refrigerator. I said your name over and over and over in the dark. I came for you again in the middle of the night when you woke me up from dreaming you with your bright sunlight blasting up my cunt.

I'm wide-awake in a lightning storm. Thunderstorm. Rainstorm. Hailstorm. It's really bright and really loud. It sounds like the skylights will burst. I can feel the electricity in my hair.

I wasn't aware that Martha Stewart is designing pet collars these days. I just went to each of the two pet stores in town <>

**RAIN AND EMBERS** [by Ali Nuri \[Ali Nuri, 978057855546\] ali-nuri.com](#)

A poetic story of survival, **RAIN AND EMBERS** touches on far-reaching themes of redemption, forgiveness, and love.

When all the ashes wash away, beauty remains in the wreckage, waiting to bloom once more.

Nuri has an unpretentious poetic sense whose verse transmutes the pain and displacement of the immigrant into beauty and an invitation to the universal of the friend.

*this dance of you and I  
is the flickering of flames  
a fire raging in the dead of night*

*to be yours  
is to be entangled  
with the source of poetry*

*the letters shape themselves  
line after line they assemble  
from a fountain of ink*

*your love  
is a mother to words  
a parent to poetic purpose*

*but alas  
what is to remain  
of kindling if not ash?*

*be like a flower  
that gifts its fragrance  
to the hand that crushes it  
Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib*

## Cultural Chimera

I have two names  
speak two languages  
a refugee  
of two places  
struggling with being  
the wrong ethnicity  
twice over—  
in the eyes of my roots and where  
I am asked to bury them  
torn  
between east and west  
sun and moon  
an eclipse  
that doesn't get to witness  
the magic of its being  
resisting against the image  
of supposed impossibility,  
delaying its birth furthermore  
the unity of two  
without conflict  
an omen  
that even in darkness  
miracles are born



## Scorched Earth

I found your redemption  
 in the love you have for her  
 your daughter,  
 my sister  
 half my blood  
 but the whole of me  
 and yet I never forgot the red glow,  
 the way you made grey metal  
 burn bright with anger,  
 the way it seared my skin—  
 the incineration of my innocence  
 no, I never forgot the pain  
 felt in the short seven years  
 leading up to then—  
 still feel somehow  
 nearly three decades in  
 I'm sorry—  
 I want to try  
 and remember  
 only your smile  
 to keep only  
 your faith in me  
 and bear witness  
 to the father you are  
 in her eyes

Ali Nuri was born in Diwaniya, Iraq in 1987. In 1990, Saddam Hussein attacked the city in the middle of the night, forcing thousands of Shi'a to make a painful choice: flee the only home they've ever known or face unspeakable torture. Together the families crossed the desert and awaited the processing of their asylum claims within the confines of a refugee camp located in Saudi Arabia. Subject to unsanitary conditions, thousands of people were crowded into a small enclosure without any facilities to accommodate their basic needs, their dignity, and their humanity. After four years, the family's asylum request was granted and they moved to the U.S., residing in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Indiana. His family moved from city to city, both nationally and internationally. Being displaced at a young age had left him torn between two cultures that heavily conflicted with each other and feeling as though he didn't belong in his entirety to one or the other. During his teenage years, Ali started writing as a challenge to overcome his dyslexia and struggles with bilingualism, joining supportive online communities to connect with other writers and hone the voice he had spent his childhood silencing. He is now a poet, an author, and an artist. He holds a degree in urban planning and works in the technology industry in Las Vegas, Nevada. [ali-nuri.com](http://ali-nuri.com)

## **OBSERVING THE INVISIBLE: POEMS** by Kelly Cherry [LSU Press, 9780807170076]

Master Poet Kelly Cherry's Imaginative Latest Collection Contemplates the Unseen

In **OBSERVING THE INVISIBLE**, Kelly Cherry crafts poems that explore the ever-evolving realm of modern physics, confronting the invisibilities and mysteries of the material world. She leverages challenging ideas into a space of contemplative wonder as the book moves from external observation into an increasingly inward space of personal reflection and expression. Throughout, *Observing the Invisible* remains deliberate in its concentration on what cannot be, almost as if the

poems are being erased even as they are being written. Acknowledging that such contradictions cannot sustain themselves for long, Cherry seeks out such difficulties and ultimately finds resolutions.

Kelly Cherry is the author of over twenty-five books of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction, including *The Life and Death of Poetry* and *Quartet for J. Robert Oppenheimer*. She is Eudora Welty Professor Emerita of English and Evjue-Bascom Professor Emerita in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. She and her husband live in Virginia.

## Occam's Razor

Imagine a point of unimaginable density.  
 This is where we begin, without dimension,  
 timeless and solitary. What causes the point  
 to break into countless pieces? We might as well  
 ask what breaks the human heart: every  
 thing and no one thing.  
 The pieces coalesce  
 or sail through space, perhaps creating it  
 in their wake. Gases mutate into stars  
 and rocks crash headlong into one another,  
 becoming planets gravitationally mustered  
 into orbits around the boiling suns, solar  
 systems eloping with galaxies, perhaps  
 honeymooning along event horizons,  
 those seductive portals to black holes, points  
 of unimaginable density.  
 You've heard  
 of Occam's Razor. Well, one thinks it may  
 be smarter to believe the Christian myth  
 than tales of gravity so great that light  
 cannot escape and strings that twist and loop  
 into other universes, and time itself  
 an old-timey flipbook of static scenes.

## Cogitation

To think is to be, said Descartes,  
 but maybe not, maybe to be  
 is to think, or so it seems to me,  
 though Blaise Pascal's intentional heart  
 adds yet another dimension to  
 what was two-dimensional:  
 We live our lives in 3-D, all  
 we think and are, blind and askew.

## Conscience

Not everybody has one, but most do,  
 and those who have one have to live with it,  
 this constant partner who can be glum or resentful  
 or covered in shame and difficult to console.  
 Reconciliation with one's conscience requires apology and amendment.  
 It is the duty of one beset by bad conscience to repair the damage, rotten cad  
 that he is. And knows he is, because conscience

tells him so. If we could temper our dismay,  
 would conscience release us from its too-tight grasp?  
 Would conscience lose its frown? See the light of day?

<>

**THREE-TOED GULL: SELECTED POEMS** by Jesper Svenbro  
 translated from the Swedish by John Matthias and Lars-Hakan  
 Svensson [Hydra Books, Northwestern University Press,  
 9780810118959]

**A Critique of Pure Representation**

In order to restore to the words their semantic roughness  
 I told myself that there was no difference  
 between the stone I held in my hand and the word "stone"  
 clattering in language: I love the roughness of language  
 which marks its own presence and I claim passionately  
 that love of language in this sense  
 means resistance to pure repression.  
 Language is not a transcendental parameter, not god,  
 not a position from which the world "down there" can be gauged—  
 no, language exists within the world, opaque like a mountain,  
 and that is why I insist on the kinship of the stone  
 with the hard and obstinate word "stone." At some point  
 its presence must be acknowledged, its unevennesses be touched!  
 To each and every one the possibility of speaking on his own behalf  
 without being represented by somebody else  
 and to the words the possibility of representing themselves,  
 before their validity is extended to comprise the things  
 that together (and therefore together with the words)  
 constitute what we mean by the "world": deprived of its privilege,  
 language will attain weight. The stones are rumbling in the mountain.

Basically, the present selection of Svenbro's poetry is arranged in chrono-logical order, though we have also adopted a loose thematic pattern that in some cases results in the chronological order being disrupted slightly. Regrettably, neither Svenbro's very early work nor his most recent book is included, as they pose difficulties that the translators have not felt able to master. For similar reasons we have felt constrained to omit a number of poems from Svenbro's middle collections, either because they are too im-bued in Swedish conditions to make much sense in English translation or because they depend on puns or linguistic effects that are untranslatable.

Translating these poems has been a very unusual and rewarding experience. Having met Jesper Svenbro in 1955 (when we both entered the same class in Landskrona) and remained in close touch with him ever since, I have had the privilege first of experiencing in his company not a few of the events that triggered the poems in this book, then reading the poems in Swedish, often while they were still fresh from the mint, and finally reliving and reimagining them while translating them into English. This last enterprise would not have been possible had it not been for John Matthias, who suggested that we translate Svenbro's poems in the first place and later proved a selfless, resourceful, and indefatigable collaborator; I am convinced that he must by now stand very well with Stiernhielm's *Musae Suethizantes*. Although I have had the pleasure of visiting John a number of times in In-diana, most of the actual work has been done by e-mail. The hazards and joys of electronic translation are best conveyed by the following poem by John Matthias, which is included at Jesper Svenbro's suggestion:

## The Cotranslator's Dilemma

Again the e-mail draft appears on my screen.  
 I go back to work.  
 Tranströmer's successor speaks aloud from his poem.  
 Sort of, that is. I'm supposed to make such improvements  
 that everyone in America will recognize at a flash  
 the original style & voice, the very personality of this poet  
 known up to now only by his most intimate friends.  
 I despair. They are waiting in Lund for my version.  
 But it's already in English, so what should I do?  
 I change an article: "The cow in the pasture" would really  
 be better written here "A cow in the pasture."  
 I stare at the screen. Maybe a comma just before the conjunction.  
 At just that moment I hear a commotion in the hall.  
 I can hear several people questioning students:  
 Which is the charlatan's office? I recognize the Swedish accents.  
 Suddenly Jesper and Leif, Göran and Lars-Håkan  
 all tumble into my room. We're here to help you, they laugh.  
 Göran offers me a virtual beer.  
 The heart of your problem, Leif says in Swedish,  
 is that you don't know Swedish. What?  
 He says in English: the problem is that you don't know Swedish.  
 Oh, that. Well, I work from this other guy's drafts.  
 What do you do? He seems to have a whole list of questions.  
 I show him the screen: "A cow" was once "The cow," I say,  
 and commas, or their absence, are very important.  
 That's it? he asks. Nothing else?  
 Well, there's the issue of prepositions. I find that most  
 of my Swedish colleagues get confused:  
 A poet whose head is up in the clouds may appear with  
 his head up around the clouds, or up about the clouds,  
 or even up from or up off the clouds!  
 The four Swedes sputter with amusement or contempt.  
 So that's all? Articles, prepositions, and commas?  
 Well, sometimes, if I'm lucky.  
 And what if you're not? Not lucky, that is.  
 Ah, then—I hesitate—then I have to rewrite the poem.  
 You'd rewrite somebody's poem?  
 Not in Swedish, of course, I hasten to say. Just in English.  
 Ah well, they grumble, that's a relief.

I mean, what can you do with a poem set entirely in Lapland  
 that's full of yoiks and vuolles? And then he throws in  
 classical myths and quotes not only from Sappho but also Rimbaud.  
 American readers will never sort it all out.  
 American readers could learn to yoik for themselves, Jesper insists.  
 In the poem with a cow? I mean, I say,  
 in the poem that appeared on my screen containing the cow.  
 The one whose poet had his head up around the clouds.  
 Apollo and Hermes are also, I can see, there on the screen,  
 and what I am to do with words like Poikilóthronos and Boukólos?  
 Well, Lars-Håkan says, what will you do?  
 I'll change the setting entirely, move the lot of them to Texas!

But in Texas nobody yoiks, everybody protests.  
 There are plenty of cows, however, and cowboys like to yell & shout  
 while they ride all around saying things like "Yahoo!"  
 But a yoik is a Lapland poem, it's a chant, an incantation, a song!  
 In my Texas version the cowboys will sing quite a lot:  
 "Git along little dogie," and stuff like that.  
 That's the line in fact that I'll substitute for the quote from Rimbau  
 What about Hermes? What about Apollo?  
 I think I'll exchange them for John Wayne & Clint Eastwood.  
 Those are mythic types American readers relate to.  
 All the Swedes have now stopped grinning & laughing  
 And are starting to cry, tearing their hair.  
 In Greek plays lots of people cry and tear their hair.  
 That's another thing that gets into this poem, along with the  
 language itself: the Poikilóthronoses and Boukóloses.  
 Sounds like some bacteria infecting the meat of the burger.  
 Göran says, darting a knowing glance over at Jesper:  
 the author of this poem is an eminent Hellenist!  
 By God, I thought he was a Swede!  
 Anyway, if you've got to have your Greek go see Ezra Pound.  
 He's long dead, of course, which means  
 You might as well just go on working with me.  
 I've become a little tipsy by this point drinking the virtual beer  
 and suddenly drop the nearly empty virtual bottle onto the keyboard.  
 Yoiks! We're all at once transported off to Amazon.com.  
 The Amazon: now that's better than Texas!  
 The stern-wheeler is sailing upriver from Santarem.  
 Elizabeth Bishop is getting on board, clutching  
 an empty wasp's nest given to her by the druggist  
 in the town's little blue pharmacy. I follow her with my cow  
 which has somehow attracted a herd—  
 not of cattle exactly, but of sheep, goats, yaks,  
 chickens, llamas, cats, and yellow dogs.  
 What's going on? I'm not exactly sure, but I like it.  
 Jesper's shouting in English: Who do you think you are,  
 some kind of Hercules? That poem (that golden girdle!) is mine;  
 I, I, I, am Tranströmer's successor!  
 Not anymore, I exclaim, heading into-the current  
 on the riverboat called Poikilóthronos Juan.  
 Off in wintry Lund, all the systems start to crash.  
 Every screen flickers and goes blank. <>

### [The Gilded Auction Block: Poems by Shane McCrae \[Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 9780374162252\]](#)

"The velocity of [McCrae's] output is matched by a propulsive intensity. His poems hurtle down the page, in fragments and echoes and dislocations, communicating amazement or horror or hunger or vulnerability with brutal precision. His syntax doubles back on itself; words are fractured, lines interrupted." —Harvard Magazine

"National Book Award finalist McCrae confronts the current American president and does not shy away from naming names. McCrae invokes present indignities shared by disenfranchised peoples using noticeably large gaps between words that call attention to a broken system while also offering space for grievances to be heard. The poem 'Guns Will Be Guns' manipulates Trump's errant speech

patterns, ironically giving a victim's voice to a gun and warning those brave enough to speak out against its intentional violence: 'boy watch out the guns / Themselves will start / Killing.' McCrae's four-part collection includes a surreal dreamscape that turns into a nightmare. In this multisectioned long poem, a creature that is half bird and half man chastises humankind for ushering in hell while mimicking Trumpisms in italicized text. McCrae's poems are ghoulish and grim, yet they do inspire awe and a bit of hope that in these torrential times, the dark dreams of a poet might help stir up change in the body politic." —Booklist

Shane McCrae is the author of five previous books of poetry: *In the Language of My Captor*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and the William Carlos Williams Award; *The Animal Too Big to Kill*, winner of the 2014 Lexi Rudnitsky / Editor's Choice Award; *Forgiveness Forgiveness, Blood*; and *Mule*. He is the recipient of a Whiting Writers' Award and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. He teaches at Columbia University and lives in New York City.

### Black Joe Arpaio

America you wouldn't pardon me  
 Even if I was truly I was sorry  
 Even if I had worked so hard and truly  
 To keep the Mexicans on the other side  
 Of the river even if I had myself  
 Built turrets on a wall I built myself  
 Complete with searchlights and machine guns white  
 Men chewing toothpicks as they scanned the brown  
 Horizon either through binoculars  
 Or aviator sunglasses the on  
 ly sign of the expressions on their faces  
 Would be their teeth you wouldn't pardon me  
 Even if I had locked every freeway down  
 And every highway every street and road  
 And backroad every drive down with police check  
 points even if I had made sure each cop wore his  
 No women aviator sunglasses  
 And mustache as he swept his flashlight first  
 Across your backseat then across your feet  
 Then shone it in your eyes and asked for papers  
 Even if I had brought to life that dream  
 You at your bedside pray each night to have  
 A-merica you wouldn't pardon me I know  
 Whoever makes your dream suffers your dream  
 <>

SEPTEMBER 1, 1939: A Biography of a Poem by literary scholar Ian Sansom, is the story of one poet, his poem, New York City, and a world at the threshold of extraordinary change.

W. H. Auden is well embedded in the popular cultural awareness. Wunderkind, victim and/or beneficiary of a literary cult of personality, he became a scapegoat and a poet-expatriate largely excluded from British literary history when, in 1939, he chose to leave it behind for New York. While many of Auden's poems have indeed become iconic, his most famous and celebrated is

'September 1, 1939'; it is also one he attempted to rewrite, and later disown. Since first published, it has enjoyed—or been condemned to—a tragic and unexpected afterlife.

These are the contributing forces underlying Ian Sansom's excavation of the man and his most revered piece of literature. But Sansom's book is also about New York City, from which Auden wrote: an island, an emblem of the Future, magnificent, provisional, seamy—and in 1939, about to emerge as the defining twentieth-century cosmopolis, the capital of the world. Auden's poem speaks to a world at the point of singular change—1939 and our own Age of Anxiety, the aftermath of September 11, when many American newspapers reprinted it in its entirety on their editorial pages.

More than a work of literary criticism or literary biography, *SEPTEMBER 1, 1939* is a record of why and how we create and respond to great poetry—and a striking account of the ways in which a single work of art can illuminate human experience, move generation upon generation, and light the way to reckon with the changing world around us.

Excerpt:...But if England wasn't too sure about Auden, Auden wasn't at all sure he wanted to spend too much time in England delivering the one lecture per term required by the university statutes. 'The winter months', he wrote to Enid Starkie, the flamboyant, publicity-seeking, cigar-smoking Rimbaud scholar who had proposed him as a candidate, 'are those in which I earn enough dollars to allow me [...] to devote myself to the unprofitable occupation of writing poetry. I do not see any way in which I could earn the equivalent if I had to reside in England during that period.' Nonetheless, he allowed his nomination to go forward.

On Thursday, 9 February 1956, the result was announced.

Wilson Knight had attracted just 91 votes. Nicolson had secured 192. And Auden topped the poll with 216. He was therefore elected as professor, succeeding his old friend Cecil Day Lewis.

'You have chosen for your new Professor', Auden began his inaugural lecture - typically teasing and self-effacing - 'someone who has no more right to the learned garb he is wearing than he would have to a clerical collar.' Setting out the terms of his professorship, he went on:

Speaking for myself, the questions which interest me most when reading a poem are two. The first is technical: 'Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work?' The second is, in the broadest sense, moral: 'What kind of a guy inhabits this poem? What is his notion of the good life or the good place? His notion of the Evil One? What does he conceal from the reader? What does he conceal even from himself?'

This book does a very simple thing. It asks Auden's two obvious questions of his own poem 'September 1, 1939'. How does it work? And what kind of a guy inhabits this poem?

In a sense, the first question is easy to answer. 'September 1, 1939' consists of 99 lines, written in trimeters, divided into nine eleven-line stanzas with a shifting rhyme scheme, each stanza being composed of just one sentence, so that - as the poet Joseph Brodsky has usefully pointed out - the thought unit corresponds exactly to the stanzaic unit, which corresponds also to the syntactic and grammatical unit. Which is neat.

Too neat.

Because, of course, this is only the beginning of an understanding of how the poem works. It takes us only to the very edge of the poem, to the outskirts of its territory. In order properly to understand 'September 1, 1939', we would have to investigate why Auden chose this rigorous, cramped, bastard form - and not, for example, an elegant villanelle, or a sestina, or a double sestina, traditional and virtuoso forms at which he excelled. And why did he begin a poem with an 'I',

undoubtedly the most depressing and dreary little pronoun in the English language? And who is this 'I'? And why do they 'sit' in one of the dives - why aren't they standing? And how are they sitting? At a table? And where is this dive? And why is it a 'dive'? And what exactly were the 'clever hopes' of this 'low dishonest decade'? And why so many double adjectives? And so on and so on. This book will attempt to follow the route of some of these obvious but necessary questions, mapping the poem word by word, line by line and phrase by phrase.

And as for the 'guy' who inhabits this poem? What is his notion of the good life or the good place? What is his notion of the Evil One? What does he conceal from the reader? What does he conceal from himself?

These are also good questions.

'September 1, 1939' is an important poem, I believe, and worthy of scrutiny, because it provides us with a rare glimpse of a writer in the act of reinventing himself, at a culminating moment in world affairs. Like *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, like *Guernica* and *The Rite of Spring*, this poem is a snapshot of the artist in extremis, working at the farthest reaches of his capacities.

But 'September 1, 1939' is not only one of those rare coincidences in literature in which the force of history meets personal psychology and ideology, to produce something truly marvellous - it also represents a moment of crisis, where the great pressures at work both outside and inside the poem force certain flaws to become apparent. Not only that, it's a poem whose troubled history involves its own self-destruction and reinvention: it therefore represents the art object as living organism, something that grows and changes, that is understood, misunderstood, appropriated, abandoned, recycled and reused, again and again. Above all, it is a poem that still reverberates with meaning and controversy, a poem that readers return to at times of personal and national crisis: it turns out that the 'guy' who inhabits Auden's poem is us.

The aim of this book, then, is to demonstrate how a poem gets produced, consumed and incorporated into people's lives - how, in the words of another of Auden's great poems, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', the work of a poet becomes 'modified in the guts of the living', and not just modified, but colonised, metabolised, metastasised. It is a record of how and why we respond to great art.

Or, at least, it is a record of how and why I have responded to this particular example of great art, and of how the work of this particular poet has become modified in these particular guts - modified, metabolised and metastasised. There has been so much written about Auden by so many people - brilliant and insightful people - over so many years, that the best I can do is to try and explain the impact that reading and studying this poem has had on me. Not because there's anything particularly interesting about me - on the contrary - but because I might usefully represent the common reader, the sensual man-in-the-street, the entirely average individual with a rather unusual interest in a particular work of art.

In the end, I hope that this book amounts to more than a record of my own peculiar tastes and notions and gives expression to that common sense of awe and inadequacy that we might all experience in the presence of great art, for how can one possibly begin to cope with someone like Auden, who was clearly a genius, and with something like this, which is clearly a masterpiece? What can one possibly say, except ... 'Wow!'?

There are some things we will never know. Did Livia poison her husband, Emperor Augustus? Did Gandhi really travel on a train between Johannesburg and Durban reading Ruskin's *Unto This Last* in 1904 and resolve to change his life, simple as that? Are our thoughts distinct from physiological



processes? Is there life after death, and if so, will it be like Doris Stokes used to say it was, all hugs and hot tea and flannelette pyjamas? Why has a cow got four legs? Why bother?

But some things are for sure.

W. H. Auden was a great great poet.

In one of the Dream Songs, John Berryman writes of Robert Frost, 'For a while here we possessed / an unusual man.'

My wife asks, what does it feel like, to have finished? The only thing in my life that has lasted longer than my interest in Auden is my marriage. What does it feel like to have finished?

I say that it feels like I've escaped.

\*

(At the end of Irvine Welsh's novel *Trainspotting*, the Kierkegaard-quoting heroin-addict Mark Renton gives his mates the slip: 'Now, free from them all, for good, he could be what he wanted to be. He'd stand or fall alone.')

\*

Finally, I am escaping from the poem, and the poem is escaping from me. I have entertained it for twenty-five years, and it has entertained me. Now we are both free to go about our business.

Sometimes, in desperation over the years, I have imagined giving up, not just this work on Auden, but work on everything, giving up entirely. Writers who admit to this desire - Larkin, say ('Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs'), or Beckett ('sleep till death / healeth / come ease / this life disease'), E. M. Cioran - are regarded by some as self-despisers, yet this yearning for ultimate escape seems to be an instinct as common and as natural as the instinct for self-preservation, and may sometimes even lead us towards self-knowledge and self-respect.

It is a testament to Auden that in my despair over Auden, Auden continued to keep me company.

\*

The logic of escape demands that one escapes 'from' some place - or something or somebody - 'to' some other place, and in order to do so, one undertakes a journey in between.

So where was I before?

Where am I now?

And what was the journey in between?

\*

D'you know, I really can't say.

All I've done is finish the preparation.

Maybe now I can begin. <>

## No Body is an Apology

For Terry Lyn Hines (1959-2012)

My first and most enduring example  
of the power of radical love.

My Mother's Belly

The bread of her waist, a loaf

I would knead with eight-year-old palms  
 sweaty from play. My brother and I marveled  
 at the ridges and grooves. How they would summit at her navel.  
 How her belly looked like a walnut. How we were once seeds  
 that resided inside. We giggled, my brother and I,  
 when she would recline on the couch,  
 lift her shirt, let her belly spread like cake batter in a pan.  
 It was as much a treat as licking the sweet from electric mixers on birthdays.  
 The undulating of my mother's belly was not  
 a shame she hid from her children.  
 She knew we came from this. Her belly was a gift  
 we kept passing between us.  
 It was both hers, of her body,  
 and ours for having made it new,  
 different. Her belly was an altar of flesh  
 built in remembrance of us, by us.  
 What remains of my mother's belly  
 resides in a container of ashes I keep in a closet.  
 Every once and again, I open the box,  
 sift through the fine crystals with palms  
 that were once eight. Feel the grooves and ridges  
 that do not summit now but rill through fingers.  
 Granules so much more salt  
 than sweet today. And yet, still I marvel  
 at her once body. Even in this form say,  
 "I came from this."

Excerpt: Long before there was a digital media and education company or a radical self-love movement with hundreds of thousands of followers on our website and social media pages, before anyone cared to write about us in newsprint or interview me on television, before people began to send me photos of their bodies with my words etched in ink on their backs, forearms, and shoulders (which never stops being awesome and weird), there was a word ... well, words. Those words were "your body is not an apology." It was the summer of 2010, in a hotel room in Knoxville, Tennessee. My team and I were preparing for evening bouts in competition at the Southern Fried Poetry Slam. Slam is competitive performance poetry. Teams and individuals get three minutes onstage to share what is often deeply intimate, personal, and political poetry, at which point five randomly selected judges from the audience score their poems on a scale from 0.0 to 10.0. It's a raucous game that takes the high art of poetry and brings it to the masses in bars, clubs, coffee shops, and National Poetry Slam Championship Tournaments around the country. Poetry slam is as ridiculous as it is beautiful; it is everything gauche and glorious about the power of the word. The slam is a place where the misfit and the marginalized (and the self-absorbed) have center stage and the rapt ears of an audience, if only for three minutes.

It was on a hotel bed in this city, preparing for this odd game, that I uttered the words "your body is not an apology" for the first time. My team was a kaleidoscope of bodies and identities. We were a microcosm of a world I would like to live in. We were Black, White, Southeast Asian. We are able bodied and disabled. We were gay, straight, bi, and queer. What we brought to Knoxville that year were the stories of living in our bodies in all their complex tapestries. We were complicated and honest with each other, and this is how I wound up in a conversation with my teammate Natasha, an early-thirty-something living with cerebral palsy and fearful she might be pregnant. Natasha told me how her potential pregnancy was most assuredly by a guy who was just an occasional fling. All of life

was up in the air for Natasha, but she was abundantly clear that she had no desire to have a baby and not by this person. One of my many career iterations of the past was as a sexual-health and public-health service provider. This background made me notorious for asking people about their safer-sex practices, handing out condoms, and offering sexual-health harm-reduction strategies. Instinctually, I asked Natasha why she had chosen not to use a condom with this casual sexual partner with whom she had no interest in procreating. Neither Natasha nor I knew that my honest question and her honest answer would be the catalyst for a movement. Natasha told me her truth: "My disability makes sex hard already, with positioning and stuff. I just didn't feel like it was okay to make a big deal about using condoms."

When we hear someone's truth and it strikes some deep part of our humanity, our own hidden shames, it can be easy to recoil into silence. We struggle to hold the truths of others because we have so rarely had the experience of having our own truths held. Social researcher and expert on vulnerability and shame Brené Brown says, "If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive." I understood the truth Natasha was sharing. Her words pricked some painful underbelly of knowing in my own body. My entire being rang in resonance. I was transported to all the times I had given away my own body in penance. A reel of memories scrolled through my mind of all the ways I told the world I was sorry for having this wrong, bad body. It was from this deep cave of mutual vulnerability that the words spilled from me, "Natasha, your body is not an apology. It is not something you give to someone to say, 'Sorry for my disability.'" She began to weep, and for a few minutes I just held my maybe-pregnant friend as she contemplated the fullness of what those words meant for her life and her body. There are times when our unflinching honesty, vulnerability, and empathy will create a transformative portal, an opening to a completely new way of living. Such a portal was created between Natasha and me that summer evening in Tennessee, because as the words escaped my lips some part of them remained stuck inside me. The words I said to Natasha in that hotel room were as much for me as they were for her. I was also telling myself, "Sonya, your body is not an apology."

At every turn, for days after my conversation with Natasha, the words returned to me like some sort of cosmic boomerang. They kept echoing off the walls of all my hidden hurts. Every time I uttered a disparaging word about my dimpled thighs I'd hear, "Your body is not an apology, Sonya." Each time I marked some erroneous statement with "My bad. I'm so stupid," my own inner voice would retort, "Your body is not an apology." Whenever my critical eye focused laser-like on some perceived imperfection of my own or some other human's being, the words would arrive like a well-trained butler to remind me, "Hey, the body is not an apology." My poet self knew that the words were demanding to be more than a passing conversation with a friend. They wanted more than my own self-flagellation. The words always had their own plans. Me, I was just a vessel.

I recently listened to famed author and spiritual teacher Marianne Williamson share a talk on relationships. In it, she described the principle of natural intelligence. She posited, 'An acorn does not have to say, 'I intend to become an oak tree: Natural intelligence intends that every living thing become the highest form of itself and designs us accordingly.'" In a single sentence, all in me that felt nameless was named. We have a dictionary full of terms describing our interpretation of natural intelligence. We sometimes call it purpose; other times, destiny. Although I agree with the spirit of those terms, I believe they fail to encapsulate the fullness of what Marianne Williamson's acorn example illustrates. Both purpose and destiny allude to a place we might, with enough effort, someday arrive. We belabor ourselves with all the things we must do to fulfill our purpose or live out our destiny. Contrary to purpose, natural intelligence does not require we do anything to achieve it. Natural intelligence imbues us with all we need at this exact moment to manifest the highest form of ourselves, and we don't have to figure out how to get it. We arrived on this planet with this source material already present. I am by no means implying that the work you may have

done up to this point has been useless. To the contrary, I applaud whatever labor you have undertaken that has gotten you this far. Survival is damn hard. Each of us has traversed a gauntlet of traumas, shames, and fears to be where we are today, wherever that is. Each day we wake to a planet full of social, political, and economic obstructions that siphon our energy and diminish our sense of self. Consequently, tapping into this natural intelligence often feels nearly impossible. Humans unfortunately make being human exceptionally hard for each other, but I assure you, the work we have done or will do is not about acquiring some way of being that we currently lack. The work is to crumble the barriers of injustice and shame leveled against us so that we might access what we have always been, because we will, if unobstructed, inevitably grow into the purpose for which we were created: our own unique version of that oak tree.

I have my own name for natural intelligence. I call it radical self-love. Radical self-love was the force that cannoned the words "your body is not an apology" out of my mouth, directed toward a friend but ultimately barreling into my own chest and then into the hearts of hundreds of thousands of people around the world. Evangelizing radical self-love as the transformative foundation of how we make peace with our bodies, make peace with the bodies of others, and ultimately change the world is my highest calling. Coincidence after seeming coincidence has made that much evident. I don't know what your highest calling is. It's possible you don't quite know either. That is perfect. At this very second, a trembling acorn is plummeting from a branch, clueless as to why. It doesn't need to know why to fulfill its calling; it just needs us to get out of its way. Radical self-love is an engine inside you driving you to make your calling manifest. It is the exhaustion you feel every time the whispers of self-loathing, body shame, and doubt skulk through your brain. It is the contrary impulse that made you open this book, an action driven by a force so much larger than the voice of doubt and yet sometimes so much more difficult to hear.

Radical self-love is not a destination you are trying to get to; it is who you already are, and it is already working tirelessly to guide your life. The question is how can you listen to it more distinctly, more often? Even over the blaring of constant body shame? How can you allow it to change your relationship with your body and your world? And how can that change ripple throughout the entire planet? At the organization I founded, The Body Is Not an Apology, we are not saying anything new (see [www.TheBodyIsNotAnApology.com](http://www.TheBodyIsNotAnApology.com)). We are, however, connecting some straggling dots we believe others may have missed along the way. We know that the answer has always been love. The question is how do we stop forgetting the answer so we can get on with living our highest, most radically unapologetic lives. This book is my most sincere effort to help us all answer that.

### What Radical Self-Love Is and What It Ain't

Let me answer a couple of questions right away before you dig too deeply into this book and are left feeling bamboozled and hoodwinked. First, "Will this book fix my self-esteem, Sonya?" Nope. Second, "Will this book teach me how to have self-confidence?" Nah. Impromptu third question, "Well then why in Hades am I reading this book?" You are reading this book because your heart is calling you toward something exponentially more magnanimous and more succulent than self-esteem or self-confidence. You are being called toward radical self-love. While not completely unrelated to self-esteem or self-confidence, radical self-love is its own entity, a lush and verdant island offering safe harbor for self-esteem and self-confidence. Unfortunately, those two ships often choose to wander aimlessly adrift at sea, relying on willpower or ego to drive them, and in the absence of those motors are left hopelessly pursuing the fraught mirage of someday. As in, "Someday I will feel good enough about myself to shop that screenplay I wrote." Or, "Someday, when I have self-confidence, I will get out of this raggedy relationship." Self-esteem and self-confidence are fleeting, and both can exist without radical self-love, but it almost never bodes well for anyone involved when they do. Think of all the obnoxious people you know oozing arrogance, folks we can be certain think extremely highly of themselves. Although you may call them ... ahem ... confident (at least that

may be one of the things you call them), I bet the phrase radical self-love doesn't quite fit. Pick your favorite totalitarian dictator and you will likely find someone who has done just fine in the self-confidence category. After all, you would have to think you're the bee's knees to entertain the idea of single-handedly dominating the entire planet. The forty-fifth U.S. president strikes me as a man with epic self-confidence. "The Donald" is not struggling with his sense of self (even if the rest of the world is struggling with its sense of who he is). Even if we were to surmise that Trump and others like him are acting from an exaggerated lack of self-esteem or confidence, I think we can agree not much of their attitudes or actions feel like love.

You may be asking, "Okay, well if this book won't help me with my self-esteem or self-confidence, will it at least teach me self-acceptance?" My short answer is, if I do my job correctly, no! Not because self-acceptance isn't useful but because I believe there is a port far beyond the isle of self-acceptance and I want us to go there. Think back to all the times you "accepted" something and found it completely uninspiring. When I was a kid, my mother would make my brother and me frozen pot pies for dinner. It was the meal for the days she didn't feel like cooking. I enjoyed the flaky pastry crust. The chunks of mechanically pressed chicken in a Band-Aid-colored beige gravy were tolerable. But there was nothing less appetizing than the abhorrent vegetable medley of peas, green beans, and carrots portioned throughout each bite like miserable stars in an endless galaxy. Yes, I ate those hateful mixed vegetables. Hunger will make you accept things. I accepted that my options were limited: pick out a million tiny peas or get a job at the ripe age of ten and figure out how to feed myself. Why am I talking about pot pies? Because self-acceptance is the mixed-veggie pot pie of radical self-love. It will keep you alive when the options are sparse, but what if there is a life beyond frozen pot pies?

Too often, self-acceptance is used as a synonym for acquiescence. We accept the things we cannot change. We accept death because we have no say over its arbitrary and indifferent arrival at our door. We have personal histories of bland acceptance. We have accepted lackluster jobs because we were broke. We have accepted lousy partners because their lousy presence was better than the hollow aloneness of their absence. We practice self-acceptance when we have grown tired of self-hatred but can't conceive of anything beyond a paltry tolerance of ourselves. What a thin coat to wear on this weather-tossed road. Famed activist and professor Angela Davis said, "I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept." We can change the circumstances that have had us settle for self-acceptance. I assure you there is a richer, thicker, cozier blanket to carry through the world. There is a realm infinitely more mind-blowing. It's called radical self-love.

### Why the Body?

Humans are a varied and divergent bunch, with all manner of beliefs, morals, values, and ideas. We have struggled to find agreement on much of anything over the centuries (just think about how long we argued about gravity and whether the world is shaped like a pizza), but here is a completely noncontroversial statement I think we have consensus around: You, my dear, have a body. And should you desire to remain on this spinning rock hurtling through space, you will need a body to do it. Everything else we think we know is up for debate. Are we spiritual beings? Depends on who you ask. Do humans have souls? Been fighting about that since Aristotle likened the souls of fetuses to those of vegetables.<sup>1</sup> But bodies—yup, we got those. And given this widely agreed-upon reality, it seems to me if ever there were a place where the practice of radical love could be a transformative force, the body ought to be that location.

When we speak of the ills of the world—violence, poverty, injustice—we are not speaking conceptually; we are talking about things that happen to bodies. When we say millions around the world are impacted by the global epidemic of famine, what we are saying is that millions of humans

are experiencing the physical deterioration of muscle and other tissue due to lack of nutrients in their bodies. Injustice is an opaque word until we are willing to discuss its material reality as, for example, the three years sixteen-year-old Kalief Browder spent beaten and locked in solitary confinement in Riker's Island prison without ever being charged with a single crime. His suicide and his mother's heart attack two years later are not abstractions; they are the outcomes injustice enacted on two bodies. Racism, sexism, ableism, homo- and transphobia, ageism, fatphobia are algorithms created by humans' struggle to make peace with the body. A radical self-love world is a world free from the systems of oppression that make it difficult and sometimes deadly to live in our bodies.

A radical self-love world is a world that works for every body. Creating such a world is an inside-out job. How we value and honor our own bodies impacts how we value and honor the bodies of others. Our own radical self-love reconnection is the blueprint for what author Charles Eisenstein calls *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible*.<sup>1</sup> It is through our own transformed relationship with our bodies that we become champions for other bodies on our planet. As we awaken to our indoctrinated body shame, we feel inspired to awaken others and to interrupt the systems that perpetuate body shame and oppression against all bodies. There is a whisper we keep hearing; it is saying we must build in us what we want to see built in the world. When we act from this truth on a global scale, using the lens of the body, we usher in the transformative opportunity of radical self-love, which is the opportunity for a more just, equitable, and compassionate world for us all.

Moving from body shame to radical self-love is a road of inquiry and insight. We will need to ask ourselves tough questions from a place of grace and grounding. Together we will examine what we have come to believe about ourselves, our bodies, and the world we live in. At times, the road may appear dark and ominous, but fret not, my friend! I have provided some lampposts along the way. They come in the form of Unapologetic Inquiries, questions you will ask yourself as you endeavor to comb the recesses of your body shame and dismantle its parts. Radical Reflections will highlight central themes and concepts you will want to remember as we take this journey together. This is not a math test and you cannot fail. Be patient with yourself, take your time. As my best friend Maureen Benson says, "You are not latex's

### Why Must It Be Radical?

"Okay, Sonya. I get it. Loving ourselves is important. But why do we have to be all radical about it?" To answer this question is to further distinguish radical self-love from its fickle cousins, self-confidence and self-esteem, or its scrappy kid sister, self-acceptance. It requires that we explore the definition of the word radical. Language is fluid and evolutionary, regularly leaving dictionary definitions feeling dated and sorely lacking in nuance. How we construct language is an enormous part of how we understand and judge bodies. The definition of radical is a powerful one as we explore its relationship to self-love. Dictionary.com defines radical as:

- I. of or going to the root or origin; fundamental: a radical difference.
- thoroughgoing or extreme, especially as regards change from accepted or traditional forms: a radical change in the policy of a company.
- favoring drastic political, economic, or social reforms: radical ideas; radical and anarchistic ideologues.
- forming a basis or foundation.
- S. existing inherently in a thing or person: radical defects of character.

Radical self-love is deeper, wider, and more expansive than anything we would call self-confidence or self-esteem. It is juicier than self-acceptance. Including the word radical offers us a self-love that is the root or origin of our relationship to ourselves. We did not start life in a negative partnership with

our bodies. I have never seen a toddler lament the size of their thighs, the squishiness of their bellies. Children do not arrive here ashamed of their race, gender, age, or disabilities. Babies love their bodies! Each discovery they encounter is freaking awesome. Have you ever seen an infant realize they have feet? Talk about wonder! That is what an unobstructed relationship with our bodies looks like. You were an infant once, which means there was a time when you thought your body was freaking awesome too. Connecting to that memory may feel as distant as the furthest star. It may not be a memory you can access at all, but just knowing that there was a point in your history when you once loved your body can be a reminder that body shame is a fantastically crappy inheritance. We didn't give it to ourselves, and we are not obligated to keep it. We arrived on this planet as LOVE.

We need not do anything other than turn on a television for evidence affirming how desperately our society, our world, needs an extreme form of self-love to counter the constant barrage of shame, discrimination, and body-based oppression enacted against us daily. Television shows like *The Biggest Loser* encourage dangerous and unsustainable exercise and food restriction from their contestants while using their bodies as fodder for our entertainment and reinforcing the notion that the most undesirable body one can have is a fat body. Researchers have shown that American news outlets regularly exaggerate crime rates, including a tendency to inflate the rates of Black offenses while depicting Black suspects in a less favorable light than their White counterparts. People with disabilities are virtually nonexistent on television unless they are being trotted out as "inspiration porn." Their stories are often told in ways that exploit their disabilities for the emotional edification of able-bodied people, presenting them as superhuman for doing unspectacular things like reading or going to the store or, worse yet, for overcoming obstacles placed on them by the very society that fails to acknowledge or appropriately accommodate their bodies. Of course we need something radical to challenge these messages.

Using the term radical elevates the reality that our society requires a drastic political, economic, and social reformation in the ways in which we deal with bodies and body difference. The U.S. Constitution was written to sanction governmental body oppression. When the Bill of Rights was signed, relatively few Americans had voting rights. Among those excluded from suffrage were African Americans, Native Americans, women, White men with disabilities, and White males who did not own land. Voting rights for women... nope. Blacks ... nope; they were only counted as three-fifths of a full person. Using a wheelchair? No voting for you, dear. Race, gender, and disability prejudice were written into the governing documents of the United States. Consider that the right to marry the person you love regardless of your gender was only legally sanctioned in the United States in 2015.<sup>11</sup> In certain other nations (e.g., Australia), it is still illegal. Marriage equality for same-sex couples is in its historical infancy in the United States and nonexistent for most of the world. Transgender people are currently fighting across the United States to retain the legal right to use the bathroom that matches their gender identity. People with disabilities have higher rates of unemployment regardless of educational attainment.

These political, economic, and social issues are about our bodies. They intersect with our race, age, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and a multitude of other ways our bodies exist. In 1989 Columbia law professor and scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw gave a name to this long-understood dynamic. She called it intersectionality and defined it as:

... the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination. The theory suggests that—and seeks to examine how—various biological, social, and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, religion, caste, age, and other axes of identity interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels. The theory proposes that we should think of each element or trait of a

person as inextricably linked with all of the other elements in order to fully understand one's identity.

Intersectionality has become a term often revered or repudiated depending on the source. Put plainly, none of us are monodimensional. We are not only men, fathers, people with living with lupus, Asian, or seniors. Some of us are aging Asian fathers who are living with lupus. Those varying identities impact each other in ways that are significantly different than if we were navigating them one at a time. Radical self-love demands that we see ourselves and others in the fullness of our complexities and intersections and that we work to create space for those intersections. As has been true throughout history, changing the systemic and structural oppressions that regard us in perfunctory and myopic ways requires sweeping changes in our laws, policies, and social norms. Creating a world of justice for all bodies demands that we be radical and intersectional.

### Unapologetic Inquiry #1

We all live at multiple intersections of identity. What are your intersections? How do your multiple identities affect each other?

Radical self-love is interdependent. The radical self-love espoused in this book lives beyond the flimsy ethos of individualism and operates at both the individual and systemic levels. Radical self-love is about the self because the self is part of the whole. And therefore, radical self-love is the foundation of radical human love. Our relationships with our own bodies inform our relationships with others. Consider all the times you have assessed your value or lack thereof by comparing yourself to someone else. When we are saddled with body shame, we see other bodies as things to covet or judge. Body shame makes us view bodies in narrow terms like "good" or "bad," or "better" or "worse" than our own. Radical self-love invites us to love our bodies in a way that transforms how we understand and accept the bodies of others. This is not to say that we magically like everyone. It simply means we have debates and disagreements about ideas and character, not about bodies. When we can see the obvious truth inherent in body activist Hanne Blank's quote, "There is no wrong way to have a body," we learn to love bodies even when we don't like the humans inhabiting them.

### Unapologetic Inquiry #2

Can you recall an occasion when you compared yourself to someone? How did the comparison impact your self-esteem and self-confidence? How did it impact your ideas about the other person?

Radical self-love is indeed our inherent natural state, but social, political, and economic systems of oppression have distanced us from that knowing. Remember that toddler I mentioned a few paragraphs ago who delighted in their wondrous body—a.k.a. you as a kid? I know radical self-love can seem like a planet outside any galaxy you've heard of. I want to assure you: Radical self-love is not light years away. It is not away at all. It lives in you. It is your very essence. You do not have to become radical self-love. You don't have to try to travel to it as though it were some far-off destination. Think of body shame like the layers of an onion. For decades in our own lives and for centuries in civilization, we have been taught to judge and shame our bodies and to consequently judge and shame others. Getting to our inherent state of radical self-love means peeling away those ancient, toxic messages about bodies. It is like returning the world's ugliest shame sweater back to the store where it was purchased and coming out wearing nothing but a birthday suit of radical self-love. By refusing to accept body shame as some natural consequence of being in a body, we can stop apologizing for our bodies and erase the distance between ourselves and radical self-love. When we do that we are instantly returned to the radically self-loving stars we always were. Talk about a transformative power! <>



### Sexually Bewitched

This is intended for the doubtful reader who might think that **THE SEX THIEVES** sounds too much like the title of a semipornographic zombie movie of the type formerly known as grade Z. The others, whether because they are already familiar with the work of Julien Bonhomme, or because they have perused the book, do not need to read the following lines for they already know, or at least suspect, that it is a little gem. Bonhomme is a very serious anthropologist indeed. A noted specialist of Central African religions and rituals, he devoted his first book, **LE MIROIR ET LE CRÂNE**, to the initiation cycle of the Bwete Misoko, a Gabonese cult where the initiates absorb large quantities of the psychedelic iboga plant to induce visions. Oops, now it's sex and drugs! But no, it was not the LSD-like effect of iboga which interested Bonhomme, and he hardly dwells on its usage. The central theme of this first book is how the Bwete Misoko initiation cycle manages to alleviate the plight of someone thought to be bewitched, not so much because the ritual operates directly as a therapy, rather because it reconfigures the experience of the suffering subject by allowing him or her to escape from the face-to-face confrontation with the suspected sorcerer. The ritual does so by granting a new identity to the initiate, a complex identity which is at the same time purely relational—it establishes a new social position vis-à-vis the participants to the ritual and the members of the cult—and entirely reflexive—a specular relation to oneself, aptly mediated by a mirror.

Common explanations can be easily dismissed, such as: that this kind of silly story works because the African masses are gullible, illiterate, and superstitious (to the contrary, many of those involved are sophisticated and well-educated city dwellers); that it is a political conspiracy intended to spread unrest (how could it work on such a huge scale?); or that it is a typical symptom of the anxiety of, take your pick, (a) lower middle-class urban professionals impoverished by the reckless neoliberal policies of the IMF, (b) recently arrived migrants from rural villages who are maladapted to large cities, or (c) illegal workers from neighboring countries looking for a better life. There is no doubt that all these people form a good chunk of the population of African cities and that they live in disquieting conditions, but why would their anxiety adopt the specific form of penis snatching?

The explanation which Bonhomme proposes is at the same time simpler and more subtle. Intent on applying to a concrete case the premises of the epidemiology of representations developed rather abstractly by Dan Sperber, and convinced that the saliency of an idea is provided by its contrastive opposition to other ideas, Bonhomme examines both the conditions that appear to favor the spreading of the epidemics—the pragmatics of the rumor—and the reasons why the rumor has taken hold of so many people so easily—the propitious milieu in which it may prosper. He thus shows convincingly that sex theft is a sort of transposition of rural witchcraft to urban settings in that it follows the same patterns of interactional pathology—what he calls, in Goffmanian terms, a "dysphoric interaction"—while the content of the rumor and the conditions of its actualization invert systematically the premises of traditional witchcraft: extrafamily versus intrafamily; urban versus rural; public versus domestic; diurnal versus nocturnal; kinship relations versus anonymous relations; long and close interaction versus short interaction; action at a distance versus direct physical contact, etc. In that sense, sex theft reconfigures African witchcraft in the context of globalization; it is simultaneously a new phenomenon, expanding within the circumstances afforded by new urban modes of life, and a very old phenomenon, the pattern of which can be easily identified in its inverted form by all concerned.

By moving from Bwete to sex, Bonhomme illuminates the fact that the alternative in anthropology is not between, on the one hand, essentialist descriptions of traditional cultural features basking in their timeless simplicity and, on the other hand, a necessary submission to the hot, quick pace of the contemporary world, dissolving in its wake the exotic clichés of the past. For globalized rumors such as the one studied in *The sex thieves* do not stem from the vagaries of local circumstances and the

gullibility of those who are said to believe in them. There is no belief involved here, in the sense of an external coherent creed to which people would—or would not—adhere, but rather there is a series of failed interactions, half-formed fears, and misinterpreted rules of public etiquette rooted in the deeper metamorphosis of behavior which city life brings about. The mechanism of the rumor as Bonhomme unveils it, even the physical experience of losing one's genitalia which many vividly describe, is not particularly African. But the content of the rumor, the reasons for its success, the circumstances of its diffusion, and the nature of the persons deemed responsible for sex theft are all rooted in social and cultural patterns deeply embedded in the countries of subSaharan Africa where the rumor took hold. Anthropology is at its best when it manages, as is the case here, to combine general explanations entrenched in a deep understanding of the ecology of practice and of the mind with the insider knowledge of the cultural particulars which endow each phenomenon with the truthful taste of its ethnographic uniqueness. <>

### All Crime All the Time

Until a few years ago, Oxygen was a cable TV channel that targeted a young, female demographic with forgettable high-drama shows with names like Last Squad Standing and Bad Girls Club. According to network executives, the millennial women they were hoping to capture craved "freshness" and "authenticity," "high emotional stakes and optimism." It didn't take long for the executives to figure out that what young women actually wanted was more shows about murder. When the struggling network began airing a dedicated true crime block in 2015, viewership increased by 42 percent. In 2017, the network rebranded and adopted revised programming priorities: all crime, all the time.

Viewership skyrocketed; Oxygen had tapped into something big. For the past few years, as the US murder rate has approached historic lows, stories about murder have become culturally ascendant. The crime minded among us were inundated with content, whether our tastes tended toward high-end HBO documentaries interrogating the justice system or something more like Investigation Discovery's Swamp Murders. (Or, as was often the case, both. True crime tends to scramble traditional high/low categorizations.) Shops popped up on Etsy selling enamel pins of Ted Bundy's Volkswagen Beetle and iPhone cases depicting Jeffrey Dahmer's face. There were approximately a million new podcasts, and they all had something to investigate.

In 2018, Oxygen hosted its second annual fan convention—CrimeCon—in Nashville's Marriott Opryland hotel. The Opryland,

as I was proudly told at check-in, was the second-biggest noncasino hotel in the world. You know that American tendency to equate bigness with luxury and plenitude with worth? The Opryland was that, in hotel form. There was lush indoor landscaping and fountains that erupted in elaborately choreographed spurts and infinite snack options you could charge to your room. You could eat a dinner at a steakhouse housed inside a replica of an antebellum mansion. For \$10, you could ride a boat down the quarter-mile-long river that flowed through one of the hotel's atriums; the water, I was told, included a drop from every river in the world.

The week before CrimeCon, the Opryland had welcomed a group of cement salespeople, and the week after it would host a convention of international-supply-chain managers, but for these three days in May, it was full of young women wearing T-shirts that said things like BASICALLY A DETECTIVE and DNA OR IT DIDN'T HAPPEN and I'M JUST HERE TO ESTABLISH AN ALIBI.

On day one of CrimeCon, I found a seat in the ballroom among a couple of thousand women and a smattering of men. The sound system blasted cheery pop music as the screens flanking the stage scrolled through a slideshow of crime-related images—mug shots and yellow police tape and close-

ups of alarming, contextless headlines: "Man Accused of Stabbing Mother," "Deadly Stabbing Suspect Arrested," "Four People Shot."

Oxygen shows feature a stable of authoritative crime experts, mostly men with handsome-haggard faces and law enforcement experience.

They're real people, but they always seem half in character, as if they were playing a beloved but slightly remote and overprotective father on a network drama. There seemed to be at least one of them on every true crime show, these inexplicably sexy cop-dads. One of them, former FBI profiler Jim Clemente, wearing a cowboy hat, strolled out onto the stage to a round of huge cheers. CrimeCon had officially begun.

"Crimes are driven by the why, the motive," Clemente said. "We need that why to solve most crimes. Because the how and the why gives you the who. We also use motives in daily life. Why eat a sandwich? Because you're hungry. But with crime, sometimes the motives are hidden. Why did she run away? Was it to escape coercive control? Why did he kill her? Was it jealousy? Or was it something more insidious?"

"And why are you here? Do you love the genre? Do you want to solve a cold case?" Clemente's voice slowed and deepened; he was transitioning into serious mode. "Or you know or knew someone who got murdered? Or you yourself were a victim of a crime? I have a theory. You want to learn so you can protect those you love. It's a very altruistic goal." His voice changed again—I had a feeling these tonal shifts would get exhausting over the long weekend. "Have fun," he bellowed. "And remember: hashtag CrimeCon on your posts!"

I should have felt at home at CrimeCon. For most of my postadolescent life, I've periodically sunk into what I've come to think of as a crime funk. I was the kind of gloomy child who filched her mother's People magazines to read not about the celebrities, but about the killers and kidnapers and suspicious overdoses. As I got older, my appetite for murder stories seemed to depend on how much turbulence was in my own life. The more sad or lost or angry I felt, the more I craved crime. I was a teenager storming with hormones when I pulled Helter Skelter off my parents' shelf and gave myself Manson Family nightmares, and a little older and a lot more depressed when I set out to read every single Manson Girl memoir. When I learned that the Columbine killers' journals were online, I read those, too.

In my crime funks, the perspectives I identified with shifted depending on what else was going on in my life. Sometimes I saw myself in the detective, the only one smart enough to put the pieces together; sometimes in the innocent victim, at the mercy of sinister forces much bigger than me; sometimes in the crusading defender, righting the wrongs of a flawed and corrupt system; sometimes, even, I saw myself in the killer.

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That the true crime obsessives packing the hallways at CrimeCon were almost all women was, on its surface, perplexing. The vast majority of violent crimes are committed by men. Most murder victims are also male. Homicide detectives and criminal investigators: predominantly male. Attorneys in criminal cases are mostly men. Put simply, the world of violent crime is masculine, at least statistically.

But the consumers of crime stories are decidedly female. Women make up the majority of the readers of true crime books and the listeners of true crime podcasts. Television executives and writers, forensic scientists and activists and exonerees all agree: true crime is a genre that overwhelmingly appeals to women.

Women aren't just passively consuming these stories; they're also participating in them. Start reading through one of the many online sleuthing forums where amateurs speculate about unsolved crimes—and sometimes solve them—and you'll find that most of the posters are women. More than seven in ten students of forensic science, one of the fastest-growing college majors, are women. A few years ago, two undergraduates at the University of Pittsburgh founded a Cold Case Club so they could spend their extracurricular hours investigating murders; the group is, unsurprisingly, dominated by women.

Sometimes women's attraction to true crime is dismissed as trashy and voyeuristic (because women are vapid!). Sometimes it is unquestioningly celebrated as feminist (because if women like something, then it must be feminist!). And some argue that women read about serial killers to avoid becoming victims. This is the most flattering theory—and also, it seemed to me, the most incomplete. By presuming that women's dark thoughts were merely pragmatic, those thoughts are drained of their menace. True crime wasn't something we women at CrimeCon were consuming begrudgingly, for our own good. We found pleasure in these bleak accounts of kidnappings and assaults and torture chambers, and you could tell by how often we fell back on the language of appetite, of bingeing, of obsession. A different, more alarming hypothesis was the one I tended to prefer: perhaps we liked creepy stories because something creepy was in us.

The weekend at CrimeCon was a crime-y blur. I went to a panel on profiling, and a demonstration of a new DNA extraction technique by a forensic scientist who appears on Dr. Oz's True Crime Tuesdays. I was handed a card listing "ii Signs you may be DEALING WITH A PSYCHOPATH." (Number 9: lack of realistic long-term goals.) I browsed, but did not purchase, greeting cards featuring a birthday message from the Manson Girls ("charlie said to make sure you have a happy birthday. and we do everything charlie tells us to do"). I cried a little bit as three of the Golden State Killer's surviving victims celebrated the arrest of a suspect after more than thirty years. I listened to a ridiculously handsome former CIA agent claim that anyone who had been to a foreign country had been in a life-threatening situation. I was exhorted to sign up for an online course in how to "not be a victim," presented by Nancy Grace. A guy wearing a LOS ANGELES COUNTY CORONER hat tried to sell me a book about Ted Bundy, and when I said I wasn't interested, he offered me a book about the Zodiac Killer instead. He told me that he ran a small publishing house: "We used to do zombies and vampires, but that's going nowhere. It's all true crime now." Then he tried to sell me a book about a bank robber. I didn't hear a single story about the people who are disproportionately at risk of homicide: sex workers, the homeless, young men of color, trans women. Instead, there were more teaser-trailers for TV specials about murdered moms, or moms who murdered.

The whole hotel was encased in a glassy dome, and through the skylights I got the vague sense that weather was happening outside, but it didn't affect me. The Opryland reminded me of a Las Vegas casino: it was so relentlessly temperature controlled and pleasant, and so difficult to locate an exit, that any desire to go outside quickly withered away. Instead I charged ice cream sundaes to my room and gorged myself on crime. For the first time in my life I could have as much as I wanted, without any apologies or explanations. Everyone else at CrimeCon understood.

It was easy to make friends at CrimeCon; complete strangers were unusually open, even confessional. A woman who'd traveled to the conference from Texas likened true crime shows to an empathy roller coaster—you felt so bad for the victims, and for their families, and even sometimes for the perpetrator. In one of the hotel's many snack shops, I spotted one of CrimeCon's rare male attendees. I asked him what had brought him here, and he nodded at his girlfriend over in the chocolate-bar section. He told me that they used to tour insane asylums, then they had a paranormal phase, and now they were into murder. Well, it was mostly her, he admitted. He was just along for the ride. I asked him if he had a theory to explain why the CrimeCon audience was so

overwhelmingly female. "I mean, no offense for the stereotype," he said, "but I think you all like the drama."

I talked to a man in a button-down shirt who turned out to work for Oxygen in an audience-engagement capacity. If you look at the ratings for Investigation Discovery (Oxygen's true crime program-ming rival), he told me, they're the same at midnight as they are at 6:00 a.m. "People leave it on all night," he said. "They fall asleep to it. People tell me all the time that they find these shows soothing."

If so, it was a strange kind of comfort. Midway through day two at CrimeCon, sinister phrases had begun to rattle around in my head—zip-tied to the dresser, scalp laceration, that was the last time anyone saw them—although I'd heard so many horror stories that I couldn't remember which murder they belonged to. I wandered past a conference room where a woman was talking about the "cold-case epidemic," then a backdrop where I could've taken a selfie that looked like a mug shot. Somewhere Nancy Grace was recording a live podcast, but I wasn't in the mood for that. Nor was I in the mood for the Wine & Crime happy hour, or the virtual reality crime-scene-exploration game. I had the sense I was seeking something, though I wasn't sure exactly what.

In the middle of one of the exhibition halls was a long wall, with WHAT'S YOUR MOTIVE written at the top. Attendees had covered it with Post-its proclaiming their reasons for coming to CrimeCon:

sick obsession  
 - so I can geek out this  
 weekend on forensics :)  
 my wife made me  
 - the patriarchy  
 - cuz I'm odd  
 - seek truth  
 to be a nerd for a weekend  
 murder is the new black!  
 girls weekend  
 true crime OBSESSED

I stood in front of this Wall of Motives for a long time. It made for a strange stew, full of flavors that didn't seemingly go together: justice and rage, morbid curiosity and sisterhood, cupcakes and patriarchy battling, fear and revenge. But something about it drew me in. It was messy and honest. It was full of contradiction. I wanted to keep thinking about it.

For almost ten years now, I've been collecting stories of women who were drawn in by crimes that weren't theirs to claim—that is, crimes that didn't impact them directly, but to which they nevertheless felt a deep connection. Women who, like me, were susceptible to falling into a crime funk. This wasn't a conscious project; there was just something about these women that snagged my attention, something about their stories that I wanted to chew on for a while. Maybe learning more about them might help me figure out this larger phenomenon of women and crime. Maybe it would help me figure out myself.

These four women took things too far, at least according to conventional wisdom. They were immoderate and occasionally unwise. And they each paid a price: they lost jobs and alienated family members; one spent \$150,000 on phone calls to prison; another is now incarcerated herself. But they also reinvented themselves, finding personal meaning through other people's tragedies. They used these murders as a way to live out other kinds of lives, ones that were otherwise unavailable to them.

These women lived in different eras and in different parts of the country. Their political leanings and class backgrounds were distinct.

If you put them all in a room together, they wouldn't necessarily get along. They might even hate one another. And yet they all shared this same proclivity.

The more time I spent with their stories, the more I realized that there wasn't a simple, universal answer to why women were fascinated by true crime. Obsession was a recurring theme in their lives, but that obsession wasn't monolithic. It stemmed from different motivations, had different objects and different implications. Perhaps most significantly, each of the four women identified with a different archetypal crime figure: the objective, all-knowing detective; the wounded, wronged victim; the crusading defender, battling for justice; and even the dark, raging glamour of the killer.

In trying to learn more about these four women, I came to understand more about the world around me. Because it's not just individuals who find murders fascinating. Periodically, the culture at large will fixate on a certain crime or grant a murderer celebrity status. These collective obsessions are often dismissed as exploitative, sensationalistic, and distasteful. But the murder stories we tell, and the ways that we tell them, have a political and social impact and are worth taking seriously. Lessons are embedded within their gory details. When read closely, they can reveal the anxieties of the moment, tell us who's allowed to be a victim, and teach us what our monsters are supposed to look like.

Maybe you've had your own crime funks, spent time in the murky territory where murder and obsession coincide. You read a news story about some horrible event that took place several states away,

and the questions start to worm their way into your brain: How do things like that happen, in what sort of world? What kind of person would do such a thing? So you engage in some late-night googling, and maybe you discover a message board with theories. You figure out the name that the murderer's ex-girlfriend is going by now and find her Facebook page. You click through her photos: there she is, fatter than in the news footage, smiling, holding a baby—hers? It's three in the morning and your computer screen illuminates your face with an unnatural glow. What is it, exactly, that you're looking for? <>

## What Is Pornography?

*I know it, when I see it.* —Justice Potter Stewart

*The explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or activity in literature, painting, films, etc., in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings.* —Oxford English Dictionary

*Playboy is art, not pornography.* —Cooper Hefner

*Pornography is the undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda.* —Susan Brownmiller

*If it exists, there is porn on it.* —Rule 34, The Urban Dictionary

## Task of the Inquiry

This book offers an opinionated introduction to and an analysis of philosophical treatments of pornography. It is a work in analytic philosophy; hence, one might expect my first move to be to define the concept of pornography and to offer some necessary and sufficient conditions for some film, image, or text to count as pornography. Perhaps surprisingly, I won't start with such a definitional task. Perhaps even more surprisingly, this is because such a definitional undertaking has turned out to be far from straightforward. As US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in 1964 famously claimed, although he cannot provide a clear definition of pornography, he knows what

counts as pornography when he encounters it. Justice Stewart was relying on his intuitive conception of pornography; unfortunately, other people rely on theirs. For instance, many Americans (at least of a certain generation) would say that magazines like *Hustler* and *Playboy* are paradigm instances of pornography. The heir of *Playboy*, Cooper Hefner, disagrees: as cited in the epigraph, he stated in a more recent newspaper article that the magazine is not pornography and that it empowers women.' The OED's definition of pornography is rather innocuous and tame sounding. Then again, Susan Brownmiller takes pornography to be the "undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda" (1975, 394). And even the most innocent sounding Internet searches can yield a wealth of pornography hits.

Many philosophers disagree with all of the above conceptions irrespective of their stance on the morality of pornography. Pretheoretically, pornography involves the following: sexually explicit content, materials without social value, intention to sexually arouse consumers, and/or being used in certain ways (e.g., as "masturbation materials"). How to understand any of these in detail and how to conceptualize their importance when examining pornography are live questions though. As things stand, there is no agreed upon definition of pornography either in philosophy or in society at large. Yet, pornography seems to play a huge role in contemporary lives: pornography-related inquiries figure as some of the most frequent Internet searches. "Our" inability to say precisely what pornography amounts to is puzzling given how commonplace pornography has become.

One hindrance to defining and understanding pornography is its highly emotive and deeply divisive nature not only in the wider society but also in philosophy. Over the past few decades, entrenched and seemingly straightforward anti- and pro-pornography positions have emerged. In the popular press, those opposing pornography are often portrayed as prudish, sex-negative feminists, who advocate censorship; pornography's defenders are characterized as sex-positive liberals, who fight for free speech and expression. Lively philosophical debates about pornography have emerged since the 1980s, and there is by now a rich literature on the topic. Nonetheless, these debates are still fraught with many difficult questions, and precious little agreement exists on basic questions: What is pornography? What (if anything) does pornography do? Is the consumption of pornography a harmless private matter, or does it harm its users in some ways? Does pornography harm nonusers, like women generally, by increasing the prevalence of sexualized violence? What, if anything, should legally be done about pornography? Is feminist pornography possible, and if so, what would make pornography feminist? Not having a clear idea about what we are talking about when we talk about pornography has hindered philosophical attempts to answer these questions. There is still much confusion over the conceptual and political commitments of different anti- and pro-pornography positions, while different sides tend to portray a simplistic picture of their opponents. Participants in the debates end up easily talking past one another. Furthermore, given the emotive nature of the topic, interlocutors can miss the fact that existing positions are much more nuanced and far more complex than they might at first seem. Indeed, different sides on the debate might not even disagree with one another, *contra* appearances.

In light of these difficulties and (apparent) disagreements, this book examines philosophical pornography debates with the aim to steady and clarify the waters. It does not put forward one overarching argument throughout but rather evaluates relevant arguments thematically. In so doing, the book has three broad goals. First, to conduct a comprehensive and careful investigation of different philosophical positions for and against pornography, which will provide much needed clarity on how pornography and other key notions are (and should be) understood. The book hence also clarifies what different views are theoretically and politically committed to. Second, to investigate important methodological issues by considering how empirically adequate existing philosophical positions are relative to the sizeable pornography industry. This will involve also considering alternative pornographies that are said to be feminist, "female-friendly," and nonheteronormative. Third, to enrich extant philosophical debates by examining how discussions in different subareas (like

feminist philosophy and aesthetics) intersect with and profit from one another—something surprisingly absent in contemporary philosophizing over pornography. Although my investigation in this book advances unapologetically from an analytic feminist philosophical perspective, it will be neutral about pornography's moral status at the outset.' One of the big lessons to emerge from this work is that given how complex a phenomenon pornography is, it is far from easy (if not impossible) to say that all pornography is harmful in some sense or that pornography does no harm at all. Our evaluative judgments about pornography must be made in a piecemeal fashion, and the prospects of making general normative claims about pornography are poor. However, as I will argue, this does not preclude meaningful philosophical work on pornography. There is still much to be done, as will become clear from the pages of this book. Nevertheless, before we can see what work still needs to be done, let us briefly look at what work has already been undertaken by way of background and in preparation for the discussions to come.

### Methodological Considerations

As noted, the book has three main goals.

1. To conduct a comprehensive and careful investigation of different philosophical positions in order to provide much needed clarity on how pornography and other key notions are understood.
2. To investigate methodological issues by considering how empirically adequate existing philosophical positions are and by considering alternative pornographies.
3. To enrich extant philosophical debates by examining how discussions in different subareas intersect with and profit from one another.

With these in mind, let me spell out some preliminary methodological commitments. First, the book aims to be sensitive to the empirical realities of the pornography industry. This not only means that I employ real-world examples; it also points to something more. The aim is to conduct an empirically informed philosophical analysis of pornography—something I think is missing from much of philosophical work on pornography. This does not mean that current philosophical work ignores examples. However, there is a difference between doing empirically informed philosophical work and citing empirical examples in one's work. Part of this book's methodological point is to argue that mentioning examples not particularly representative of the current pornography industry does not suffice for empirically informed philosophical investigation of the topic. One of this book's methodological lessons, then, is that our philosophical accounts must do justice to a sizeable industry and complex phenomenon—citing a few examples that fit one's philosophical view while ignoring examples that go against it is not empirically informed in the right kind of way.

My above points may suggest that the forthcoming analysis will be descriptive in looking at what pornography currently is about. One might, however, wonder whether this is the right method as we are engaged in a philosophical (rather than a sociological) examination of pornography. Let me clarify this point at the outset. The book aims to provide clarity on how pornography and other key notions are to be understood, while considering methodological issues by taking into account how empirically adequate existing philosophical analyses are. This aim (I contend) falls under the banner of doing what Burgess and Plunkett (2013) call "conceptual ethics" and what Sally Haslanger (2000) terms "amelioration." Instead of looking at our linguistic intuitions when trying to elucidate something—the concept of pornography here being the case in point—we should rather engage in normative and evaluative inquiry. This is because our intuitions about the concept at issue are too muddled and unclear, and our uses of the term expressing that concept too idiosyncratic. We should not then ask how we do understand x, but how we should understand x in order to bring about conceptual clarity and advance other practical goals that we may have. Subsequently, my aim in the book is to clarify what pornography is and ought to be in a manner that does justice to pornography



as an industry and a complex empirical phenomenon. In so doing, we can meaningfully revise what we mean by pornography, but in a manner that is empirically informed. Hence, in the pages to come, I aspire to strike a balance between normative and descriptive analyses.

This departs significantly from the above-outlined methodology advanced by Rea (2000). Rea holds that a nonstipulative "real" definition of pornography that "respects commonly held views and widely shared intuitions [about pornography] and attempts to capture these in a set of necessary and sufficient conditions" is preferable. I agree with Rea that we need to clarify the definition of pornography for public and moral debates. But I am unconvinced that an appeal to a real definition that fits "our" ordinary conception of pornography is the most helpful way to proceed. For one thing, it is not obvious to me that there is an intuitive ordinary conception. This is precisely one of the major stumbling blocks with articulating a definition of pornography. Sexual explicitness is often taken to be a hallmark of pornography. But clearly not all visual depictions that are sexually explicit count intuitively as pornography (just think of the oft-cited example of anatomy books). Sexual arousal is commonly said to be another distinguishing feature of pornography. But sexual arousal is highly subjective, and many pornographic works fail to sexually arouse individual viewers. Furthermore, many nonpornographic films are clearly intended to sexually arouse—and they do. This may make them pornographic, but something's being pornographic is not equivalent to it being a piece of pornography. (Compare a painting that is iconic in the sense of resembling an icon stylistically to an actual icon.) And as noted, some take pornography to be by definition morally repugnant, while others disagree. Taking this into account, I am not convinced that a real nonstipulative definition of pornography that fits "our" intuitions would be particularly helpful or that we can articulate such a definition to begin with. Furthermore, Rea's intention to elucidate pornography itself, rather than revise what we take pornography to amount to, is not unproblematic. Is there such a thing as pornography itself? I think not. The content and nature of pornography has changed significantly over time, and (I suspect) contemporary viewers would not see much of past pornography as pornography anymore. Given that pornography evolves, there seems to be no trans-historical conception of pornography for our intuitions to track. In light of this, revising "our" conception of pornography on the basis of changes to the genre seems rather more appropriate.

My approach departs from Rea's in another important respect too. Rea classifies live sex shows as pornography (he is not alone in doing so). This is, in my view, a mistake. Performing in pornography is one type of sex work; lap dancing and live sex shows are different types of sex work. In what follows, then, my discussion does not extend to live sex shows, lap dancing, or prostitution. I will also avoid extending my discussion to "camming": live, interactive, and often more relationship-like webcam performance. Although many pornography performers also do camming to earn more, I contend, it is a mistake to collapse the distinction. For instance, there is a perfectly ordinary and straightforward distinction between cinema and theater even though they both involve acting. So, even though the separation of pornography from live performance is somewhat unhappy and highly pretheoretical, I do not see huge obstacles in drawing this distinction.

Finally, let me return to the point about starting from a morally neutral position. One might immediately object to such a starting point by citing some glaring counterexamples: What about child pornography and the so-called revenge porn? The morally objectionable character of child pornography is clear-cut, while "revenge porn" is morally condemnable in being nonconsensual and involving serious privacy violations. So how can I start from a morally neutral perspective when presented with such examples? I think that these examples nicely illustrate the need for this book and the need for conceptual amelioration when thinking about what pornography is and should be—but amelioration that is informed by empirical issues. As I see it, it is a mistake to classify images of children's sexual abuse as pornography to begin with; rather, such images are documentations of

abuse and their harmfulness is unequivocal. However, what we should philosophically say about sexually explicit materials that involve at least prima facie consenting adults is not so clear-cut. Of course, this raises other issues that I will return to in later chapters. For instance: Which images count as children's sexual abuse? Does this include virtual and cartoon images of children in sexualized depictions? What should we say about pornography involving supposedly adult performers who are portrayed as underage or childlike? Answers to these questions are far less equivocal and require serious philosophical reflection. However, as I will argue later on, sexual arousal and sexual explicitness are neither necessary nor sufficient for some imagery counting as pornography. Therefore, even if documentations of children's sexual abuse are currently classified as pornography, there is no reason to do so based on "the sexual nature" of the imagery. The fact that someone documented the abuse does not render the documentation a piece of pornography, just as the documentation of an art performance is not eo ipso a piece of art. (It might be, but this depends on other factors to which I will return later.) By the same token, I think it is also a mistake to describe the phenomenon of revenge porn as a kind of pornography. What is intuitively doing the work is that the images are sexually explicit and/or suggestive, and pretheoretically pornography is about sexual explicitness. But imagine that I had written a very sexually explicit letter to a former partner who then publishes it online without my consent.

I think that many would be hard-pressed to say that this is an instance of pornography, albeit being an intimacy violation for sure. Once we see that pornography is about something other than surface sexual explicitness, we can see that some phenomena currently subsumed under 'pornography' in the popular press and media should not be so subsumed. This subsequently enables us to formulate a unified notion of pornography to overcome conceptual and terminological difficulties. Moreover, all of this demonstrates the methodological need for amelioration that is empirically informed in order to avoid talking at cross-purposes when we talk about pornography.

### Structure of the Book

This book has seven forthcoming chapters, in which I will consider philosophical pornography debates along the following themes. Chapter 2 ("Subordination: Causal and Constitutive") outlines and discusses Langton's famous subordination claim: pornography both causes and is the subordination of women. Next in chapter 3 ("Does Pornography Silence Women?"), I turn to Langton's other key view: pornography causes and is the silencing of women—the silencing claim. Chapter 4 ("Free, Regulated, or Prohibited Speech?") carefully detangles various politico-legal stances on pornography's permissibility. The chapter discusses liberal pro- and feminist antipornography positions, showing that these positions are far more complex than usually characterized and that they are actually in agreement on many central issues pertaining to pornography. The following chapter 5 ("Pornographic Knowledge and Sexual Objectification") examines a more recent claim that pornography generates harmful knowledge about women with the objectification of women being pornography's mechanism for doing so. Chapter 6 ("The Aesthetics of Pornography") connects debates in aesthetics and feminist philosophy when analyzing the ethics and aesthetics of pornography. In chapter 7 ("Pornography as Liberation"), I discuss the idea that some pornography may liberate, rather than subordinate. This involves considering racialized, queer, feminist, and trans\* pornography as well as claims made by disability advocates that pornographic portrayals of "disabled bodies" are sexually enriching. The book closes with chapter 8 ("What Is Pornography Revisited"), which considers social ontological analyses of pornography as potentially fruitful alternatives to prevalent speech act theoretic approaches. <>

### Trauma is a Tumble, a Rumble of Feelings

In **CONSENT: A MEMOIR OF UNWANTED ATTENTION**, Donna Freitas delivers a forensic examination of the years she spent stalked by her professor, and uses her nightmarish experience to examine the ways in which we stigmatize, debate, and attempt to understand consent today.

### Author's Note

Trauma is a jumble. Of feelings, of memories, of nausea and sickness in a person's gut, of confusion in the mind.

This memoir is about a trauma in my life, a state of siege that began one spring and that was not alleviated until nearly two years later. By the end of it, I was in a heap.

I've done my best to put what happened in order, but I'm not sure if I got everything and its timing exactly right. There was so much of it to make sense of, a labyrinth, really, that sometimes I get lost in its twists and turns. When I try to remember what happened, as it happened, often what I get is one big flood of memories, all piled on top of one another, melted together, the layers difficult to distinguish.

But know this: each event I describe is one that is seared in my brain and, sadly, likely always will be.

### The Monster in the House

The package sat, unopened, on the coffee table. It had been there for days. Through sun and rain and summer thunderstorms. Next to it was a fat candle from Pottery Barn that I'd bought on sale and a stack of books I was reading for graduate school. In front of the table was an old, wood-framed couch. I'd thrown a thick blanket over it to hide its cheap cushions, stained from former occupants of my university-issue apartment, with its cinder-block walls and tall bright windows that I loved with all my heart. It was the first place I'd ever had all to myself. Behind the table was the hulking television set I'd won during my first year of college and had lugged around for years. It was from my residence-hall lounge, and the RAs had raffled it off at the end of the semester. I was the lucky winner they'd pulled from the hat.

The package was thin, a rectangular manila envelope, my address handwritten on the front in careful script. Its contents could have been anything. Happy photos of friends or pictures from a wedding. But there was an article sealed within that dull yellow envelope. The draft of one.

I knew this because the author, who was also my mentor, told me so, along with his directive that I read the essay inside of it, that he needed me to read it. I would be a bad person, a bad student, a bad friend if I ignored this duty as I'd ignored so many other needs and requests from him lately.

He sent it to me on the day he left for a monthlong trip. It was the end of July, it was hot and humid, the blacktop outside my apartment literally steaming with the heat. He called to inform me the article was on its way, that I had the entire month to get to it. Maybe he believed that lack of time or warning was behind my failure to read anything else he'd sent recently. Maybe he thought that allowing me a whole month was a kindness.

During the four weeks he was away, he called to ask if I was reading, if I had already read. He called over and over and scolded when it became clear that I had not yet fulfilled this simple obligation. Time was running out, August was waning, and I hadn't even opened the envelope.

"Don-na," he'd say over the phone in that singsong way he always spoke my name. "I'm coming home. I want to be able to talk about this when I get back."

Why, why, why? I wondered, silently, as I promised him—because I did promise him—that I would get to it soon, maybe today. Why me? I was a nobody graduate student. He was an important

professor, famous in certain circles. Didn't he have colleagues whose opinions he could solicit? Why did he care about mine?

By then I knew the answers to my own questions. The desperation in his voice was evidence enough. But still, the knowledge was murky and vague, fearful and suspicious. I'd pushed it deep into the recesses of my brain, done my best to kill it. I was in denial and I relished this denial, so fierce and powerful that it was almost magnificent.

As I sat there, watching television on my couch, that ugly manila envelope taking up space on my table next to the remnants of my latest take-out dinner, a part of me was still hopeful that I was wrong; that the nagging feeling consuming my insides would turn out to be a product of my melodramatic imagination.

Day after day I rose from bed, walked out into my living room, wishing that the envelope had vanished overnight. But no, it sat there, among my things, just steps from my hideous Pepto-Bismol—colored kitchen, where I cooked lavish dinners for friends, for my RA staff, for myself. Seeing the envelope each time I came in the door was like discovering someone had left a ticking time bomb in my apartment while I was out buying Advil at CVS. I would agonize over its presence in my house and my life, doing my best to disarm it.

It was just an article. An innocent thing. A stack of papers, typed up and printed out and stapled together. Strings of words in black and white. What was I afraid of? What, really, was the big deal? I read articles all the time. I was a graduate student, a voracious reader. Reading was my calling, my purpose, my joy.

Just do it already, my mind would push, one minute. But I don't want to, it would tug, the next. Come on, Donna, I would admonish myself. It's not like an article can actually hurt you. It's not like it's packed with knives and bullets and poison.

Back and forth, back and forth went this spiral of thoughts. As the days marched forward, the questions of how I'd gotten to this place, and whose fault it was, plagued me. Whose responsibility was it, really? Mine? His? The answer was so hard to parse out, but parse it out I did, and then I did again.

I allowed the article in my house. (Consent?) I placed it on the coffee table. (Also consent. Right?) I answered the phone when he called, pleading with me. (Consent, technically. But there was no caller ID back then, so maybe not?) I made him promises that I would read. (Is there consent when there is also cringing? When he is begging?) But I also resisted touching that yellow envelope. (I did not want to consent to it.) I didn't open it for nearly a month. (This was a silent no. But do silent nos count?) I scowled when I looked at it. (A bodily gesture of resistance. But then, it wasn't like he was in the room and could see me scowling. Thank God.) I did my best to ignore its presence, its persistence, I didn't move it, didn't touch it, not at first. (Does the absence of a response imply a yes?)

The mere sight of the article on my coffee table filled me with a dread so profound I'm not sure I can ever convey its depths. Words are not enough. Then again, shouldn't I have used my words? Shouldn't it have been that easy, just saying the word no loud and clear and true like a bell?

I waited until the day before he returned from his trip to open the envelope, to take out the article, to actually touch it with my fingers. I held it as if I might be allergic to the paper, averting my eyes. It was like readying myself to take the most disgusting medicine in the history of the world, medicine you know is going to make you sick but somehow you have to get it down your throat. You have to

take a deep breath, close your eyes, and swallow it, then do your best to distract yourself from such a pervasive level of disgust that you know gagging and retching are inevitable.

I turned on the television so there was noise around me, so it felt like there were other people nearby. I didn't want to be alone with it, not any bit of it, not the envelope, the paper, the article, not the words on the pages.

Then, finally, I started.

After so much resistance, I let my eyes settle on the first word and then the second and the third, until I was allowing them inside my brain, inside my body, where they would cohere into sentences that would take on meaning. I convinced myself that after so much melodrama I was about to find out the article was as benign as the stack of books I read for my classes, that soon I would be laughing at how silly I'd been to make such a big deal over nothing, that I would be rolling my eyes at the way I'd fought this article off as though it were a mugger in a dark alley. I'd realize that the author really did mean well, that he had no ulterior motives or harmful agenda.

I waited for the relief to hit, for the cool wave of it to flow through me in the oppressive August heat.

But as those words entered me one by one, piling up into a massive heap of sentences that became paragraphs that became sections, it turned out that the article was poison after all, that it really was going to make me sick. So ill that I got up from my couch and lay down flat on my back on the floor of my apartment, holding my stomach.

The article was a confession of love.

But it wasn't a direct confession. There was no Dear Donna at the beginning, or sentences that included the words I've lately realized that I'm in love with you. He'd told me he loved me without telling me directly, while cloaking it in a lengthy, lofty reflection—no, an honoring—of a real-life love between an older man, a famous writer and thinker, and a young woman thirty years his junior, with whom this man began a passionate and clandestine affair, one that was revealed to the public only many years after his death. The essay was about forgiving this man the transgression of loving the younger woman, of pursuing her, of being unable to stop himself from doing so, from corralling his desires. The article justified his love for her, praised it as virtuous, even divine, and exulted in the fact that she reciprocated that love, forbidden as it was to both of them because the man was also a priest. I imagine my mentor believed this was the ultimate romantic gesture, to craft an essay about the love he felt for me, but to do so metaphorically. To invite me into a sexual relationship through the poetry of a well-written paper. For him, a deeply thought-out intellectual essay was the equivalent of a sonnet.

It was sneaky and convoluted and, ultimately, cowardly, though it was like everything else that he did, which was also sneaky and convoluted and just indirect enough to leave me doubtful, to make me question my instincts, my judgment, my intuition, that something was deeply wrong with his behavior toward me. His movements were always just shy of obviously inappropriate, they were always potentially completely innocent; acts that could be interpreted as overtures of something romantic, yet that also could be misinterpreted as such.

There was always room for doubt with him, and this was part of his talent as a stalker of me.

Eventually I got up from the floor and sat on the couch again. I tossed the papers onto the coffee table and they fanned across it, obscuring the cheap wood. My dread ballooned outward to encompass the entire apartment, oozing through the screens of my open windows and poisoning the humid summer air.

What was I going to do? What was my plan?

He was going to call me the second he returned home and push for a face-to-face meeting so we could "discuss" his article. Not answering the phone wouldn't do any good, since he would simply show up at my door and wait for me to come out. I could deny that I'd read it. I could deny and deny, but then he would just badger and badger until I couldn't deny any longer. I could say yes to him, I could have the conversation and act like I didn't see any connection between his essay and the situation I now found myself in. That he'd put me in.

As these thoughts flew through my head, my entire being revolted. My entire self, my body, my brain, my heart, my soul, were one big no. No, no, no, no. I cannot do this. I cannot. I wanted to die. I wanted to die rather than deal with what was looming.

The phone rang.

I considered not picking up because, you know. It was probably him.

But I did pick up, because what else was I going to do? Never answer the phone again? I had a job to do, with RAs who depended on me. Friends. Family. A boyfriend.

It was my father on the line.

"Your mother has cancer," he told me the moment I said hello, his voice thick with grief. "It's not good. You have to come home. She's having surgery tomorrow. She might not make it. Your mother might die."

I listened to him, barely comprehending his words, their terrible meaning. As I held the phone to my ear, already beginning to pack my things, something incredible registered inside of me. I would not be here tomorrow because my mother was having surgery. Major surgery. For cancer. She might die. This was the ultimate excuse to be away when he came back. There could exist no better excuse to avoid the dreaded conversation. To never ever have that discussion he was so desperate to have.

As my father continued to talk, I thought to myself: I am a horrible daughter. And later, as I hung up the phone and zipped up my travel bag, I thought to myself:

I am saved. <>

### [The Curious Relationship Between Pornography and Conservative Protestants in The United States](#)

This book is about the curious relationship between pornography and conservative Protestants in the United States. By "pornography" I mean the standard definition of sexually explicit material made with the intent of arousing the viewer, and these days, accessed primarily through the internet. And by "conservative Protestants" I mean American Christians who believe that faith in Jesus Christ alone grants them eternal salvation (Protestant), and who view the Bible as inerrant, supremely authoritative, and best interpreted literally (conservative). While I will occasionally settle for an alternative definition of "conservative Protestant" depending on the dataset I have available (e.g., by the denomination believers affiliate with, self-identifying as "evangelical" or "fundamentalist") throughout the book, my preference will be to focus on theological beliefs as the key identifying marker of conservative Protestants.

Empirically, this book represents my attempt to understand the social etiology and consequences of an ongoing paradox. On the one hand, conservative Protestants almost unanimously consider pornography not only morally wrong or sinful but dangerously so, and in some ways unique in its

sinfulness. Sexual sin within the conservative Protestant subculture holds a special place among threats to personal godliness and society in general—more so than, say, greed, bigotry, or gossip (a perspective I call "sexual exceptionalism"). And yet, despite their essentially unanimous moral rejection of pornography use, conservative Protestants, depending on how you define them, view pornography only slightly less often than other Americans. There is a consistent difference, to be sure, but certainly not as great as one might expect. This paradox—that conservative Protestants both morally reject and regularly view pornography—is in some ways an inevitable consequence for a subculture that repudiates the sexual mores of the dominant culture while simultaneously (and quite intentionally) refusing to disengage from that culture, particularly in terms of technology and media consumption. This book takes stock of how that paradox plays itself out in the community life, mental health, and intimate relationships of conservative Protestants.

But the theoretical punch of this book is bigger than just elucidating how conservative Protestants deal with porn or sexual sin more broadly. While I will develop a number of concepts and make several more minor arguments throughout, a central aim of this book is to advance our understanding of what I call "moral incongruence." In simple terms, moral incongruence is the experience of violating socially learned and sacralized moral values. Applied to pornography use, the concept of moral incongruence helps us understand how the "effects" of pornography use in our society are often less about what the practice of viewing explicit sexual media does to peoples' brains or standards and more about what that practice means within our own moral context. Applied to the experience of conservative Protestants, I show how moral incongruence creates a situation in which pornography affects conservative Protestants' lives in ways that are not only unique but also, as we will see, uniquely damaging compared to other Americans who may use pornography more often, but who lack the deeply inculcated and socially reinforced moral condemnations against it. This damage can also be exacerbated by other subcultural distinctives among conservative Protestants, including their pietistic idealism, biblicism, sexual exceptionalism, complementarian gender ideology, and contentious understandings of mental health and change. (I'll explain all those terms and ideas in good time.)

There is no way around it. The topic of pornography is loaded with moral and political implications. Some scholars view it as irredeemably oppressive and misogynistic—a cancer for society. Others, applying a more social constructivist interpretation, challenge the very idea that "pornography" is itself "a thing," rather than an arbitrary label dominant groups give to sexual ideas and images that fall outside their parochial standards of acceptability. The former group sees porn as immoral and to be rejected, while the latter group sees it as amoral and valuable for pushing the boundaries of sexual freedom. And of course, many (myself included) fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Readers should know that social science is inextricably linked with issues of morality and politics. This is so because social science involves statements about what human beings are like, and inevitably involves assumptions about the sorts of goals and priorities around which societies should be organized. Scientists are human. (That's a nice way of saying they are prone to bias.) As such, they do not approach the issues of human flourishing, fairness, and moral imperatives without preformed and deeply held beliefs. Moreover, as the moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt has argued so powerfully, scientists, like all humans, tend to be "groupish." Rather than choose our intellectual tribes on the basis of pure reason, we like to emotionally identify with groups first, and then use reasoning to defend our group's beliefs against others whom we conclude to be either stupid, or evil, or both. I am not saying that is how social science ought to be; but that's how it is, nevertheless.

Why do I say this at the onset? In my experience, pornography re-search is a unique field because there is little established dogma that groups in power use to exclude scholars from the conversation. That is a good thing. Different scholarly camps approach the subject of porn with different

ideological presuppositions and different conclusions that they like to draw. This is not the case for all sexuality research certainly, but it has been true in research on pornography. In some disciplines or fields, one ideological position on an issue eventually comes to dominate the narrative and ultimately takes on a moral quality. Even attempting to question the established doctrine on such subjects would show that you are not only ignorant on an issue most consider settled; there may also be something morally wrong with you. But the subject of pornography's positive or negative influence on society is not like such issues. On the contrary, differing arguments on the subject of porn's "effects" are published in nearly every issue of the top sexuality journals like the Archives of Sexual Behavior or the Journal of Sex Research, both of which I currently serve as an editorial board member. The debates about porn are wide open. That is good for science, and for me.

Still, readers will almost certainly have their own moral and political views on the subject of porn. And they may be curious whether I have an agenda in writing about it. (I consider it a point of professional pride that in 2017 I was accused of having a pro-porn agenda by anti-porn activists and having an anti-porn agenda by pro-porn activists in the same week!) It is best to address the issue of my own potential biases from the outset. I am not a robot or a sociopath, and so of course I have my own moral views regarding issues like pornography, sexuality, religion, family functioning, and so on. But this book is not written to moralize about the dangers of pornography. In fact, people who read this book hoping to find ammunition for a political crusade against pornography will ultimately be guilty of cherry-picking findings. My arguments in this book regarding pornography's place in the lives of conservative Protestants are nuanced, contextualized, and in some ways surprising and contradictory. They certainly do not fit neatly into a "porn is always harmful" narrative. And nothing in my findings suggests pornography should be banned or outlawed—a proposition that I find imprudent and implausible.

But with that said, neither will I avoid discussing the vast and growing body of literature suggesting that pornography use, under certain circumstances, can be detrimental to romantic and family relationships, sexual functioning, mental health, and even our relationships with strangers. And even the staunchest pro-porn advocates have to recognize how so much of the content of mainstream pornography is filled with misogynistic and racist messages. Having published over twenty peer-reviewed articles and now a book on the subject, my scholarly opinion on pornography is not neutral. On balance, I don't think there is much evidence that porn (especially in its most mainstream form and as it is most often produced and used) makes the world a more humane and equitable place. But my goal in writing this book is neither to moralize against nor advocate for pornography. Rather, I wish to understand how it is experienced by a large, but specific portion of American men and women.

A few more caveats. Readers will likely notice that my interview sample and focus are selective in at least two ways I wish to acknowledge here.

First, the majority of men and women I interviewed are college educated and live in urban or suburban regions of the country. As a result, conservative Protestants from rural, working-class areas of the United States are not well represented, which means I'm also likely missing representation from more charismatic, Pentecostal expressions of conservative Protestantism often found in such regions. This is largely a result of the networks I had available to recruit interview participants. Though unfortunate, this is not as problematic as it might seem for a study of conservative Protestants and pornography use, since education, income, urban residence, and knowledge of computers are shown to predict regular pornography use. Thus, my interview sample comprises the conservative Protestants most likely to be affected by pornography's availability.

Second, because I am writing about what I consider to be "main-stream" conservative Protestantism, my examples and arguments will be more about conservative Protestants on the whole (in a



statistical sense) rather than small pockets of conservative Protestants who may deviate in important ways from those in the mainstream. One important example where readers might see this is in my almost exclusive focus on heterosexual conservative Protestants, who constitute around 99% of that group, according to the General Social Surveys. To be sure, there are conservative Protestant men and women who privately are attracted to the same sex (likely a much larger percentage than we know) or who may openly identify as gay or lesbian. I don't intend my lack of focus on these men and women to indicate that I am somehow unconsciously being heteronormative; and I certainly do not intend it as a form of erasure (acting like they don't exist). I do write about these men and women at points in the book, but I fail to do their unique experiences justice. I hope other scholars will fill in this and other canyon-sized gaps that this book has left. exceptionalism reflects a largely Western evaluation of moral priorities that appears to be missing among Christians in other non-Western contexts. But even within Western expressions of conservative Christianity, there have been dissenting voices like C. S. Lewis, who have held that internal sins of pride and selfishness tell us more about a Christian's true spiritual state than his or her private sexual mistakes.

None of this is to suggest that conservative Protestants should just accept that porn use will become more commonplace among a growing number of Christians. But it seems that the emphasis on sexual sin—to the extent that young Christian men and women commonly evaluate their own spiritual lives by whether they have viewed porn recently and show a pattern of either obsessing unhealthily over porn or backing away from their faith due to the personal dissonance this causes in their lives—is undeniably counterproductive to helping young Christians live out their faith as conservative Protestant communities would hope.

### The Usefulness of Complementarian Assumptions

The largest and most influential camps of conservative Protestantism are formally committed to complementarianism, and they often reaffirm that commitment when given opportunity. This is unlikely to change anytime soon. The complementarian assumption that men tend to be more visually oriented than women, and therefore tend to view pornography more than women, may have long been true in a statistical sense, but this view is coming to reflect the present reality less and less. Visual pornography, the kind that primarily men were thought to be interested in because of how "God designed them" is now a problem for conservative Protestant women.

But beyond causing conservative Protestants to largely ignore the growing challenges and temptations confronting younger conservative Protestant women, maintaining these pervasive stereotypes about men's and women's sexual tendencies has been completely counterproductive in meeting the needs of this population. Starting from the assumption that "God designed" men to be visual and interested in physical intimacy, and "designed" women to be interested in emotional connections and to be sexual responders for men has caused women who wrestle with visual, physical temptation to feel even more abnormal and, consequently, less willing or able to process that struggle with others in their faith community.

While complementarianism may be a core biblical belief for many conservative Protestants, in terms of dealing with pornography, the associated assumptions about men's and women's sexual tendencies have proven unhelpful. In contrast, we saw that pastors who were willing to openly discuss the issue of sexual temptation and pornography with women, assuming their temptations can be just as strong as those in men, were able to more effectively minister to those women. The more leaders in congregations can acknowledge that men and women are both sexual beings with a broad spectrum of sexual profiles and tastes, the easier it will be for women in those congregations to become more open about those temptations and get the resources they need to continue walking in faith.

## Structuring Openness into Faith Communities

Among the greatest torments for conservative Protestants when it comes to pornography is the feeling of isolation—the resignation that they must wrestle with their temptation and failures alone. Readers will recall that a number of those I interviewed and presented in the book expressed fear that other church members would judge them for their porn struggles and, consequently, fellow parishioners would be the last people they would want to ask for accountability or counsel. Part of the problem is the sexual exceptionalism I already addressed: if sexual sin is the most shameful and stigmatizing of all sins, porn users will be less eager to acknowledge their struggles. But this problem is compounded by the perception that fellow Christians do not battle the same temptations, or do not struggle to the same extreme, and thus would either not understand or would view the confessor as lesser, spiritually and morally. This only increases their shame and isolation. Whether their perception is true or not, it is obviously counterproductive and contrary to what most conservative Protestant churches would like to be characterized by—namely, openness and restoration.

But I should clarify. For conservative Protestants, not all shame and bad feelings stemming from porn use are negative. Rather, as one pastor explained, there is "the shame and guilt that accompany those that are true Christians and especially Christians who think [porn is] wrong and know it's wrong." Within the conservative Protestant subculture, true believers should feel guilty about their porn use at some level. But to the extent that these negative feelings stem from a perception that fellow Christians either cannot or are unwilling to identify with the same struggle, it only hinders opportunities for openness and mutual support. Conversely, throughout my interviews, it seemed that the following practices are helpful:

- Talking through the temptation with others
- Thinking together about what emotions or past hurts might fuel acting out or shame
- Strategizing about concrete steps that can be taken to avoid temptation
- Openly confessing to one another when someone had a "bad weekend"
- Accepting one another as works-in-process

These practices, done regularly, not only diminish the unhealthy suffering but seem to foster more practical success in avoiding future failures with pornography.

Recognizing this, some churches have devised ways to structure openness into their congregations and small groups. One congregation, for example, implemented a regular gathering in which pastors and other leaders were invited to discuss their own present or past sexual struggles, and how they personally fight those battles. Those in attendance could ask advice or share about their own personal experiences in ways that could be helpful to others. These discussions were gender specific, and women's sexual temptation was addressed in some form as well.

Openness and interaction among members has also been accomplished through small groups. While the gradual shift in the American religious landscape toward megachurches can in some ways contribute to an individualist, isolated, antiseptic feeling among churchgoers, small groups may provide opportunities to develop deeper, interdependent, familiar relationships with fellow Christians. Because opportunities for confession and counsel in the area of pornography use may be limited if one happens to be in a group where few others are struggling with the same issue, recovery-focused ministries have been helpful. Parts of these ministries function as support groups for those with similar struggles, and participation is confidential. A commitment to offering these sorts of stable options to Christian men and women have proven to be more effective ways of structuring openness into faith communities, rather than assuming those things are happening organically. <>

## **AUTHENTIC HUMAN SEXUALITY: AN INTEGRATED CHRISTIAN APPROACH, 3RD EDITION** by Judith K. Balswick and Jack O. Balswick [IVP Academic, 9780830852376]

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A new generation of students, pastors, psychologists, and sociologists engaged in counseling will be indebted to the Balswicks for this study of an endlessly fascinating and perplexing facet of human identity.

### **Evolving Mysteries of Sex Christianity**

We are grateful for the positive response to the previous editions of [Authentic Human Sexuality](#), especially as a source for courses taught at Christian seminaries and colleges. In this new edition we've made some changes in the organization of the material, but the major changes have to do with updating the social science research on issues of human sexuality. Building on trinitarian theology, we bring a biblical model of covenant, grace, empowerment, and intimacy in defining authentic sexual relationships. Our foundational belief that we are created in the image of God requires a careful understanding of the Scriptures for wisdom and direction in how to live our lives as sexual beings.

Our Christian theology addresses what it means to be created as sexual beings and how our sexuality leads to meaningful and authentic sexuality. Significant relational aspects of human sexuality are discovered throughout the Bible. In Old Testament books like Genesis, the Song of Songs, and Hosea, the relationship between the children of Israel and Yahweh illustrates how movement toward or rejection of God's way leads to fulfillment or distortion in human relationships. Jesus revolutionized relationship power by coming to serve and empower others. He was inclusive in his approach to others (there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, rich nor poor). He broke cultural relationship rules when responding with compassion and empowerment to all he encountered. We are challenged to be Christlike in our relationships with others. The New Testament provides instruction to single and married persons in regard to sexual attitudes and behavior.

The book is divided into four parts. In part one, "The Formation of Sexuality," we open with a chapter that defines authentic sexuality as God's good gift. Trinitarian theology serves as a model for two essential dimensions of being created as sexual beings: differentiation and unity. Chapter two considers the sociocultural and historical. In chapter three we offer an interactive developmental model of human sexuality, bringing together the biological and sociocultural factors that contribute to human sexuality. Chapter four gives an overview of sexual minority identity formation and the

specific biopsychosocial forces that contribute to sexual attraction, orientation, and identity. In chapter five we bring a dialogue on Christian responses to the LGBTQ community, focusing on biblical passages and different interpretations regarding marriage equality.

In part two, "Authentic Sexuality," chapter six introduces a biblical model of authentic sexuality in relationship. This becomes the basis for God's intention that our sexuality is to lead us into meaningful, person-centered relationships. The biblical accounts of covenant, grace, empowerment, and intimacy provide a theology of authentic sexual relationships. Chapter seven brings out the unique dynamics of sexuality and singleness, while chapter eight deals with the practice of premarital cohabitation. Chapter nine concludes with a perspective on maximizing marital sexual fulfillment.

In part three, "Inauthentic Sexuality," we bring forward the difficult inauthentic forms of human sexuality. The nonrelational focus distorts God's holy meaning in creating us as sexual beings. Chapter ten looks at some of the common causes of extramarital sex and the serious consequence it has on relationships. Chapter eleven considers sexual harassment as an uninvited eroticizing of a relationship. Sexual abuse of children in chapter twelve is referred to as a violation deep within the child's soul. Chapter thirteen focuses on two forms of sexualized power—rape and sexual violence—destructive forces emerging from a violent world. Chapters fourteen and fifteen investigate two particularly self-defeating and devastating forms of inauthentic sexuality: pornography and sexual addiction.

Part four concludes with a final chapter, "The Sexually Authentic Society," in which we discuss the importance of developing societal structures capable of promoting and sustaining authentic sexuality. It challenges the Christian community to be intentional and proactive in bringing salt and light to a world in desperate need of theology that gives meaning and right understanding to human sexuality.

## The Sexually Authentic Society

Our investigation of human sexuality has been guided by a search for a God-ordained sexual authenticity. Considering various psychological, sociological, cultural, and biological factors that contribute to and influence the development of one's sexuality, we have offered a biblical framework that deepens our understanding of what it means to be an authentic sexual person. As we come to the end of this book, we take a bird's-eye view of the societal and cultural context within which individuals live out their lives as sexual beings. Clearly, the development and nurturing of authentic sexuality does not exist in a vacuum. Larger social systems affect us in a way that either promotes or distorts sexuality as God intended it to be. Throughout the book we have contended that individuals thrive when these social structures provide support, guidance, and accountability. These structures are diagrammed in three concentric circles representing family life, community life (including the congregation and wider community), and societal life.

## Family Life

Theologically, the relationship principles of covenant, grace, empowerment, and intimacy are applicable to family sexual health. Parents, who are the leaders of the family, have formed a marital bond modeling a relational context; spouses offer themselves as covenant makers and covenant keepers in body, mind, and spirit to each other in "one flesh" union. Through a differentiated unity, they create a reciprocal interdependence in which the best interest of the relationship is a priority. Equality and mutual empowerment model gender richness.

The family offers a predictable and secure environment for children. Uniqueness is affirmed as each member forms togetherness in a family bond. Grace rather than shame is offered when mistakes are made. Empowerment in the form of nurture and guidance builds members up rather than tears them down. Sexuality is acknowledged as God's gift, and parents provide solid information about bodies and sexuality, focusing on the meaning of sexuality in the context of biblical and relational dynamics.

Respect is demonstrated through appropriate affection and sexual boundaries and through affirmation of personality, gender, and sexuality differences. Children are encouraged to freely express - themselves as male and female rather than be confined by rigidly imposed gender roles. Each parent establishes unique emotional bonds with both male and female children.

Ideally, the family affirms sexuality for what it is meant to be. Home is a place where feelings and opinions are honored, so there is no need to keep secrets or hide feelings and thoughts. This is a place where members listen to and encourage each other to talk openly about sex and gender. Sexually authentic family life ensures that members can be emotionally open and not ashamed. It is a place where they can be themselves, free from the distorted sexual messages and demanding expectation of the outside world.

In contrast, when a family interacts with conditional love, shame, misuse of power, and lack of connection, these patterns lend themselves to inauthentic ways of being sexual. Challenging these family-interaction patterns can bring needed change, establish new patterns of relating, and develop authenticity in sexuality. Family counseling can be an enormous help with communication, boundary keeping, honest expression of discomfort regarding sexual messages, gender inequalities, and disrespectful behaviors. It is a safe place where attitudes and behaviors can be challenged.

An example of such a process is when Judy counseled the family of a teenage daughter, including her two younger brothers, mother, and father, in her therapy practice. The concern had to do with boundaries in the family. In the safety of the therapy room, the daughter could share her frustrations about her younger brothers barging into her bedroom whenever they chose. The family had an open-door policy. She was also uncomfortable when her father hugged her too long and needed him to be more sensitive to her wishes for other expressions of affection. The mother empathized with her daughter's sexual development and supported her need for personal privacy. Together the family devised a new family rule of knocking on the closed door before entering. The father became thoughtful regarding his daughter's discomfort with showing affection, deciding on weekly times they could engage in special activities together. Once the brothers honored their sister's need for privacy and respected her gender uniqueness, they were able to relax and have more positive interactions. The counseling offered an opportunity for the family to work together for the good of the whole.

## Community Life

The New Testament paints a picture of the ideal community of Christian believers existing for the support and good of all of its believers and the wider community of which it is a part. Here we turn to the biblical concepts of *koinonia* and being a good neighbor to fulfill these goals.

The local church serves as a primary group for Christian believers. Sometimes described as a "family of families," the church gives members a source of identity, support, and accountability. For church to become a plausibility structure of faith, it needs to be a place where persons discover sexual authenticity supported by biblical truths. It needs to be a place that serves as God's transforming agent of grace in the lives of believers.

God's ideal for social and sexual relationships within a local church context is the New Testament concept of *koinonia* (Greek *koinōnia*, "fellowship"). Scripture uses this term to refer to a group of believers united in identity and purpose. One of the metaphors that the apostle Paul uses to describe the church is family. Christians are members of a divine family, the head of which is the triune God. The apostle Paul conveys the words of God, "I will receive you.... I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters" (2 Cor 6:17-18). Ephesians 2:19 says, "You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (NRSV).

Jesus' attitude toward inclusiveness is clearly shown in Mark 3:31-35. While speaking to a crowd, he is informed that his mother and brothers have arrived. He replies, —Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'" (NRSV). The common membership we have in the body of Christ binds all believers to Christ and to one another as family. The concept of koinonia provides us with a model of the church as a primary support and accountability community.

Strong families are not ends in themselves but part of a body of believers with shared beliefs, values, ideals, and goals caring for one another and others. Churches that practice koinonia are a witness. Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:35). The New Testament example of koinonia is a model for how human beings live meaningful lives in harmony with themselves, others, and their Creator.

Sociologically, a primary group serves as a mediating structure between the isolated, private world of the family and faceless, remote societal structures. Unfortunately, more and more people in modern society are not part of a primary support, meaning there is a loss of group accountability and effective social control. Perhaps social networking has become the modern substitute for a primary group. In our electronically driven lives, people connect with each other through Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and so on. Yet these social media platforms contain rapidly changing and disconnected collections of people. Since these networks are individualized, they lack foundational group-based values like commitment and a sense of secure belonging.

Responses to the disintegration of primary group relationships are varied. Some try a variety of groups based on interests such as economic sharing, hobbies, or religious devotion. Some become involved in residential communities such as Homewood, Pleasantville, and Community Heights for identity and belonging. Primary group identity and relationships are desperately sought out, yet often prove to be exceedingly difficult to achieve. In light of this, the church plays an important role as neighbor.

We have endorsed the church as a social unit in which individuals and families find support and accountability for their sexual values and behavior. In addition, the church reaches into the neighborhood in two important ways to encourage sexual authenticity. First, as a community of believers, the church can play a prophetic role by challenging sexually inauthentic aspects of society. The church is called to faithfully preach the kingdom by exposing the sexual lies, manipulations, and illusions perpetuated by elements in society that deny the light of God's redemption in Jesus Christ.

The church community also has a role in combating the bombardment of inauthentic sexual messages. Our families are more vulnerable today because of alarming rates of inauthentic sexual messages. It takes a coordinated effort at all levels to protest inauthentic sexuality in a media world. Excessive expressions of sexuality are most notably found in the form of the sexualization or eroticization of nonsexual aspects of life and social relationships. An example is overreliance on sex in advertising and sexually suggestive content in the media.

In a recent article, "Media and Sexualization: State of Empirical Research, 1995-2015." Manique Ward (2016) reviewed 109 publications that contained 135 studies. From this comprehensive review she concludes that "sexually objectifying portrayals of women are a frequent occurrence in mainstream media" (p. 516). Ward believes that the constant exposure to a sexualized media is directly associated with a range of problems, "including higher levels of body dissatisfaction, greater self-objectification, greater support of sexist beliefs and of adversarial sexual beliefs, and greater tolerance of sexual violence towards women" (p. 560).

The sexualized media presents a diminished view of women's competence, morality, and humanity. Young girls are especially vulnerable to media advertising of the "perfect" female body, one that is slim and well-shaped, a problem that contributes to eating disorders and related psychological problems. The church can have a voice combating inauthentic messages by helping children learn how to discern false claims in media: offering youth a workshop on the impact of media in defining beauty, body image, and sexuality; or having a parenting class to discuss authentic versus inauthentic messages about sexuality.

The people of God are healers who tend to the sexually wounded in their church and the wider community. The parable of the good Samaritan is a vivid illustration of Jesus' command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 19:19). Here Jesus presents the concept of neighbor as the normative model for all community-based relationships. How convenient it would have been for Jesus to make a clear distinction between those who are our neighbors and those who are not. Instead, he made the startling assertion that every individual is a potential neighbor: neighbor-type relationships are created when one person comes to the aid of another. Moreover, each of us is capable of both being a neighbor and having a neighbor. Thus, when meeting the needs of others, I am a neighbor; and when someone meets my needs, I have a neighbor.

In the church or community setting, group identity may be about serving others in a myriad of ways, such as working in a homeless shelter, providing a home for unwed mothers and their children, and resettling refugees. Some will offer their homes as places of temporary refuge for sexually broken people. When the call to be a neighbor is from God, the action is an empowering one. It provides what is needed without judgment or condition.

### Societal Life

In most modern translations of the Bible, the term shalom, used 250 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, is usually translated as "peace." Peace in Western cultures connotes the absence of conflict. However, in Hebrew culture shalom is not just about the mere absence of conflict; it is about human welfare in material and spiritual matters. For shalom to exist, there must be justice, holiness, and righteousness in the ethical structures of society; there must be fairness and respect in the way human beings treat each other at each social structural level. Such a situation is poetically portrayed in Isaiah:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together;  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. (Is 11:6-8 NRSV)

In the sexually authentic society, social space will be safe from sexual predators of both the less dangerous (sexual harassment) and more dangerous (sexual violence) variety. In our society we need protection from the distorted expressions of sexuality. Every society has agreed-on standards of what is acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior. Consensus regarding sexual attitudes and behaviors in traditional societies was largely based on religious beliefs, the vital source of foundational values. In modern societies there is considerably less consensus and a noted absence of religious influence.

Modernist and postmodernist influences. Our technologically oriented societies are based primarily on a scientific worldview. Modernization challenged the traditional religious sphere with a

secularized belief system based on scientific rationalism. Modernity builds a sexual ethic and morality on the basis of scientific and naturalistic assumptions. Living in the sexual climate of the postsexual revolution, we can easily feel overwhelmed by damaging forces in society.

Rejecting both the moral certainty of traditional religious systems and the certainty of scientifically based modernist thinking, postmodernists promote a variety of alternative sexual moralities. This more radical response adheres to many flavors of truth, depending on one's personal experiences and collective perspective. To avoid the modernist pitfall of idealizing any one cultural form of sexual morality, postmodernity goes to the opposite extreme by rejecting any criteria for assessing the rightness or wrongness of sexual behavior. While this is a corrective to only using human reason as the basis for constructing sexual morality, it is problematic when reality is solely constructed by personal experience.

Rejecting the general laws of nature as grounds for accepting or rejecting sexual morality, postmodernists view reality as multilayered, with many ways of knowing. While a Christian perspective is acknowledged as one view, there are equally acceptable ways of knowing, and therefore Christianity is just one of many plausibility structures. In fact, postmodernists warn about the danger of accepting one system of morality over the myriad other options, for to do so is judged as restrictive and intolerant. Postmodernity is open to any cultural form that can collectively be argued as defensible.

A strict postmodernist view leaves one with little ground on which to evaluate the moral superiority of one system of sexual morality over another since all reality and alternative forms are acceptable. The problem is how to contest dehumanizing, degrading, and abusive forms of sexual behavior that some may defend from their subjective system of morality. As Christians, we must stand for a morality that recognizes the potential for evil as well as good in individuals and social systems.

There is a reality that the Christian community must seek to uphold, but to do so effectively demands a good understanding of both the potential benefits and the destructiveness of modern and postmodern thinking toward sexual morality. To embrace modernity and postmodernity uncritically leaves one in the position of merely choosing human perspectives over God's perspective. It is essential that Christians recognize the positive and negative forces of both modernity and postmodernity in order to make a biblically based, proactive response to the current cultural views of sexual morality.

A proactive response to inauthentic societal sexuality. Given the increased rates of premarital and extramarital sex, the explicit sanctioning of these behaviors in television and movies, and the multibillion-dollar industry in cybersex via the Internet, a case can be made that we are now living in the postsexual revolution. In other words, the sexual revolution has taken place, and these pervasive and invasive forms of sexualized media are becoming normalized and standardized.

### Living from a Minority Sexual Standard

Being a Christian at this time, perhaps as much as any time in history, means one is living out a minority sexual standard. How can a biblical standard of sexual morality be modeled and effectively advocated in the face of alternative and often contradictory standards of sexual morality? One way the Christian community protests is through boycotting. We applaud the attempts to combat the corroding effects of pornography and dishonest treatment of sex as they affect public sexual morality.

Such a reactive response to sexual immorality is limited, however, so we advocate a proactive response. The Christian community can set an agenda to combat rather than merely oppose the secular agenda. Picture the movement of a group of balls on a pool table after they have been struck



by the cue ball. The force of the cue ball sends all the other balls colliding off each other and against the sides of the pool table. In a reactive model, the persons or things (pool balls) simply adjust to pressures (cue ball). This is not good enough.

While reactivity responds to the actions of an undesirable element in society, proactivity is a form of acting that takes the initiative in a way that forces the undesirable element to respond. With proactive responses to circumstances, one takes intentional steps toward changing external forces. In hope of liberating others from the sexual pollutant, we can actively engage in changing norms of sexual morality.

What are some examples of a proactive approach? We can use educational resources to teach others to detect the destructive ways, both subtle and not-so-subtle, that popular culture treats sex. We can critically analyze the sexual content in movies, television, music, and advertising in terms of their failure to show the negative consequences of non-relation-centered sexuality. We can raise consciousness about comedy that innocently avoids an honest portrayal of the negative consequences of promiscuous sexual involvement. The point is to go beyond an automatic rejection by evaluating the content in terms of its theological correctness, subtle damaging messages, and honest consequences in the more proactive way.

Telling youth to "just say no" to sex is a reactive response, whereas offering a strong rationale for practicing sexual abstinence is a proactive response. The proactive approach involves developing a rationale for abstinence before marriage that integrates social science and biblically based truths. By calling women and men to be faithful to their spouses and to model justice, purity, and righteousness to their children and to others, we proactively set an agenda capable of making a significant difference.

An even more radical proactive response is for Christians to become involved in the creation of the arts and popular culture, portraying love and sex in God's intended way. Those not directly involved can affirm artists who treat sex in a way that reflects biblical values.

Developing proactive responses to inauthentic societal expressions of sexuality is not a simple or easy thing to do. When so much is at stake, the Christian community needs to develop clear rationales that affirm reasons for a biblically based sexuality. The Christian community must be at least as knowledgeable and sophisticated in exposing the dishonest portrayal of sex when it occurs, and it must participate in the production of popular culture that is based on biblical morality.

## Conclusion

We have suggested that sexual authenticity will develop in a social environment that supports and holds members accountable at the familial, congregational, and societal levels. We have used the biblical concepts of covenant love, koinonia, neighbor, and shalom as descriptors of ideal social structures that would characterize each of these three levels. When authentic sexuality exists at all levels, each will mutually reinforce the sexual authenticity of the other and of the individuals within them.

When the authentic expression of sexuality is challenged at any level, the Christian church, as a called-out community, needs to be the salt of the earth by responsibly modeling authentic sexuality and needs to take a prophetic role as the light of the world by voicing God's call for authentic expressions of sexuality. This book has hopefully encouraged and challenged Christians to live sexually authentic lives as a testimony in a secular society characterized by competing sexual moralities. It is our prayer that we individually and collectively seek the power of the Holy Spirit and the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught and modeled for us how to be salt and light to the world. <>

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## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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#### **ADDICTED TO LUST: PORNOGRAPHY IN THE LIVES OF CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTS**

by Samuel L. Perry [Oxford University Press, 9780190844219]

Few cultural issues alarm conservative Protestant families and communities like the seemingly ubiquitous threat of pornography. Thanks to widespread access to the internet, conservative Protestants now face a reality in which every Christian man, woman, and child with a smartphone can access limitless pornography in their bathroom, at work, or at a friend's sleepover. Once confident of their victory over pornography in society at large, conservative Protestants now fear that "porn addiction" is consuming even the most faithful. How are they adjusting to this new reality? And what are its consequences in their lives?

Drawing on over 130 interviews as well as numerous national surveys, *Addicted to Lust* shows that, compared to other Americans, pornography shapes the lives of conservative Protestants in ways that are uniquely damaging to their mental health, spiritual lives, and intimate relationships. Samuel L. Perry demonstrates how certain pervasive beliefs within the conservative Protestant subculture unwittingly create a context in which those who use pornography are often overwhelmed with shame and discouragement, sometimes to the point of depression or withdrawal from faith altogether. Conservative Protestant women who use pornography feel a "double shame" both for sinning sexually and for sinning "like a man," while conflicts over pornography in marriages are escalated by patterns of lying, hiding, blowing up, or threats of divorce. **ADDICTED TO LUST** shines new light on one of the most talked-about problems facing conservative Christians.

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#### **AUTHENTIC HUMAN SEXUALITY: AN INTEGRATED CHRISTIAN APPROACH, 3RD**

**EDITION** by Judith K. Balswick and Jack O. Balswick [IVP Academic, 9780830852376]

## Sex Pervades Our Culture

Sex pervades our culture, going far beyond the confines of the bedroom into the workplace, the church, and the media. Yet despite all the attention and even obsession devoted to sex, human sexuality remains confusing and even foreboding. What, after all, is authentic human sexuality?

That is the question Judith and Jack Balswick set out to answer in this wide-ranging and probing book. Informed by sociology, psychology, and theology, the Balswicks investigate how human sexuality originates both biologically and socially. They lay groundwork for a normative Christian interpretation of sexuality, show how authentic sexuality is necessarily grounded in relationships, and explore such forms of "inauthentic sexuality" as sexual harassment, pornography, and rape.

Since its first publication, [Authentic Human Sexuality](#) has established itself as a standard text at numerous colleges and seminaries. Now this third edition features updated theological and social science research, insights from current neuropsychological evidence, and an expanded biblical model of authentic sexual relationships, along with updated discussion of sexual minorities, same-sex attraction, and LGBTQ issues.

A new generation of students, pastors, psychologists, and sociologists engaged in counseling will be indebted to the Balswicks for this study of an endlessly fascinating and perplexing facet of human identity.

**CONSENT: A MEMOIR OF UNWANTED ATTENTION** by Donna Freitas [Little, Brown and Company, 9780316450522]

**In this "compelling and disturbing" true story (Rebecca Traister), a young woman's toxic mentor develops a dark, stalking obsession that disrupts her career -- and her peace of mind.**

Donna Freitas has lived two lives. In one life, she is a well-published author and respected scholar who has traveled around the country speaking about Title IX, consent, religion, and sex on college campuses. In the other, she is a victim, a woman who suffered and suffers still because she was stalked by her graduate professor for more than two years.

As a doctoral candidate, Freitas loved asking big questions, challenging established theories and sinking her teeth into sacred texts. She felt at home in the library, and safe in the book-lined offices of scholars whom she admired. But during her first year, one particular scholar became obsessed with Freitas' academic enthusiasm. He filled her student mailbox with letters and articles. He lurked on the sidewalk outside her apartment. He called daily and left nagging voicemails. He befriended her mother, and made himself comfortable in her family's home. He wouldn't go away. While his attraction was not overtly sexual, it was undeniably inappropriate, and most importantly--unwanted.

**THE GILDED AUCTION BLOCK: POEMS** by Shane McCrae [Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 9780374162252]

**An incisive new collection of poetry on political and contemporary themes**

*I'm made of murderers I'm made  
Of nobodies and immigrants and the poor*

*and a whole / Family the mother's  
liver and her lungs*

In **THE GILDED AUCTION BLOCK**, the acclaimed poet Shane McCrae considers the present moment in America on its own terms as well as for what it says about the American project and

Americans themselves. In the book's four sections, McCrae alternately responds directly to Donald Trump and contextualizes him historically and personally, exploding the illusions of freedom of both black and white Americans. A moving, incisive, and frightening exploration of both the legacy and the current state of white supremacy in this country, **THE GILDED AUCTION BLOCK** is a book about the present that reaches into the past and stretches toward the future.

**HUMANS ON THE RUN: OF EXILES AND ASYLUMS** by Kumar M. Tiku [Oxford University Press, 9780199484812]

**HUMANS ON THE RUN** is an attempt to preserve memories of several microscopic journeys embarked upon by humans, in time and space, often under conditions of utter and complete hopelessness. A collection of 24 stories that narrate first-person accounts of migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers affected by multiple displacements due to political or sectarian strife across several countries: India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, Eritrea, and South Sudan.

Individuals in flight, long disconnected from the certitudes of a settled, anchored existence, map their journeys when moving to the next village, town, city, country, or continent, in the hope of beating certain death, sustained denigration, and systematic abuse. The stories take the reader to the heart of human existence, capturing a sliver of the textured human experiences encapsulated in each person on the run as a result of raging conflict in her or his backyard.

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**THE BODY IS NOT AN APOLOGY: THE POWER OF RADICAL SELF-LOVE** by Sonya Renee Taylor [Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 9781626569768]

"To build a world that works for everyone, we must first make the radical decision to love every facet of ourselves...'The body is not an apology' is the mantra we should all embrace." --Kimberlé Crenshaw, legal scholar and founder and Executive Director, African American Policy Forum

"Taylor invites us to break up with shame, to deepen our literacy, and to liberate our practice of celebrating every body and never apologizing for this body that is mine and takes care of me so well." --Alicia Garza, cocreator of the Black Lives Matter Global Network and Strategy + Partnerships Director, National Domestic Workers Alliance

"Her manifesto on radical self-love is life altering--required reading for anyone who struggles with body image." --Claire Foster, Foreword Review

Humans are a varied and divergent bunch with all manner of beliefs, morals, and bodies. Systems of oppression thrive off our inability to make peace with difference and injure the relationship we have with our own bodies.

**THE BODY IS NOT AN APOLOGY** offers radical self-love as the balm to heal the wounds inflicted by these violent systems. World-renowned activist and poet Sonya Renee Taylor invites us to reconnect with the radical origins of our minds and bodies and celebrate our collective, enduring strength. As we awaken to our own indoctrinated body shame, we feel inspired to awaken others and to interrupt the systems that perpetuate body shame and oppression against all bodies. When we act from this truth on a global scale, we usher in the transformative opportunity of radical self-love, which is the opportunity for a more just, equitable, and compassionate world--for us all.

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**OBSERVING THE INVISIBLE: POEMS** by Kelly Cherry [LSU Press, 9780807170076]

### Master Poet Kelly Cherry's Imaginative Latest Collection Contemplates the Unseen

In **OBSERVING THE INVISIBLE**, Kelly Cherry crafts poems that explore the ever-evolving realm of modern physics, confronting the invisibilities and mysteries of the material world. She leverages challenging ideas into a space of contemplative wonder as the book moves from external observation into an increasingly inward space of personal reflection and expression. Throughout, *Observing the Invisible* remains deliberate in its concentration on what cannot be, almost as if the poems are being erased even as they are being written. Acknowledging that such contradictions cannot sustain themselves for long, Cherry seeks out such difficulties and ultimately finds resolutions.

Kelly Cherry is the author of over twenty-five books of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction, including *The Life and Death of Poetry* and *Quartet for J. Robert Oppenheimer*. She is Eudora Welty Professor Emerita of English and Evjue-Bascom Professor Emerita in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. She and her husband live in Virginia.

**PORNOGRAPHY: A PHILOSOPHICAL INTRODUCTION** by Mari Mikkola [Oxford University Press, 9780190640071]

Debates over pornography tend to be heated and deeply polarized--as with other topics that have to do with sex, pornography cuts to the core of our values and convictions. Philosophical debates concerning pornography are fraught with difficult questions: What is pornography? What does pornography do (if anything at all)? Is the consumption of pornography a harmless private matter, or does pornography violate women's civil rights? What, if anything, should legally be done about pornography? Can there be a genuinely feminist pro-pornography stance?

Answering these questions is complicated by widespread confusion over the conceptual and political commitments of different anti- and pro-pornography positions, and whether these positions are even in tension with one another. For a start, different people understand *pornography* differently and can easily end up talking past one another. In order to clarify the debate and make genuine philosophical headway in discussing the topic of pornography, Mari Mikkola here provides an accessible introduction to contemporary philosophical debates conducted from a feminist philosophical perspective. The starting point of the book's examination is morally neutral, and the book provides a comprehensive discussion of various philosophical positions on pornography that are found in ethics, aesthetics, feminist philosophy, political philosophy, epistemology, and social ontology. The book clarifies different stances in the debate, thus clarifying and helping readers to understand what exactly is at stake. In addition, although the book does not argue for a single outlook, it puts forward substantive philosophical views on different aspects of philosophical debates about pornography. Mikkola ultimately offers readers important methodological insights about doing philosophical work on something as ubiquitous as pornography.

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**RAIN AND EMBERS** by Ali Nuri [Ali Nuri, 9780578555546] [ali-nuri.com](http://ali-nuri.com)

A poetic story of survival, **RAIN AND EMBERS** touches on far-reaching themes of redemption, forgiveness, and love.

When all the ashes wash away, beauty remains in the wreckage, waiting to bloom once more.

Nuri has an unpretentious poetic sense whose verse transmutes the pain and displacement of the immigrant into beauty and an invitation to the universal of the friend.

**SAVAGE APPETITES: FOUR TRUE STORIES OF WOMEN, CRIME, AND OBSESSION** by Rachel Monroe [Scribner, 9781501188886]

A provocative and original investigation of our cultural fascination with crime, linking four archetypes—Detective, Victim, Defender, Killer—to four true stories about women driven by obsession.

In this illuminating exploration of women, violence, and obsession, Rachel Monroe interrogates the appeal of true crime through four narratives of fixation. In the 1940s, a frustrated heiress began creating dollhouse crime scenes depicting murders, suicides, and accidental deaths. Known as the “Mother of Forensic Science,” she revolutionized the field of what was then called legal medicine. In the aftermath of the Manson Family murders, a young woman moved into Sharon Tate’s guesthouse and, over the next two decades, entwined herself with the Tate family. In the mid-nineties, a landscape architect in Brooklyn fell in love with a convicted murderer, the supposed ringleader of the West Memphis Three, through an intense series of letters. After they married, she devoted her life to getting him freed from death row. And in 2015, a teenager deeply involved in the online fandom for the Columbine killers planned a mass shooting of her own.

Each woman, Monroe argues, represents and identifies with a particular archetype that provides an entryway into true crime. Through these four cases, she traces the history of American crime through the growth of forensic science, the evolving role of victims, the Satanic Panic, the rise of online detectives, and the long shadow of the Columbine shooting. In a combination of personal narrative, reportage, and a sociological examination of violence and media in the twentieth and twenty-first century, *Savage Appetites* scrupulously explores empathy, justice, and the persistent appeal of violence.

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**SEPTEMBER 1, 1939: A BIOGRAPHY OF A POEM** by Ian Sansom [Harper, 9780062984593]



One poet, his poem, New York City, and a world on the verge of change.

W. H. Auden, a wunderkind, a victim-beneficiary of a literary cult of personality, became a scapegoat and a poet-expatriate largely excluded from British literary history because he left. And his poem, "September 1, 1939," was his most famous and celebrated, yet one which he tried to rewrite and disown and which has enjoyed—or been condemned—to a tragic and unexpected afterlife.

These are the contributing forces underlying Ian Sansom's work excavating the man and his most celebrated piece of literature. But Sansom's book is also about New York City: an island, an emblem of the Future, magnificent, provisional, seamy, and in 1939—about to emerge as the defining twentieth-century cosmopolis, the capital of the world.

And so it is also about a world at a point of change—about 1939, and about our own Age of Anxiety, about the aftermath of September 11, when many American newspapers reprinted Auden's poem in its entirety on their editorial pages.

More than a work of literary criticism or literary biography, this is a record of why and how we create and respond to great poetry.

"**'SEPTEMBER 1, 1939'** is not only one of those rare coincidences in literature in which the force of history meets personal psychology and ideology, to produce something truly marvellous—italsorepresents a moment of crisis, where the great pressures at work both outside and inside the poem force certain flaws to become apparent. Not only that, it's a poem whose troubled history involves its own self-destruction and reinvention: it therefore represents the art object as living organism, something that grows and changes, that is understood, misunderstood, appropriated, abandoned, recycled and reused, again and again. Above all, it is a poem that still reverberates with meaning and controversy, a poem that readers return to at times of personal and national crisis: it turns out that the 'guy' who inhabits Auden's poem is us."—Ian Sansom

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**THE SEX THIEVES: THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF A RUMOR** by Julien Bonhomme, Translated by Dominic Horsfall, Foreword by Philippe Descola [HAU, 9780986132582]

While working in Africa, anthropologist Julien Bonhomme encountered an astonishing phenomenon: people being accused of stealing or shrinking the genitals of strangers on the simple occasion of a handshake on the street. As he soon discovered, these accusations can have dramatic outcomes: the “sex thieves” are often targeted by large crowds and publicly lynched. Moreover, such rumors are an extremely widespread practice, having affected almost half of the African continent since the 1970s. In this book, Bonhomme examines the story of the “penis snatcher,” asking larger questions about how to account for such a phenomenon—unique in its spatial and temporal scale—without falling prey to the cliché of Africa as an exotic other.

Bonhomme argues that the public belief in sex thieves cannot be considered a superstition or form of mass hysteria. Rather, he brings to light multiple factors that explain the rumor’s success and shows how the cultural dynamic can operate on a vast scale. Analyzing the rumor on both transnational and local levels, he demonstrates how it arises from the ambiguities and dangers of anonymity, and thus that it reveals an occult flipside to everyday social interaction. Altogether, this book provides both richly ethnographic and theoretical understandings of urban sociality and the dynamics of human communication in contemporary Africa and beyond.

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**SONG OF SONGS: A POEM** by Sylvie Baumgartel [Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 9780374268039]

A debut poetry collection from a writer whose vivid verse explores the connections and relationships that make us human

Sometimes I like to feel sexy. Sometimes I don't. Sometimes I like to be very plain. Invisible almost, hiding in plain sight. I want to hide and to be found.

In the spirit of the biblical Song of Solomon, Sylvie Baumgartel's **SONG OF SONGS** takes the subjects of love and worship, and brings them to the desperate, wild spaces of domestic life. With a voice at once precise and oneiric, Baumgartel explores the landscapes of sex and desire, power and submission, in this groundbreaking book-length poem that forces us to question the bounds of devotion. An ambitious and vivid debut, **SONG OF SONGS: A POEM** is a work of breathtaking honesty, couched in language few of us are brave enough to speak aloud.

There are things we don't talk about. They come in two categories: the mundane and the explicit. That which will bore, that which will corrupt. Waiting for lotion to soak into your legs, the desire to give your entire body over to someone else. In her debut book of poetry, **SONG OF SONGS**, Sylvie Baumgartel strays from neither.

Drawing on the biblical Song of Solomon, Baumgartel brings the themes of love and devotion into a new space—one of desperation and domesticity, wildness and wonder. All seventy-three pages of Song of Songs take place in the speaker's home. We are in her head as she masturbates, as she hangs laundry to dry, as she eats chickpea salad. We're with her as she panics about her acute awareness of her own breathing, ponders whether she has multiple personality disorder ("Nope, I don't, just looked it up"), and asks how people only, just now, have discovered the reason for the holes in Swiss cheese.

More than anything, we're there for her devotion to a single "you." "For you," "because of you," "you." Everything the speaker does is for this unidentified person, her every action at the service of another. Over the course of Song of Songs, Baumgartel forces us to question the bounds of devotion. What is the meaning of a life lived not for oneself but for another? Can power be found in submission? Song of Songs is a book-length poem about sex, connection, and relationships—but not in the ways we usually speak aloud about them.

**THREE-TOED GULL: SELECTED POEMS** by Jesper Svenbro translated from the Swedish by John Matthias and Lars-Hakan Svensson [Hydra Books, Northwestern University Press, 9780810118959]