

Internet Porn Capitalism Men?

I-solation and capitalism

Cuntry is a non-erotic book of prose poetry whose “I” is a young woman who in early adolescence became addicted to Internet porn.¹ What keeps coming back to me, months after I read this book, is a line about how the I’s sister believed that any man, “even Jesus would fuck her.” I took this comment to mean that this “I,” like her sister, felt as if she had no particular appeal; men were interested in her only because she had what was necessary for heterosexual sex (and thus, ultimately, for insemination, impregnation). But this what—a hole or holes—is a property all women have. Whatever might be particular or special about “me” is, by and large, irrelevant. (Readers are kindly requested to excuse the vulgarity; the rest of this short essay is more restrained.)

In “Dead Dog Country Song,” the author of *Cuntry*, Kristin Sanders, writes:

The night my mom and dad asked me have you been looking at porn on the Internet again? The night I ran to my room crying. When my mom came in I told her how I looked at pictures of women because I needed to know what a woman looked like, I was no curves no period no boys interested at all and I was doing it to compare myself to the pictures of women because I had to. I said I quit dance. I said I hate my body, I have nothing . . .

Nothing—lacking basic features all women are supposed to have.

We are not told if the mother, or father, responded at all to this. This “I” feels on her own—free to find somewhere else, anywhere, information, self-respect, stimulation, love, work, a therapist, . . .

A decade or more ago a book-length report on the *Sexual Behavior of Teenagers and Contemporary Japan* quoted a female high-school student saying that she had sex with multiple partners because “There is nothing to fill the time.” The Japanese researcher also proposed that teenagers, “exposed to excessive media full of sexual information and strong peer pressure,” rushed into sexual relationships “as a confirmation of affection to compensate their failure in establishing emotional connectedness.”² But now, from Japan, the United States, and many other “developed” countries come reports that teenagers, young adults and older adults are not rushing into relationships or sex at all. A sociologist reports that over the

¹ Kristin Sanders, *Cuntry* (Trembling Pillow Press, 2017). I encountered this book at [Berl’s Brooklyn Poetry Shop](#), a valuable institution.

² Masako Ono-Kihara, *Sexual Behavior of Teenagers and Contemporary Japan*, The WYSH Project (Tokyo: Sanko Publisher, 2011). Note that the original text is in Japanese. The passages quoted above are from the English translation cited here; translator unknown.

course of a year only 50 percent of heterosexual single American women in their 20s go on any dates, and older women are less likely to do so. Tinder, which has been promoted a site for quick sex hook-ups, turns out to be a site for spending time on one's cellphone, perhaps fantasizing about quick sex hook-ups. The average Tinder user apparently spends an hour and a half a day on the site, but only 2 percent of his or her attempted electronic connections lead to an electronic connection, let alone to meeting someone in the flesh, with or without clothes.³

The most valid explanations here, as in other domains, are likely economic. Now that everyone is in the workforce and with few labor unions or laws to protect them, there's no time for sex or intimacy. Porn, vibrators, and social media will have to do. And, as ever with capitalism, once some basic activity—e.g. drinking water—has been monetized, consumers are made to feel there is something bad about engaging in the activity without paying extra for it. Drinking bottled water must be healthier or a sign of greater social status than just drinking the good water that, for most Americans at least, comes for free out of their taps. And so too flirting, which is free and was once considered good fun, is now increasingly considered toxic, dangerous, sexual harassment. You should spend your time and money with electronics instead.

A question one might find in *Cuntry*, as elsewhere: What does all this do to our sense of ourselves? And what if our self is what we have to sell?

Ill-literacy and the marketing of the self

Some time ago I drafted and polished a long essay, with many footnotes, about *Cuntry*. Not so much about its poetry and poetics as about aspects of sex, electronic media, consumer capitalism, and the plights of women and men that reading the book called to mind. But my sense is that most members of the intelligentsia now do precious little reading—above all skimming on their cellphones news stories and opinion pieces reassuring them that the Chief Tweet is an awful person. And I regularly encounter aspiring poets who have not even heard

³ The sociologist is Michael Rosenfeld who runs a longitudinal study out of Stanford University called “How Couples Meet and Stay Together.” His statistics on dating (or the lack thereof), as well as the information about Tinder, comes from Kate Julian, [The Sex Recession: Why Are Young People Having So Little Sex?](#) *The Atlantic*, December 2018. Other articles in this burgeoning field: [‘There isn’t really anything magical about it’: Why more millennials are avoiding sex](#) by Tara Bahrapour, *Washington Post*, August 2, 2016; [Millennials are having less sex than any generation in 60 years; Here’s why it matters](#), by Melissa Batchelor Warnke, *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 2016; and [Too Much Netflix, Not Enough Chill: Why Young Americans Are Having Less Sex](#), by W. Bradford Wilcox and Samuel Sturgeon, *POLITICO Magazine*, February 8, 2018. A quote from Warnke’s article:

The proffered reasons for millennial abstinence? A culture of overwork and an obsession with career status, a fear of becoming emotionally involved and losing control, an online-dating milieu that privileges physical appearance above all, anxieties surrounding consent, and an uptick in the use of libido-busting antidepressants.

of any number of great poets who came before them and whose work could, at the very least, offer suggestions about the various ways poems might be written. Given all this, it seemed wrong to publish, front and center, a long essay on most any subject.

And as I was working *Cuntry* over in prose, it occurred to me that I might be taking its words way too seriously, or certainly in the wrong way. Perhaps much like all the lawyers who provide us with “the fine print,” many contemporary poets, bloggers, Web content providers, academics, and essayists now write with the assumption that our work will *not* be read? Some of us hope our work will be “liked”—an electronic activity which seems to have a lot to do with wishing to belong or wishing to feel as if one belonged, but very little to do with reading.

There *could be* a special kind of freedom in writing for no readers. You might wish to avoid words that appear on the lists of suspicious words used by government spies and their search engines, but otherwise . . . You could—for example, as Sanders does—speak of your most private (or seemingly most private), intimate, shameful experiences. Without the least fear of any consequences at all.

Except few of us writers avail ourselves of this opportunity. Consciously or unconsciously, we keep seeking the elusive reader. Sensing the void, we, quixotically, seek to make connections—even just one—within it. The mind molds itself for the sake of its marketability, Theodor Adorno, in a somewhat different context, noted a century ago.⁴

Some of this is quite simple, bald, and, yes, vulgar. An essayist decides that the poetry book he’ll write about is the one about sex and porn. Some African-American rappers make much of the word “nigger,” and some women writers and women comedians make much of “cunt.” After reading *Cuntry* I imagined that the author had several personae or alter-egos—several “I’s”—and the market had helped her choose the most readily saleable one—the “I” addicted-to-Internet-porn—to offer to the public.

Selfies and dogs

In one of my favorite poems/paragraphs in her book, Sanders writes:

The Internet is now a lot of selfies, a lot of images of women, taken by women and taken by men. The Internet is now a lot of free porn, a lot of videos. It is short bursts of information on a scrolling screen. . . . The Internet is some art, but mainly abject feelings. The Internet now is a monster that I blame. The Internet is now the reason I was ruined. And who else is ruined. Everyone. We are the ruined, the owned, the selfied, the lost,

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), “Cultural Criticism and Society,” *Prisms*, translated from German by Samuel and Shierry Weber (The MIT Press, 1983), 21. These essays were first collected and published in German in 1955.

we are the failures, the narcissists, we framed ourselves in an image and put it on the Internet for the world to see.

That passage led my long essay to propose that because of “the Internet”—or electronics, cellphones, social media, et al.—and because of the demands placed on parents and others by the capitalist work world, the majority of working-class and well-to-do young children no longer feel that their desires—or even just their human presence—are more than half-recognized by their parents. There is almost always a cellphone between parents (or nannies) and children. In New York restaurants I see many contemporary infants exploring the fact of and possibilities for communicating with other beings—by speaking to them or by making gestures, facial expressions. But contemporary infants often get little or no response from the people around them, looking at screens. What does such lack of response (which of course got its start long before the Internet) do to a child?

The other morning when I came out of my apartment building I saw a black dog lying on its back on the cement path, legs in the air, akimbo, in position, waiting, to have its belly rubbed. Next to the dog stood the owner, loosely holding the leash, thumbing his phone.

Boys, sex, capitalism

An old-fashioned, rather involved parent, and of a teenage boy, I want to add to the void this fact: young men these days cannot write books like *Cuntry*. They certainly could not get such a text published by a major publisher, nor by a little, non-commercial press such as *Cuntry*'s New Orleans-based Trembling Pillow Press. Heterosexual men, and heterosexual young men most particularly, most sadly, cannot even explore in their own minds some of the avenues of their experiences and feelings that Sanders and many other women, gay men, and transgender people are now encouraged to explore. A young heterosexual male writer *might* be able to write about his addiction to Internet porn and how he preferred it to sex with real people, and how he masturbated, etc., but this would have to be in the context of making himself an example of what I have heard called “toxic masculinity.”

I keep finding myself driven back to Freud's observation, in *Die Traumdeutung* (The Interpretation of Dreams) that civilization involves—or simply is—the age-long progress of repression of we human beings' emotional lives. Or we could say that the power of capital is now such that it can get the vast majority of workers—entrepreneurs and investment bankers included—to feel they would rather work and try to advance in their careers than to have much of an emotional life at all. And in addition to our instincts (e.g. our sex drives or our anger) being suppressed and sublimated, they are demonized. We are close to saying that what differentiates us from real animals is that not that we do a lot of thinking or walk erect on two legs or are now capable of wiping out life on Earth, but the *animals* have sex and want to and can't resist their hormones, etc., whereas WE can be celibate!

Sanders puts the matter differently (and with parentheses):

(The failure of the Internet. The failure of the addict. The failure of the body to orgasm. The failure of porn. The failure of endless connections. The failure of country music. The failure of feminism. The failure of fucking. The failure of being fucked. The failure of my country music songwriting dreams. The failure of this text. The failure of the confession. The failure of the penis. The failure of the cunt.)

— **William Eaton**