

"It's a rare book that can provide a deeper understanding of our cultural relationship to female sexuality along with an array of lively cocktail party trivia. Impeccably researched and engagingly written, *Virgin* does both with wit, style, and intellectual rigor. Before I read it, I didn't even realize how little I knew about virginity, and how much there is to know. What a huge contribution to study of sexuality and gender."

—Lisa Jervis, cofounder, *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture*

"*Virgin* is an engagingly written book on a fascinating subject. The information within can help Americans establish a healthier relationship with sexuality."

—Gloria Feldt, author, activist, former president of  
Planned Parenthood Federation of America

"It would all be exhausting if it weren't so enlightening and, for reasons both prurient and educational, page-turning."

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"Hanne Blank's always original and provocative writing fills a long-standing gap to investigate perhaps one of the most engrained, personally defining, but yet understudied taboos: virginity. With the wit of the best conversationalist and the grounding of an experienced scholar, she crosses disciplines, historical epochs, and religious traditions, and reveals very well what has been most desired and most feared through history in women themselves."

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—Rachel Manija Brown, author of *All the Fishes Come Home to Roost*

"Erudite and witty."

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

# VIRGIN

*The Untouched History*

HANNE BLANK

BLOOMSBURY

might themselves be erotically affected by the mythology of the erotic virgin that so permeates the culture. Virgins are not exempt from the mythologies of their own sexual status, after all. A virgin may well be every bit as erotically caught up in the implications of her own sexual status as the man who fantasizes about popping her cherry, but she is even less likely than he to be asked about it. How strange, in a culture so often obsessed by virginity, that we have chosen to be so blind.

Virginity is not the opposite of sex. Rather, it is its own unique and uniquely troublesome sexual entity, and one we have largely avoided addressing. Our presumptions about virginity have been with us for a very long time and will require a great deal of time and effort to question, let alone change. If we are ever to fill the virginity void with something more realistic than propaganda and more accurate than pornographic fantasy, however, this work is a challenge we would do well to take up.

## CHAPTER 12

*The Day Virginity Died?*

Virgin: teach your kids it's not a dirty word.  
—billboard, Baltimore, Maryland, 2003

**D**ID YOU HEAR about the virgin parade they were going to have in Hollywood?" asked a popular Jazz Age joke. "One girl got sick and the other didn't want to march all alone." As this 1920s joke demonstrates, the liberalization of sexual culture in America started well before the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s. During the twentieth century, our beliefs and expectations in regard to human nature, our economic lives, our experiences of the body and identity, and our relationships to religion have all undergone massive—and ongoing—change. It is small wonder that our ideals and expectations in regard to virginity have been shifting, too.

As often as magazine articles have lamented the "death of virginity" in the twentieth century, and as many jokes as have been made about virgins being an endangered species, virginity is hardly so fragile as all that. Still, it has been changing, its place in our lives and its role in our culture shifting with the tides of history. We can see the nature of this shift in a massive study conducted in the late 1980s among young adults in thirty-seven different countries around the globe. The study revealed that while for both males and females premarital chastity—virginity—still earned a place in a list of the eighteen characteristics

considered most desirable in a potential mate, both men and women ranked it lower than most other traits. What was more, men and women assigned it nearly equal importance—sixteenth most important in the eyes of males and eighteenth most important to women. For men and women alike, virginity was significantly less important than things like “dependable character,” “education and intelligence,” and “emotional stability.”

Clearly, virginity still matters. But just as clearly, it matters differently now than it did a hundred years ago, or five hundred, or a thousand. As the primary determining factor in perceptions of female virtue, honor, character, and worth, virginity is indeed on the decline. If we believe that reckoning intrinsic human value should be based on deeper and more substantive qualities than whether or not someone has once been sexually active, we should find this pleasing.

#### *The Empirical Virgin*

There is in any event little point to hysterical proclamations that virginity is vanishing. To paraphrase P. T. Barnum, there's a virgin born every minute. And as long as human beings have to negotiate the transition into adult-partnered sexuality, virginity will continue to be meaningful both personally and socially. The question we need to be asking is not *whether* the culture of virginity has been changing over the last century or so. It has. The questions we need to be asking are *how* and *why* it has changed and whether or not these changes are yet complete.

The primary way that we have done and continue to do this is through the scientific study of sexuality. Accustomed as we have become to having an empirically based medical establishment, it is sometimes difficult to appreciate how recently this mode of research became commonplace, but in truth we cannot begin to speak of a consistently scientific approach to either medicine or sexuality until the second half of the nineteenth century. Earlier research into sexuality typically depended more upon compelling anecdote than on reproducible data.

Sexology, the scientific study of sexuality, had its beginnings in the late-nineteenth-century work of psychologists and psychiatrists like Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing. Although early sexologists were primarily

concerned with abnormal and criminal sexuality, as in Krafft-Ebing's famous *Psychopathia Sexualis*, they soon began to study the parameters of “normal” sexual desires and activities as well. Surveys of sexual behavior and attitudes began to be conducted in the United States as early as the 1920s. Within a couple of decades, British and continental researchers had begun to follow suit. Still, the kinds of massive, quantitative sex surveys we now think of when we think of sex research did not come into being until after World War II, with Alfred Kinsey's monumental 1948 *Sexual Response in the Human Male*.

However one might be tempted to critique Kinsey's work (and some of the criticism is merited), it nonetheless transformed our expectations about what we could and should know about sex. Prior to Kinsey and Kinsey-influenced research efforts, such as the British Mass Observation surveys that followed close on Kinsey's heels, notions of what could be considered sexually “normal” or “average” were based mostly on hearsay and conjecture. After Kinsey, on the other hand, laypeople and experts alike could point to charts, graphs, and statistics and use them to determine what was and was not “typical.” Attempts to take the behavioral and attitudinal measures of entire populations through statistics became a hallmark of sex research.

During the same time period, increasingly rigorous research methods helped to reduce the role that emotions and cultural prejudices played in how the medical establishment dealt with women's bodies. This did not, by any means, magically eradicate sexism within medicine, but it did provide for vastly improved levels of transparency and frankness. Many women eagerly embraced this more matter-of-fact approach to their own reproductive and sexual lives. Women like Stella Browne and Marie Stopes in England and Margaret Sanger in the United States, all of whom worked to educate women about sexual health and contraceptive options in the early years of the twentieth century, were often overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of women who wanted to learn what science had to teach them about their own bodies and sexualities. An unsqueamish and, above all, unsentimental approach to dealing with women's reproductive and sexual health rapidly became the expected standard for the medical profession.

Between 1890 and 1945 the West witnessed the rise of the birth control movement, the first commercially produced menstrual tampons, the establishment of the custom of the premarital gynecologist visit, the requirement (in some places) of venereal disease testing prior to the issue of a marriage license,

the beginnings of a sexuality self-help literature written by women, and an increase in the popularity of hospital births.

This new frankness was by no means limited to doctors' offices and the family planning clinics that were beginning to crop up in larger cities. For example, at the phenomenally popular 1939 World's Fair display devoted to the new vaginal product known as Tampax (introduced to American markets in 1936), hundreds of women a day stopped to get information and ask questions of the nurses there to answer them. Topics gynecological were addressed in books, pamphlets, and in the new genre of magazines appealing to female audiences. Even in 1918, a young British couple might get advice on contraceptive devices and sexual compatibility from Marie Stopes's *Married Love*. By 1930 a book intended for similar audiences, Theodor van der Velde's *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique*, quite unqueamishly reassured its readers that many women did not enter married life as virgins. In 1940 books like Oliver Butterfield's *Sex Life in Marriage* provided readers access to clinical detail on topics as explicit as resistant hymens, vaginal lubrication, and "honeymoon" cystitis. Magazine advertisements for contraceptive devices and nostrums tended to remain back-of-the-book items along with other quasi-medical appliances, but advertisements hailing the convenience of tampons moved into the main pages of major women's magazines. Women increasingly felt entitled to take advantage of, and even to demand, no-nonsense, directly vaginal products like tampons that were both convenient and conducive to an active lifestyle. A large number of women clearly wanted to be able to deal with their sexual and reproductive lives in a practical, literally hands-on way. This was particularly true in the United States, where, as contraceptive historian Lara V. Marks has revealed, women were earlier and more fervent adopters of female-controlled intravaginal contraceptives like diaphragms and contraceptive jellies.

At first such products were marketed to and considered acceptable only for married, presumably nonvirginal, women. But this state of affairs did not last long. What mothers and big sisters used and liked in terms of managing their own needs, particularly in regard to menstruation, younger women eventually heard about. And while this "trickle down" effect took some time, it is clear that women of all ages quickly came to embrace tampon use. As early as the end of World War II, Dr. Robert Dickinson's medical assessment of tampon use appeared in both the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and, in a somewhat less technical version, in *Consumer Reports*. Dickinson specifically

stated that tampons did not "impede standard anatomic virginity," thus paving the way for younger women to use them and for tampon manufacturers to feel justified in marketing to that demographic. Authors of late-1940s and 1950s office gynecology textbooks took it as a given that any woman of menstruating age might well use tampons.

By the 1980s, up to three-quarters of high school women used tampons regularly. While tampon manufacturers have occasionally felt moved to publicly allay fears that tampon usage threatens virginity, as in a 1990 Tampax ad that showed an introspective, white-shirted teenaged girl beneath the question "Are you sure I'll still be a virgin?" (the ad's text made it clear that the answer to that question was "yes"), on the whole it has become relatively rare for contemporary First World women to question the suitability of tampon use for any woman of menstruating age. The lesson of the tampon was that the vagina could be emotionally and sexually neutral territory. To learn to use tampons to absorb menstrual flow was also to learn that the insertion of an object into the vagina might be purely utilitarian, with no larger social meaning at all.

It is difficult to appreciate, from our current vantage point, just what a radical departure this was from the nineteenth-century view. As in the controversy over the use of the speculum, Victorian doctors and patients alike lived in fear of even the most stringently medical contact with the vulva, let alone vaginal penetration. This permeated the nineteenth century's attitudes toward women and their genitals to the point that Victorian girls and women were ideally not to be permitted to straddle anything, ever. Little girls were kept from riding on seesaws or hobbyhorses, and they were discouraged from running, jumping, or gymnastics, for, as historian of childhood Karin Calvert notes, it was believed that "playing the wrong game or with the wrong toys could prematurely awaken sexual feelings in children and destroy their natural purity." Ladies who rode horseback did so sidesaddle for the same reason. In this paranoid context, even bicycling constituted a terrifying threat. As two-wheelers became more and more popular among middle-class young people around the end of the nineteenth century, the medical journals revealed a feverish, sometimes pornographically detailed, concern that the pressure that the bicycle seat placed on the vulva and perineum not only held the menace of creating "arousing feelings hitherto unknown and unrealized by the young maiden" but might, the articles claimed, contribute to painful and debilitating disorders of the genitals as well.

Intriguingly enough, the idea that such spraddle-legged activities constitute a threat to virginity shows up in sex education texts to this day. Despite the lack of any actual studies in the literature regarding whether horseback riding, gymnastics, or riding bicycles might have a particularly high rate of damaging women's hymens, virtually every contemporary writing about virginity aimed at teen girls is duly equipped with a disclaimer that says something along the lines of "many girls tear or otherwise dilate their hymen while participating in sports like bicycling, horseback riding, or gymnastics." Other activities, like tampon use and masturbation, are sometimes added to the list. But astonishingly, given the near-complete lack of hard evidence to support their inclusion, the odd mantra "bicycling, horseback riding, and gymnastics" shows up again and again.

Today these three activities are invoked in a very different way than they were a hundred years ago. A century of liberalization of attitudes toward women—and sports and sexuality as well—has transformed bicycling, horseback riding, and gymnastics from looming bogeymen into a laundry-list reminder that not all women will have the same experience of virginity loss. Whether or not physical activity can actually damage the hymen is debatable; more debatable still is whether or not the hymen alone is a useful gauge of virginity anyhow. "Bicycling, horseback riding, and gymnastics" is now a placeholder for the idea that just because something happens to physically involve the genitals doesn't mean it's sex. Women's genitals, in other words, may finally be achieving the ability to simply be just another bit of the body, as essentially neutral and as variable as any other.

### *The New Woman*

At the same time as empirical science was transforming attitudes about women's bodies, social and philosophical understandings of women were being transformed by progressivism, urbanization, and, perhaps most of all, by sheer economics. Urbanization, the rise of factory labor, and the accompanying surge of poor and working-class migration to the cities continued at a dizzying pace in the new century: The huge labor market meant that more and more women went to work, not merely as domestics (although many did) but also in sweatshops and factories. Regardless of whether the job was mechanized "women's

work," as much sweatshop work still is to this day, or something quite different, women worked for a living and were paid in cash.

Working women worked because they had to earn money to survive. But it would be a mistake to imagine that these women were blind to what it meant that they were breadwinners and had the ability to pay their own way in the world. It would be a bigger error still to imagine that the culture in which this was becoming a more and more common state of affairs could possibly remain unchanged.

Prior to the industrial era, there were only two groups of women who were likely to be self-supporting, the very wealthy whose wealth was inherited and the extremely poor who scraped by on whatever they could earn. Most women married not merely because it was socially expected that they would do so, but because marriage was, as Jane Austen had written nearly a century earlier in *Pride and Prejudice*, the "pleasantest preservative from want." Women were expected to be economically dependent on their husbands, their domestic labor compensated only in kind, not in cash.

Over the course of a century, the wage-earning woman went from being the lower-class exception to being the unexceptional norm. The economic structure of the industrialized West thoroughly incorporated the presence of women's labor. (The same is now true of the global economy as a whole.) This largely unsung revolution of female paid labor provided the economic basis for a great many of the other revolutionary changes in sex and gender roles that took place in the twentieth century.

One of those other changes came under the banner of "human rights." In its simplest form, the philosophy of human rights holds that all human beings are equally deserving of opportunities to thrive and prosper, regardless of their social rank or sex. Progressives made it their business to address not only the horrors of poverty, disease, and various social ills like child labor and prostitution, but also violations of human rights like discrimination against women. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, organized feminism attacked bias against women in multiple arenas, leading to sweeping legal and attitudinal changes that permitted women to own and control their own property, instigate divorce, file lawsuits in their own names, and vote. Forward-thinking activists pushed for more and better public and private educational options for all and were especially vocal in regard to the need for education for girls and women, including sexuality and contraception education.

The working women of the early twentieth century lived in a very different world than their mothers and grandmothers. In many ways they themselves were a different breed: New Women. For these "thoroughly modern Millies," work meant leaving the house to earn a wage and socializing meant "going out." Dance halls, public parks, vaudeville houses, cinemas, restaurants, even beer gardens and nightclubs became the places where young people whose wages were not yet spoken for by spouses and children went to have fun. Music, fashion, art, and public mores all felt the impact of this new, largely young adult money and energy. Women rolled their stockings down and bobbed their long, high-maintenance hair. Skirts got shorter and clothing silhouettes leaner and more boyish. Corsets began to disappear in favor of elasticized girdles that allowed greater freedom of movement.

Perhaps most shocking of all, young women began to let it be known that they were both conscious of, and quite able to manipulate, their own sex appeal. Flappers and vamps visibly flaunted their sexuality on stage, on screen, and in the streets. As the film roles of silent-movie star Clara Bow made clear, being a desirable, sexually successful woman had nothing to do with being a traditionally "good" girl. Bow, also known as "The 'It' Girl," was often cast in the image of her working-class fans as a waitress or salesclerk. Success at love, these films told their audiences, had everything to do with good looks, urbanity, and daring.

A new game was afoot, and women and men alike were still trying to figure out what the rules were. The New Woman of the teens and twenties had not, despite all the enthusiastic press about her liberation, cast off the shackles of her sex and stepped unfettered into a brave new day where everything was possible. Rather, she had loosened a great many ties to old modes of living that no longer fit well, but had not yet established herself securely in something new. Sexuality was a much more visible and overt part of her life, from the films she saw to the clothes she wore to the dates she went on. Whether she personally kissed, necked, or petted or not, she wasn't likely to be ignorant of such practices. Her own feelings and desires only complicated things further. The New Woman's new sexuality was at least as much firewalk as pleasure cruise.

In theory women were still expected not to have sex before marriage. But with changes in gender roles, female independence, the new custom of going out, and new expectations of sexiness as part of female identity, "having sex"

had become a realm of many shades of gray. Even gynecology books acknowledged that wedding-night hymens were likely to have already been dilated by probing fingers during hot and heavy petting, but refrained from qualifying such acts as being definitively either "sex" or "not sex." The new economic and social equations of sex and dating also meant that it was less clear what sex—whatever *that* was—was supposed to mean to a relationship. Where exactly virginity fit into all of it was as difficult a question as all the others.

To many people, the new, overt sexiness of New Women promised not so much freedom as havoc. Sexually active women have always been considered troublesome, of course; one function virginity has served over the ages is to control women's sexual activity and make it something that can be policed and regulated. But as sexually self-willed women became more visible through movies, theater, journalism, and novels, more and more people became nervous about what that might mean. People questioned whether the New Women could still be trusted to fulfill their daughterly, wifely, and motherly roles. Seeing to it that they would become the subject of debate, research, and policy.

Part of this process involved the study of a strange new creature. Neither child nor adult, this bizarre being was scarcely recognizable as properly human. In 1904 psychologist G. Stanley Hall assayed a systematic description of this troublesome changeling. *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* was the opening salvo in the ongoing battle of Established Society versus the Young Person.

Through Hall's eyes, the Young Person was a strange, volatile, contrary, and vulnerable creature. When it came to female adolescents, much of that vulnerability was specifically sexual. Anything that hinted at deviation from the expected standards of premarital virginity, early marriage, and postmarital monogamy was a cause for alarm. Not just psychologists but families, parents, schools, friends, and religious organizations all placed their own types of pressure on young women to conform to older, more conservative sexual and behavioral standards—standards that were perceived as being under heavy attack.

The print media also had a large role to play in attempts to regulate the sex lives of young people. A wide variety of articles and advice columns appeared in magazines like *Mademoiselle*, *Nash's*, and *Women's Own*. Young people turned to these publications not only to see what their peers were wearing, seeing, and

dancing to but also what they were thinking and how they were conducting their dating lives. The magazines attempted to strike a balance between the old and the new, simultaneously acknowledging the desirability of a certain amount of sexual freedom and insisting that it have strict limits. While dating was considered normative and kissing understood to be enjoyable, young women were also cautioned that "kisses, like other good things in life, are valued in proportion to their scarcity." Emily Post described the phenomenon in 1937 as "the same cheapening effect as that produced on merchandise which has through constant handling become faded and rumpled, smudged, or frayed and thrown out on the bargain counter in a marked-down lot." Peer pressure, enhanced by the messages disseminated in popular magazines, was another mode for ferocious grassroots enforcement of sexual expectations and limits.

Over the past century and a half, those expectations and limits have often been directly correlated to romance, emotional intensity, and perceived commitment to a relationship. Beginning around the mid-1800s, a particularly sentimental version of romantic love was held up as a relationship ideal for women. It was, as Joan Jacobs Brumberg points out, "a singularly important source of female identity," so much so that Stanley Hall enshrines it in his textbook on adolescence, adding the imprimatur of science to the notion that experience of romantic love was part and parcel of the adolescent female self. The presence of romantic love rapidly became a key factor in the equations that determined sexual boundaries for young women.

A promise of marriage has, across history, frequently been the price of admission for sexual access to a woman. But with the increased centrality of romantic emotion, the coin of the realm gradually became "true love." Established as the pinnacle of emotional experience—and often in a way that contrasted it negatively against marriage—being "in love" assumed extraordinary pride of place. Emotional intensity in a love relationship took on a marriage-like function in terms of representing commitment and the strength of a bond between two people, and it is still perceived in that light today. Currently, surveys show that about 80 to 90 percent of people who marry have some premarital sexual experience, and that well over half of them profess the belief that premarital sex is acceptable as long as it is in the context of a "committed" love relationship.

Just how many women had intercourse prior to marriage, during the early years of the twentieth century, is difficult to pinpoint. Sex-behavior studies dealing with that period are relatively few and far between, and their sample

populations were often numerically limited, demographically skewed, or both, but the data we do have about women's premarital sex lives from the 1920s until the 1953 release of Kinsey's *Sexual Response in the Human Female* demonstrate a decided rising trend.

Katherine Bement Davis's 1929 *Factors in the Sex Life of Twenty Two Hundred Women* reported that only 8 percent of the women she surveyed who were married before World War I had had intercourse prior to marriage; a similar level, 12 percent, was noted in Stanford University psychologist Lewis Terman's *Psychological Factors in Marital Unhappiness* (1938) for those marrying prior to 1912. Contrast this with what Terman claimed for the women who married during and immediately after World War I: their premarital intercourse rate had, it seemed, jumped to 26 percent. New York physician G. V. Hamilton's *A Research in Marriage*, based on interviews with one hundred men and one hundred women conducted in 1928, showed a premarital sex rate of 35 percent. Dorothy Dunbar Bromley and Florence Haxton Britten's 1938 *Youth and Sex* looked at undergraduate university women and determined that somewhere between a quarter and a third of them had "indulged in the sex act."

Viewed in light of this upward trend, Kinsey's post-World War II revelations that of his female respondents, nearly 50 percent of those who married by age twenty-five and as many as 66 percent of those who married between the ages of twenty-six and thirty had lost their virginity before they married comes as no surprise at all. Premarital intercourse had been on the rise since the beginning of the century, and as the century progressed, it became increasingly obvious to the general public that for a rising plurality of women, virginity loss and marriage had become two separate events.

#### *Progress in a Pill*

People often refer to the period from the early 1960s through the early 1970s as "the sexual revolution," but as we have seen, this "revolution" did not appear out of nowhere. In truth, what historian of sexuality Hera Cook has characterized as "the long sexual revolution" began not with the Summer of Love but far earlier, and as Barbara Ehrenreich, Dierdre English, and other commentators have long noted, the revolution was primarily about women's sexuality, not men's.

A largely silent, but truly massive, part of this revolution consisted in the destabilization of the value placed on virginity. The development and availability of effective contraception has been and continues to be a major contributor to this destabilization.

Historically, women have been at the mercy of fate when it came to the question of whether and how often they would become pregnant, how many children they would bear, and even whether they would survive childbirth at all. The desperation and fear that even many married women felt in regard to sexual intercourse was a direct result of their inability to know whether or not a given episode of intercourse would mean another risky pregnancy. For unmarried women, of course, the prospect of pregnancy was all the more fraught. Although romantic and even sexual dating had become quite commonplace by the start of the World War II, sexual intercourse was still often reserved for an engagement or for marriage itself for the simple reason that women were justifiably terrified of ending up unwed mothers.

This was part of what lay behind the trend toward very youthful marriage during World War II and immediately after it. Youthful dating, with all its sexual intrigue, had become the norm, but the expectation that women would not become pregnant until they were married remained in full force. Although there were other forces in play as well, not least the emotional and demographic turmoil of a protracted world war, the upshot was that that brides were younger than they had been in some decades. Between 1940 and 1959, the percentage of women aged fourteen to seventeen who married had jumped by 33 percent in the United States, and by 1959 a quarter of first-time brides went to the altar prior to their nineteenth birthday. In the United Kingdom, a similar though less dramatic drop took place: between 1926 and 1930, most first-time brides were close to twenty-six years of age, but after that point the age went steadily down to hover at around twenty-three years of age by 1960. That marriage was taking place earlier by no means indicates that young people were marrying *instead* of having premarital sex—one British national survey revealed that 46 percent of women marrying in the 1950s did not marry as virgins—but rather that those who did have premarital sex were likely to marry soon after. This resurgence of early marriage led some people to believe that Jazz Age excesses had given way to a return to a more “traditional” prioritization of marriage and family, an interpretation that was extended as well to

the 1950s' valorization of the happy space-age housewife. Such assumptions, however, proved premature.

Into this milieu it emerged that the biggest single obstacle to female sexual autonomy had, for all practical purposes, been overcome. For as long as we have records, women have attempted contraception, often at significant risk. Most contraceptives, historically, have been troublesome, difficult and expensive to obtain, unpleasant or even debilitating to use, and often dependent upon male cooperation. Adding insult to injury, many have been indifferently effective. Then the world changed: following several breakthroughs in the laboratory synthesis of hormones, the first contraceptive pills were released into the British and American markets between 1957 and 1960.

The birth control pill had been a dream of contraceptives activists since the beginning of their movement: Marie Stopes stated in 1928 that “the demand for a simple pill or drug” contraceptive would be unimaginably huge. She was correct. The Pill was originally available only to married women, yet by the mid-1960s, approximately a third of married American women and about 25 percent of younger working-class British couples used it. The percentages only rose from there.

The Pill's reliability and the fact that it was mess-free and convenient helped make it popular, but those were not the only reasons it was embraced so quickly by so many. For the first time in history, women could separate sex and pregnancy both literally and symbolically. The Pill did not have to be taken at the time one had sex. The Pill also did not directly involve the genitals. Contraception could happen entirely behind the scenes and on a woman's own initiative.

This unprecedented control was, as Lara Marks points out, not without ironic drawbacks. “By diminishing the risk of pregnancy, the oral contraceptive undermined the powerful psychological weapon women had previously possessed to deny sexual intercourse. After all, men could now argue that as there was no risk in having intercourse why should they not do so. Within this context the pill changed expectations about sexual intercourse. Now sexual intercourse was much higher on the agenda for some couples than other forms of sexual activity, such as heavy petting, which had been one way of avoiding pregnancy.”

This insight provides some perspective on the popular perception of a link between the introduction of the Pill and the sexual revolution of the late 1960s



and early 1970s. While there is no question that the Summer of Love and related events came rather rapidly on the heels of the introduction of the Pill, there is no evidence that suggests a cause-and-effect relationship between the two. The Pill certainly revolutionized contraception and made it possible for women to develop, for the first time, a concept of female heterosexuality that concerned itself more with pleasure than with the prospect of pregnancy. But as historians like Elizabeth Siegel Watkins accurately note, "In the 1960s and early 1970s, demographers focused on the contraceptive habits of *married* women to document the *contraceptive* revolution, while sociologists surveyed the sexual attitudes and practices of *unmarried* women to study the *sexual* revolution. Journalists combined the two contemporaneous changes and developed the lasting image of the Pill as the symbol of the sexual revolution; scientists and the public accepted and promoted this interpretation of the pill" [emphases in the original].

#### *The Day Virginity Died?*

As Gloria Steinem, then a young journalist writing in the pages of *Esquire* magazine, wrote in 1962, "The pill is obviously important to the sexual and the contraceptive revolutions, but it is not the opening bombshell of either one." Indeed, large percentages of unmarried women had for decades, as we have seen, been having sex without it. The firestorm of sexual politics that took place in the wake of the Pill was not caused by the Pill so much as catalyzed around it.

In a time of intense, emotional, and self-consciously political challenge and tumult, sexual politics was only one of the many issues on which the rebellious and radical sought wholesale change. Second-wave feminism, the birth of the gay and lesbian liberation movement, the idea of free love, and experimentation with family and household structures among young adults all contributed to a dramatic, chaotic expansion of sexual politics and possibility.

Somewhere in the midst of it all, the pendulum of the ideology of virginity took a hard swing to the left. Increasingly, there was a sensibility that female virginity had finally been stripped of its mystic value and could now be regarded as essentially identical to male virginity, more an event than an attribute. It separated the mature and the immature, but not necessarily in the same

way that it traditionally had been understood to do: to many it was now seen as the difference between being "liberated" and being "hung up." To actually be a virgin betrayed one as repressed. *The Sensuous Man*, a popular 1971 guide to the new sexual culture of swinging singles and recreational sex, characterized virginity as "woman's most hideous ailment."

"Liberated" people were supposed to have gotten beyond feeling inhibited in regard to sexual appetite and pleasure. Along the way, more and more women began to insist that female sexual pleasure was just as important as male sexual pleasure. Rather than using romantic commitment and marriage as their sole yardsticks of a successful interpersonal life, some men and women took to gauging personal success on the basis of sexual experience. Intrepid explorers of the new "liberated" ethos experimented with sex independent of marriage or even romantic relationships, with thousands of men and women engaging in what was called "free love" but is more accurately described as merely relatively unfettered sex.

Despite the doomsday predictions of some pundits, this unprecedented and unabashed wantonness failed to cause the end of the world or even the downfall of civilization as we know it. Evolving egalitarian philosophies of sexuality and gender, however, have indeed transformed the way we civilize our sexual impulses, and this very much includes the way we think about virginity. Since the 1960s, the practice of placing social and economic value on virginity has often been dismissed out of hand as an artifact of an obsolete mode of patriarchy, a now-irrelevant throwback to an ignorant time. As such, the idea has appeared to many to have no legitimate place in a sexually liberated, nonsexist culture. "Virginity" could only be useful as a value-neutral term that distinguished between those who had experienced partnered sex and those who had not yet done so.

This way of thinking about virginity had its predictable critics among social conservatives, to be sure. But it also had its detractors among liberals and radicals. Lesbian feminists, notably including Marilyn Frye, took issue with the heterosexual bias inherent in the fashionable denigration of virginity as a social status. A virgin, Frye argued, was a woman who owed nothing to men, whatever her sexual history. Virginity, she argued, was still powerful, but only if it were understood in what she purported was its original meaning of feminine autonomy. (There is no real sense in either Greek or Latin that the words *parthenos* or *virgo* necessarily indicated anything of the sort when applied to

human beings; as we have seen, they were primarily used to describe young unmarried women and girls.) Frye was in turn criticized by other lesbian feminists, who sought to rehabilitate the term "virgin" differently, applying it only to lesbians who were, as writer Rita Mae Brown quipped, "penis-pure and proud."

Such radical deconstructions and redefinitions contributed to the general instability of the idea of virginity. This instability has in turn enhanced the sense that virginity must be going the way of the button-hook and the Victrola. Reports of its demise are, of course, exceedingly premature: we are all still born virgins. As a point of social history, however, the anxiety over vanishing virginity is more defensible. If the course of the twentieth century is anything to go by, the ideology of virginity as a stand-in for specifically female virtue and human worth is indeed making its leisurely way to the egress. It seems clear that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift where virginity is concerned, one that neither began nor ended with the sexual revolution, but constitutes a broader, longer revolution all its own.

### *Pop Goes the Virgin*

One of the better ways to gain some perspective on this shift is to look at where, when, and how virgins and virginity show up in popular culture. The virginity-related pop culture of the twentieth century could easily fill volumes, but zeroing in on a quartet of programs—the films *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Little Darlings* and the internationally popular American television shows *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—lets us see some of what has been happening to virginity since the "revolutionary" 1960s, including our increasing tendency, as a culture, to reflect upon virginity itself.

Attracting a cult following from the earliest days of its existence as a stage musical in 1973 London (it ultimately ran for nearly three thousand performances), Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Show* became *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in 1975 when it was made into a film version starring Susan Sarandon and Tim Curry. A send-up of horror and science-fiction movie clichés of the 1950s and 1960s, *Rocky Horror* is also a campy, overblown dissertation on the culture clashes of the sexual revolution. In it, the thoroughly virginal and comically repressed couple Brad Majors (Barry Bostwick) and Janet

Weiss (Susan Sarandon) become engaged following the wedding of friends, but while driving home from the wedding they become lost in a forest. It is a dark and stormy night, so naturally enough by the conventions of the B-movies *Rocky* exists to lampoon, they end up at the doors of the creepy Gothic castle of the outrageous hypersexed transvestite mad scientist, Dr. Frank N. Furter (Tim Curry).

In the course of things, both Brad and Janet are debauched by Frank, whose mottos are "give yourself over to absolute pleasure" and "don't dream it, be it," but Brad and Janet react very differently to their experiences of sex. Brad remains uptight, tense, and defensive of the conservative morals he espoused at the start of the film, while Janet embodies the virgin-to-slut cliché. She ends up having an illicit tryst with Rocky (Peter Hinwood), Dr. Frank N. Furter's muscle-bound, golden-haired "Frankenstein's monster." In the song "Touch-a Touch-a Touch Me," Janet sings to Rocky about having been the kind of girl who had "only ever kissed before" and of having been afraid of the consequences of petting, but then promptly announces, by way of inviting him to bed her, that everything changed when she lost her virginity. "I've tasted blood and I want more," she sings, echoed by two female household servants who voyeurize the whole thing via closed-circuit television, chanting "More! More! More!"

By the end of the film, Janet has been transformed into a joyous libertine who sings that she feels "released" and that her "mind has been expanded." In a parallel stanza within the same song, though, Brad sings "Help me, Mommy / I'll be good, you'll see / take this dream away." Only in the last minutes of the film does Brad cave in to Dr. Frank N. Furter's magical zone of sexual excess. While Dr. Frank N. Furter is ultimately killed by his own extraterrestrial fellows because his "lifestyle's too extreme," Brad and Janet survive. Clad in corsets, fishnet stockings, and stiletto-heeled patent leather pumps, they are left, their virginites long gone and their sensibilities entirely transformed, to scramble their way out of the wreckage of Dr. Frank N. Furter's destroyed mansion.

As important as virginity and virginity loss are to *Rocky Horror*, it is not too surprising that its extensive audience subculture has adopted the motif. In most of the places where the movie airs on a regular basis—usually on a weekend night at midnight, accompanied by the costumed acting, singing, dancing, and assorted audience participation of contingents of devoted fans who have

seen the film dozens or even hundreds of times—first-timer “virgins” are singled out for special treatment. Though the specifics vary widely, *RHPS* “virgins” might be made to wear name tags advertising their virgin status, have lipsticked *V*s put on their cheeks and foreheads, be goaded to participate in suggestive pantomime, or just be paraded before the more experienced members of the audience before the film runs and they thus join the gleeful crowd who will initiate the next week’s crop of “virgins.”

A very different sort of virginity-related peer pressure forms the subject of director Ronald Maxwell’s 1980 *Little Darlings*. Set at a sleepaway summer camp for teenaged girls, this film pits a posh daughter of the old-money set, Ferris (Tatum O’Neal), against the tough, streetwise Angel (Kristy McNichol), who hails from a working-class single-parent home. The predictable storms of adolescent bitchiness and put-downs among the various teen campers eventually lead to an insidiously competitive conversation about virginity. Although most of the girls are lying through their teeth, all but two members of the cabin claim that they are sexually experienced. The only ones to admit to virginity are Ferris and Angel. A wager is promptly lodged as to which of the two girls will manage to lose her virginity first that summer.

Making loss of virginity into a matter for deadly earnest wagering is of course nothing new in the annals of fiction; French writer and military officer Pierre Ambroise Choderlos de Laclos’s 1782 *Les liaisons dangereuses* (converted to the screen on more than one occasion) provides a classic, vicious example of such a bet. What makes *Little Darlings* so remarkable is that the bet involves two teenaged girls, and that the virginities they are scheming to lose are their own. In this movie we see lost virginity not just as an emblem of adulthood but of *cool*: the young women who lie about having lost their virginities do so because they are desperately afraid of being socially unappealing to their peers. It is an extraordinary snapshot of what virginity implied and entailed to women who were of an age to literally be daughters of the sexual revolution.

Although the film industry’s interest in virginity has often been limited to boys-will-be-boys raunchfests (*Porky’s* [1982], *Losin’ It* [1983], and *The Last American Virgin* [1982], etc.), some comedies—*Animal House* (1978) is one example—have managed to get in some cogent digs at conservative virginity ideology along with their quotient of titty jokes. There have also been occasional serious treatments. Spike Lee’s 1988 *School Daze* and John Hughes’s

1985 *The Breakfast Club* both explored virginity as a socially and emotionally complex issue among young adults, both films providing a harsh look at the relationship between virginity and social acceptance.

Since the 1970s, television has also engaged with virginity narratives. The majority of television virginity plots tend to be neat single-episode packages aimed at high-school-aged viewers, in which characters of a similar age range go from confronting the possibility of virginity loss to dealing with the aftermath in a single swift half-hour installment. This is, at least in terms of age range, a relatively accurate reflection of reality: American age at virginity loss has hovered around the sixteen- to-eighteen-year-old range since the 1970s. Aside from the matter of age, what *Slate* television critic Kate Aurthur has called the “Very Special Virginity episode” has had consistent conventions over the thirty years that virginity has been a subject of television programming. Among them is the repeated contention that virginity loss always has consequences.

A fine case in point was provided by the extraordinarily long-lived prime-time soap opera *Beverly Hills 90210*, which ran from 1990 to 2000. Originally the saga of a Minnesotan family who relocates to Beverly Hills, the show centered around the family’s twin high-school-aged children, Brandon and Brenda, as they came of age in the milieu of one of the United States’ wealthiest communities. True to form for a teen-centric series drama, there was a virginity-loss narrative beginning in the very first season. Although it took most of the first season to do it, Brenda (Shannen Doherty), the daughter of the central family, lost her virginity to the Porsche-driving bad boy Dylan (Luke Perry). Brenda and Dylan’s sexual liaison was foreshadowed very early in that year’s story line, but Brenda, frightened by the possibility of sexually transmitted disease, postponed the act until the season’s penultimate episode. This left an entire juicy episode of consequences, in this case a pregnancy scare and the breakup of Brenda and Dylan’s relationship. The season thus ended, leaving fans to wait two months for the news that Brenda was not in fact pregnant.

Of the numerous deflorations that took place during *90210*’s ten seasons, the one that garnered the largest number of column inches in the press was that of the “good Catholic girl” character Donna, played by Tori Spelling, actress daughter of *90210*’s producer. Donna’s virginity, an open topic of discussion among the core characters of the show from the beginning, lasted very nearly as long as the show itself. Although Donna was at the core of the cast from the

first season and began a romantic relationship with the character David in the second season, the course of what ultimately turned out to be true love (or at least a Hollywood approximation of it) ran nowhere near close to smooth. Quite exceptionally, given the crazed rutting to which *90210*'s characters seemed so prone, Donna hung on to her virginity until her last year of college, the show's seventh year. When she finally did have sex with David, it took place offscreen, and while there were mild consequences—she had to break the news to her Catholic mother—there was no punishment. Ultimately, and anticlimactically, the Donna and David characters married.

What viewers and critics made of Donna's lengthy virginity—lengthy by Hollywood standards, anyway, although hardly so by a real-world metric—varied a great deal. Heralded by some as evidence of a newfound (and, it was implied, long overdue) return to traditional sexual mores among young people, others found Donna's perennial discussions and displays of virginity infuriating and heavy-handed. In terms of its historical moment, Donna's much-discussed virginity was both and neither.

Brenda and Donna both, simultaneously, reflected meaningful trends in the sexual culture of the era of *90210*. By the mid-1980s, approximately half of unmarried women between the ages of fifteen and nineteen were what the researchers euphemistically call "sexually active," meaning in most cases that they had identified themselves as having engaged in partnered sex at least once, à la Brenda.\* And as in Brenda's case, the real issue wasn't whether one was or wasn't a virgin, but whether the consequences of sexual activity endangered one's own chances of middle-class success. Sexually transmitted diseases and,

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\*One of the numerous problems of the sexological research is that types of sexual activity are not always delineated separately in surveys. Where a survey presents figures on numbers of people who are "sexually active," there is often no concrete way to tell exactly what kind of activity that represents. The common assumption of many readers of such surveys is that "sexual activity" means "penis-in-vagina intercourse," but this assumption is not necessarily warranted. Additionally, being "sexually active" in terms of having a history of partnered sexual activity does not mean that a consistent or ongoing amount of sexual activity exists, as in fact it does not for most young people. The reader of sexual statistics does well to read "sexually active" as meaning only "has ever engaged in some form of partnered sex" in any report which does not define its terms more specifically.

particularly, unplanned pregnancies among women "old enough to know better" are often seen as revealing a lack of critical discipline. Brenda's pregnancy scare was thus a cautionary tale, while Donna succeeded in negotiating premarital sex "correctly."

In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, another long-running teen drama series (spring 1997–summer 2003), *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon addressed virginity from yet another perspective: that of the personally and sexually empowered young woman. That young woman is Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar), slightly ditzy California high school student by day, anointed slayer of vampires and other supernatural menaces by night. With the help of the mentor and father figure who is her "watcher," Giles (Anthony Stewart Head), and a small group of close-knit friends, Buffy becomes a gifted warrior whose job it is to combat the forces of evil that frequently appear in their small "hellmouth" town of Sunnydale.

Along the way, as is traditional for teenaged heroines, she falls passionately in love. But the man with whom she falls in love is a vampire, Angel (David Boreanaz), known as Angelus to his vampire friends. He is a curious creature, living under a gypsy curse that gave him back his soul and thus also his conscience and which is destined to remain with him until such unlikely time as the guilt-ridden creature experiences a moment of perfect happiness. At the start of the show, Angel is thus that very *rara avis*, a vampire-hating vampire who himself fights the forces of darkness. Over the first half of the show's second year, the romance between Buffy and Angel intensifies. Finally, in the first half of a two-part episode that falls squarely in the middle of the second season, Buffy's seventeenth birthday arrives and she gives in to the passion that has been building in her relationship with Angel. Buffy loses her virginity in a steamingly erotic, yet nongraphic, visual vignette that conveys, in its glowing skin tones and rich, draped fabrics, a mixture of intense romance and profound sensuality.

The consequences are not long in arriving. Buffy wakes up to find Angel gone, and it rapidly becomes clear that sex with Buffy was the occasion of perfect happiness required to break the curse that equipped Angel with a soul. The paradox is overblown, but it works: the sincerity of Buffy and Angel's emotions is proven by his turning, quite literally, into a demon. Having had Buffy in one metaphorical sense, Angel is now determined to have her in the other. Buffy's life (as well as those of her family and friends) is on the line as a

soulless Angel seeks revenge for having been forced to endure the apparently emasculating constraints of having a soul. No garden-variety pregnancy scare for Buffy.

The entire second half of the second season follows Buffy's attempts to deal not only with the threat Angel poses but also with her cherished memories of the lover and relationship she lost. Although at first she does not realize what has happened, and begins to blame herself for Angel's sudden cruelty, she soon realizes that the change in Angel represents a far larger problem than post-coital betrayal. Buffy rapidly deduces that there are only two solutions to the problem Angel represents: find a way to reinstate the curse and restore Angel's soul, or kill him. Ultimately, with the help of her friends, she does both. With tears in her eyes, she tells Angel to close his eyes, kisses him one last time, and plunges her sword through his heart, sending Angel to hell.

Buffy's virginity story, otherworldly as it is, is at root not about sin and punishment, but about maturity in the face of adversity. Buffy's decision to lose her virginity to Angel has its consequences, but those consequences are not in themselves consequences of sex. Angel loses his soul as a consequence of the power of emotion, not merely of orgasm. Whedon places romantic love on a pedestal only to kick the pedestal out from under it. In the Whedonverse, even the most culturally impeccable romantic virginity narrative is not enough to turn a girl into a woman. To truly be her own mistress a young woman must be capable of much more than just sex. In the world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—and in our world as well, Whedon implies—a woman's true value does not lie in her virginity, or her ability to be sexually loved. It lies in her ability to love, be loved, and simultaneously kick ass, take names, and do whatever needs to be done, no matter how difficult.

### *True Love Legislates*

Of all the countries of the developed world, the United States is the only one that has to date created a federal agenda having specifically to do with the virginity of its citizens. Involving hundreds of millions of dollars in taxpayer funding, this agenda has proven hotly controversial. Intersecting in a number of ways with evangelical Christian and other socially conservative efforts to promote a resurgence of what advocates term "traditional values" or "family

values"—although both terms are to some extent misnomers when viewed from historical or anthropological viewpoints—the focus of this governmental program is to establish virginity as the only appropriate sexual status for any never-married person.

The history of this agenda and its associated legislation is simple enough in outline. In 1981, during the first term of President Ronald Reagan, a program known as Title XX of the Public Health Service Act, the Adolescent Family Life Act, or AFLA, was sponsored by then-senator Jeremiah Denton, a Republican from Alabama (later joined by Massachusetts Democrat Edward Kennedy). The bill passed and was instituted under the aegis of the U.S. Office of Population Affairs. AFLA's mandate was to create programs to decrease pregnancy rates among unmarried minors (the age of legal majority in the United States is eighteen) specifically by promoting chastity and sexual self-restraint. The media quickly began to refer to AFLA as "The Chastity Act."

A successor to the 1978 Adolescent Pregnancy Program, the first federal program designed to prevent teenaged pregnancies, programs funded under AFLA were required to teach abstinence from sex—in other words virginity, since these programs were to be aimed at adolescents who were not yet sexually active—as the normative standard and best practice for preventing pregnancy and disease. Abstaining from sexual activity was also to be taught as a "secondary prevention measure" for teenagers who had already had sex and/or a past pregnancy. The terms of AFLA forbade grant money to be given to projects that encouraged, promoted, or advocated family planning services, including contraception or medical abortion.

Initially funded at \$11 million, AFLA was a fairly small program by U.S. federal standards. In 1982, with \$13.5 million at stake, five hundred research grants were proposed and sixty-two were granted. Many AFLA grant recipients had close ties to churches and religious organizations. Programs funded by AFLA soon came under fire for using explicitly religious language and concepts, and it was not long before the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed suit on the grounds that AFLA's activities violated the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution—the principle of separation of church and state.

This suit, filed in 1983, went as far as the Supreme Court but was ultimately settled out of court in 1993. The settlement left AFLA standing and provided parameters within which the program and others like it would be permitted to

Adolescent Family Life Act 1981

function. AFLA marched on. With regular funding increases, AFLA has grown from an \$11-million-a-year program at its outset to a \$31-million-a-year program in fiscal year 2004.

In 1994, the year after AFLA's more questionable practices had been reined in by the courts, congressional representative John Doolittle, a Republican from California, sponsored a bill to amend the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The Doolittle Act, had it succeeded, would have sharply limited what sorts of material state and local school districts could include in their HIV-prevention curricula, a major venue for sexuality-related education in American public schools. But because the U.S. federal government is prohibited from dictating curriculum standards to public schools (U.S. public schools are administered at the state and municipal levels), the Doolittle Act proved unpassable.

Between the ACLU challenge to AFLA and the abortive Doolittle Act, however, proponents of what had by then come to be called "chastity education" had received a primer on what would and would not be found legally acceptable in terms of legislation on the subject. Explicitly religious language was unacceptable, and medical and scientific inaccuracy in the name of discouraging sex frowned upon. But the government's right to use taxpayer-funded programs to teach specific sexual ideologies and behaviors had gone entirely unchallenged. Furthermore, no laws existed to prevent the federal government from linking grant monies to specific educational content. They had only to make the states responsible for accepting or rejecting the funds, and with them, the designated content.

These lessons were put into practice in 1996 in the form of a rider attached to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. This Act, a major legislative goal of the Clinton administration, was a component of a gargantuan overhaul of the American social welfare system. During the final hours of debate on the Act, a sleepy little rider—a sort of add-on legislation that piggybacks on a larger piece of legislation and is passed if the "parent" bill is passed—was attached to it. This rider received no public debate and, in fact, no real notice at all.

The Act passed, and with it, the rider, known as Title V, Section 510(b). This, as it turned out, was a bill that allocated \$50 million per year, for each of five years, to be offered to the states for the purpose of funding programs that promoted chastity. Administered by the federal Maternal and Child Health

Bureau of the Department of Human Services, Section 510(b) required that the states provide matching funds at a 3:4 state-to-federal ratio. Total funds per year for the initial five years were \$437.5 million. Renewed under the George W. Bush administration after its initial five-year run ended, the funding has consistently increased: federal 510(b) funding for fiscal year 2005 was \$273 million.

The way these funds may be used has been exactly spelled out. Recipients of Section 510(b) money include programs at the state, local, and community levels, educational agencies, and individual school districts. Program content is dictated by a list of eight tenets, none of which may be contradicted. Some programs are additionally prohibited from raising private funds to supplement 510(b) programming with information considered contrary to the eight required messages.

What is to be taught under Section 510(b)? "Abstinence education," defined as "an educational or motivational program" that does the following:

- a) has as its exclusive purpose teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity; b) teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school-age children; c) teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems; d) teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of sexual activity; e) teaches that sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects; f) teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society; g) teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increase vulnerability to sexual advances, and h) teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity.

These are almost exclusively ideological statements. Statements about the harmfulness of sexual activity or even unmarried childbearing are meaningless unless they involve very specific social contexts. Significant rates of unmarried sexual activity have been a constant throughout the twentieth century,

yet somehow we continue on the whole not only to survive but to thrive, much of the developed world enjoying standards of living and civil freedoms of which our forebears could only dream. As for the perniciousness of unmarried parenthood, the statistics from many northern European countries, such as Denmark and Sweden, as well as Iceland, give the lie to doomsday scenarios. Approximately half of the babies born in Denmark and Sweden are born to unmarried adults; and in Iceland the ratio of births to unwed parents jumps to two-thirds,\* yet in none of these countries has this led to social trauma, economic catastrophe, or even a general hue and cry among the clergy of these Protestant nations.

The other planks of the Section 510(b) agenda are similarly reactionary and shaky. The importance of self-sufficiency prior to sexual debut, for instance, is just another version of the economic argument that for millennia has been used to argue for female virginity prior to marriage. Ironically, part of the reason that economic self-sufficiency is indeed an asset for would-be parents in the United States is that there is little provision for public, subsidized health or child care. To state unequivocally that an individual woman's economic self-sufficiency is the primary factor in whether it is difficult for her to raise a child as a single parent is to put the cart well before the horse. Although a "mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage," as promoted by the 510(b) legislation, may enhance the resources available for childrearing, as generations of women have painfully learned, it is hardly a guarantee.

A similarly ideological, historically shortsighted item of Section 510(b) is its emphasis on monogamy and marriage. While it is generally true that females have historically been expected to refrain from sex prior to marriage, it is also true that males have not. This "expected standard" must perforce be a relatively new invention, and one which arguably owes its existence to gender-egalitarian feminist theory. It also bears noting that if this is indeed a standard

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\*A growing trend in many northern European countries is for couples to cohabit, then marry following the birth of a child. In Sweden, for example, 70 percent of cohabiting couples who have a child marry within five years of the child's birth. Out-of-wedlock childbirth is not an accurate predictor of harm to parent, child, or society, and is not even an accurate predictor of a child's likelihood of being raised in a single-parent home.

expected by some minority of the American populace, it has demonstrably never been the standard *observed* by the vast majority.

Additionally troublesome from a historical and legislative perspective are the words "school-age" and "children." In the United States, public schooling now commonly lasts until age eighteen. But in thirty states, secondary education is only compulsory until a young person reaches the age of sixteen (in another nine states it is seventeen). Therefore, the age at which a young person may be considered school-age can vary considerably, and the end of the school-age period may or may not coincide with the transition to legal adulthood.

This is not the only reason it can be tricky to determine who should be considered an adult and who must be considered a child in America. The federal age of majority is eighteen years of age, but individual state laws make it possible for minors to legally drive cars, hold paying jobs, and in some cases be prosecuted as adults in criminal court.\* With parental consent, depending on state law, it may be possible for minors to marry. At age seventeen, and again with parental consent, minors may join the U.S. military. At the same time, young people must be at least eighteen to vote or buy pornography, and twenty-one to buy or consume alcohol. Even if the question of who is a child is based completely on whether a young person has the legal authority to consent to sex, the age at which this is possible varies from state to state and from fifteen years of age to eighteen. While it would be silly to suggest that Americans are incapable of recognizing the difference between children and adults when dealing with individuals, American law often makes it a confusing task to differentiate between them in legislative terms. Section 510(b) is clearly using the most inclusive possible definition of "child," which is to say including all legal minors as children. But by doing so, Section 510(b) contradicts, in spirit, the letter of many extant state laws.

All these things are troubling. More troubling still, from a political perspective, is that American abstinence-only legislation has generated a top-down

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\*Vermont's state law permits children as young as ten to be prosecuted as adults under some circumstances. Other states permit at least some cases involving minors to be moved from juvenile to standard criminal court, but the minimum ages for these moves vary. Most commonly the age limits for moving a case are somewhere between fourteen and seventeen years of age, or up to four years younger than the age of majority.

ideological program that rests neither on the demands of extant law nor upon the wishes of American voters. Surveys repeatedly find that more than 90 percent of Americans support comprehensive sex education in the schools, and that upward of 80 percent of American adults believe that birth control and safer-sex information should be provided even to teenagers who are not yet sexually active. Abstinence education does not reflect an American popular mandate, but rather an unasked-for imposition of a moral agenda. This is unprecedented in American history and unique among the nations of the contemporary developed world.

It is also, in its public refusal to use the actual word "virginity," both canny and strange. The word "virginity" appears nowhere in American legislation that deals with the ideal of "abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard." One might well wonder why. It seems odd that, having described premarital virginity in detail, they would shy away from simply using the term. It is, after all, what they're talking about.

But it does not appear to be what they want to be *perceived* as talking about. Virginity has, for reasons both valid and not, gotten something of a bad reputation over the course of the twentieth century. In America particularly, a person who is a virgin is often seen as a rarity, perhaps an oddity, probably an unredeemable loser. No wonder AFLA, Section 510(b) programs, and abstinence educators alike seem to prefer to avoid it.

Abstinence, on the other hand, is associated with virtuous self-control. Critically, it offers the impression of choice. One *is* a virgin, but one *chooses* to abstain. Using the word "abstinence" in this context suggests the quintessentially American ideals of self-determination and choice. It verbally transforms compliance with government propaganda into a celebration of personal liberty.

Renaming virginity "abstinence" lifts it out of a web of unpleasant associations and makes it modern. Conveniently, it also sidesteps religious implications: Jesus's mother was not Abstinent Mary. Use of the word "abstinence" is also convenient in that it applies not only to those who have never had sex, but also to those who have already had sex but might be convinced not to do it again. Virginity, after all, is seen as perishable, a one-time-only affair. While the idea of "secondary virginity" is popular in some circles, it is also a problematic term for any number of reasons, not least that it appears to be an oxymoron. Abstinence, on the other hand, can be used in reference to anyone, because a person can abstain from something whether he or she has or hasn't

tried it to begin with. Given that approximately 50 percent of American young people have participated in partnered sex by the time they leave high school, the utility of all-encompassing terminology is evident.

Many critics of abstinence-only education have claimed that the abstinence-education agenda is transparently religiously motivated. Indeed, there are numerous connections between the abstinence movement, individual Christians, and Christian denominations more generally. Many recipients of AFLA funding in the early 1980s were religious individuals or organizations who used the funding to help finance the development of abstinence curricula and teaching materials based on overtly religious principles. When Section 510(b) made the teaching of abstinence ideology a condition of granting its educational funding to states and community organizations, those curricula and materials stood poised to supply the market that Section 510(b) created.

An often-cited example is the controversial grade seven to nine curriculum *Sex Respect*. A joint production of Catholic sex educator Coleen Kelly Mast, whose other titles include *Love and Life: A Christian Sexual Morality Guide for Teens*, and an organization based in Glenview, Illinois, called the Committee on the Status of Women (founded by longtime archconservative Phyllis Schlafly), *Sex Respect* was funded in part by a \$391,000 AFLA grant awarded in 1985. Creation of a similar curriculum intended for a high-school audience, *Facing Reality*, it was funded by a three-year, \$300,000 AFLA grant awarded in 1990. Mast is now considered one of the leading experts on abstinence education. Her résumé includes having been one of four Americans chosen to participate in a 1996 conclave on "Education for Chastity" held by the Vatican. Mast's curricula, which have been lambasted by the press as well as by scientific organizations for their medical inaccuracies and for instances of racial and other bias, are used in over two thousand American public school districts.

Religion collides with federal funding in the production of abstinence-education materials in a very different way in the case of the program called Free Teens USA. A recipient of Section 510(b) funding, Free Teens USA is run by a group of individuals with strong ties to the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's controversial Unification Church. In 2003 reporter John Gorenfeld, writing for the online magazine *Salon*, divulged the results of his spelunking into federal files made accessible through the Freedom of Information Act. Free Teens administrators have headed statewide Unification Church branches, worked for Unification Church-owned companies, including the gun manufacturer

Why abstinence?



Kahr Arms, and worked as senior financial officers within the central Unification Church. The Unification Church claims no official ties to Free Teens, but this is often the case for Moon-affiliated front organizations. It must be said that Free Teens abstinence education conforms quite well with the Unification stance on sexuality, which holds that any sexual experience outside of marriage is an abomination, even to the point that the Reverend Moon has advocated (in 1992) that women who are sexually attacked should kill themselves rather than go through the “fall” of being raped.

Religion also plays a role in abstinence education through the secular adaptation of teaching methods and strategies devised for use in religious contexts. Beginning in the early 1990s, evangelical Christian ministries targeting adolescent and young-adult populations began to form groups and create programs specifically designed to deal with what they view as a cultural onslaught against sexual purity. The best known of these, and one of the oldest, is True Love Waits, run by LifeWay Christian Resources, an operation of the Southern Baptist Convention. In addition to producing and licensing a number of products, including sportswear, stickers, and jewelry, True Love Waits also offers a number of counseling, educational, and motivational programs.

True Love Waits’ most distinctive offering by far, however, is the True Love Waits Commitment Card. This is a simple piece of paper, with space for a signature at the bottom, that reads: “My Commitment: Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to a lifetime of purity including sexual abstinence from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship.”

True Love Waits’ pledge cards have proven popular, a staple of TLW’s small community groups as well as massive regional rallies. A similar pledge-taking phenomenon called the Silver Ring Thing puts a fifteen-dollar silver ring on the pledge-taker’s left ring finger (the same finger on which Americans traditionally wear their wedding rings) as an outwardly visible sign that one has taken the pledge. Approximately eighty other religious virginity-pledge groups, including the Unification Church’s Pure Love Alliance, exist and have modified this pledge process for their own uses. So have numerous abstinence curricula intended for use in public schools. *Sex Respect* includes a version that reads “I, [the undersigned], promise to abstain from sex until my wedding night. I want to reserve my sexual powers to give life and love for my future spouse and marriage. I will respect my gift of sexuality by keeping my mind

and thoughts pure as I prepare for my true love. I commit to grow in character to learn to live in love and freedom.” Although this and other secularized versions omit references to God, the Bible, and other explicitly religious concepts, they do exude a sanctimonious odor.

To the young people signing these pledges, however, the language is often less important than whether or not their friends are signing up. Two researchers, Peter Bearman of Columbia University and Hannah Brückner of Yale, devoted themselves for several years to researching the effects—good, bad, and indifferent—of virginity pledging. Their findings, released in several reports beginning with the landmark 2001 “Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and the Transition to First Intercourse,” which was published in *The American Journal of Sociology*, determined that while virginity pledges did have some effect on the sexual behavior of those who made them, what mattered most was whether signing—and keeping—the pledge was considered “cool.”

The more pledgers there were in a particular school, the more likely pledgers were to keep their pledges. But this was only true as long as the number of pledgers did not grow so large that being a virginity pledger stopped being an identifiable subculture. There was, Bearman and Brückner discovered, a specific point beyond which pledges were no longer likely to have an effect. When more than 30 percent of the students at a given school took abstinence pledges, the pledgers stopped delaying virginity loss. As the researchers put it, “The pledge identity is meaningful, consequently, only if it is a minority identity, a common situation for identity movements.”

For those pledgers to whom the “pledge identity is meaningful,” on the other hand, it appears that pledging does indeed delay sexual debut. Not, it must be said, for the entire period stipulated in the pledge, but for roughly eighteen months. As Bearman and Brückner put it, “There comes a phase chronologically where the pledgers catch up with nonpledgers.”

While abstinence promoters view this figure as evidence of success, critics have interpreted it as a sign of failure. Other researchers looking at the same data—the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth), the only federally run sexuality research to date that has included virginity pledge questions—like Harvard’s Janet Rosenbaum, have found similarly high rates of pledge breaking. Rosenbaum’s research, published in 2006, indicates that 52 percent of pledgers had sex within a year. More troublesome,

Rosenbaum's research suggests that teens are likely to lie about their sexual experience to "reconcile their memories with present beliefs," with 73 percent of those who had sex after pledging later denying that they made the pledge at all. Perhaps such cognitive dissonance is to blame, as Bearman and Brückner suggest, for pledgers being approximately one-third less likely than non-pledgers to use contraception when they first have sex.

What little research has been done on abstinence-education programs has yielded similarly indifferent evidence of their effectiveness. Neither AFLA nor Title V Section 510(b) requires that the programs they underwrite provide proof of their effectiveness. Some states, though, have taken such evaluations upon themselves. Success, on the whole, has been elusive. Many state reviews, such as those conducted in Arizona (June 2003) and Texas (2004), found that sexual behavior among young people who have been taught "abstinence" curricula have not differed substantially from what they had been when students were taught earlier "comprehensive" curricula. Some reviews, such as the independent study commissioned by the Minnesota Department of Health to study the effect of the state's "Education Now and Babies Later" (ENABL) program from 1998 to 2002, revealed that in some schools, sexual activity among abstinence program participants increased substantially. Where positive effects have been shown to come from abstinence programs, they have been most strongly associated with short-term outcomes (a finding that seems congruent with Bearman and Brückner's research) and younger students.

What will come of the American experiment in disseminating a federal virginity ideology is uncertain. Since the system and its ideological agenda were instated without public debate or referendum, it is inaccurate to say that the program was one that the American public chose. But because there is no means by which these federal provisions can be repealed by national ballot, they are not likely to be repealed at all unless through a successful Supreme Court challenge of their constitutionality. For purely economic reasons, states are unlikely to forgo the funds offered through Section 510(b), although many individual municipal school districts have either refused to accept Section 510(b) funds or have channeled them to programs outside of the schools.

The abstinence agenda has its vocal critics—California congressman Henry Waxman is a notable example—both inside and outside of the Washington Beltway. But it also has its very vocal champions, not least in the Bush White

House. The intensity of executive support for abstinence programs has made itself felt beyond AFLA and Section 510(b), sometimes in disturbing ways.

The Centers for Disease Control, the federal medical research organization responsible for addressing infectious and chronic diseases, had until 2002 been conducting research into "Programs That Work," sex-education curricula that had been proven through empirical review to effectively reduce risky sexual behaviors. Of the five they identified as effective, none were abstinence centered. Since 2002, however, the CDC has discontinued this research program and the program's findings have been removed from public view at the CDC's Web site. Other CDC statements praising contraception in a public-health context have also mysteriously vanished from the CDC's online offerings, leaving, instead, statements of presidential and other official support of abstinence programs. It seems reasonable to surmise that high-ranking opposition to anything other than the official virginity-until-marriage agenda has created something of a chilling effect on the CDC's ability to conduct and present scientific research on reproductive health issues.

Where all this will leave the United States remains to be seen. Attempts to export American-style abstinence ideology to other countries have had little real success thus far, despite attempts to tie it to American foreign aid funding. Among its brethren in the developed West, the American government stands alone with its official virginity policy, and the American people stand alone among other First World countries in having to figure out how to deal with it. Perhaps the only thing that is at all clear about this unprecedented legislation of virginity-flavored agitprop is that a politically powerful right wing, faced with the cumulative social change of the last century, has begun to panic in earnest. Reactionary, hyperbolic, and heavily dependent upon a specifically Christian model of sexual morality, the American federal attempt to resurrect—or, more accurately, manufacture—an "expected standard" of virginity until marriage may be best understood as a signal of nothing more than a deep-seated terror of change.

## *Epilogue: The Once and Future Virgin*

The stone butch has the dubious distinction of being possibly the only sexual identity defined almost solely in terms of what practices she does not engage in. Is there any other sexual identity, we might ask, defined by what a person will not do?

—Judith Halberstam

EVERY TABOO, every law, and every rule serves at least two functions. On an immediate level they exist to control behavior, to keep people from doing things that their culture considers inappropriate, unethical, or wrong. But on a larger level, rules and taboos exist as representations of the abstract concepts that a culture depends upon to help make sense of human experience. A rule like “thou shalt not steal” enjoins people not to steal the belongings of others. But it also conveys the message that the concept of “private property” plays an important role in the culture. Additionally, it presumes that there is something of a consensus within the society about what “private property” is and what “stealing” is, and that the people who live within this culture are aware of these ideas and what they mean.

Such rules are never entirely complete on their own. When these abstracts become embodied as laws, much less actual events, they acquire context. Context brings variables. With variables come challenges about how these abstracts

are understood and interpreted. If a man steals to keep himself from starving, is “stealing” still understood the same way? What if he steals because another man has threatened to kill him if he does not? Or if he steals from someone who has monopolized all of the available resources so that no one else can have any? What then? No single abstract, and no single rule, can adequately serve every moment.

The job of bridging the gap between an abstract principle and its real-world embodiment is complex and highly temporal. The gap can only be bridged in the moment, and only by individual human beings, inheritors of specific histories and denizens of particular times and places. The process of putting abstract concepts into practice thus inevitably reflects both historical and current surroundings, theories, philosophies, and mores.

As such, the process also reflects change. The abstract concepts themselves change slowest, real-world applications of these abstracts change fastest. The laws and rules, the mechanisms that shape and guide daily practice, change at a rate somewhere in between. All are artifacts of human culture, tools that we use to organize our lives, our families, our communities, our cities and countries and institutions. They exist in a constant, complex web of creation and destruction, growth and change.

The regulation and organization of sexual behavior is one of the most basic, and often one of the most volatile, arenas in which culture does its work. Virginity is one of an array of abstract concepts that human cultures have developed to impose some sense of order on the sexual behavior of their members. Not every human culture places a particular value on virginity, and not every culture that does value it values it the same way or to the same degree. Indeed, a given culture’s treatment of virginity can change over time.

Nonetheless, making some distinction between virgins and nonvirgins is a common motif in human culture, and it makes pragmatic sense that this should be so. Potentially reproductive sexual activity is critical to a culture’s ability to survive and thrive. Thus the onset of such activity in the lives of individual members of a society is meaningful: it is the moment in which they enter the lists in the battle for long-term survival of their people.

Everything else we talk about when we talk about virginity, from definitions to rituals to legislation to morality, proceeds from the awareness that sex *matters*. Sex has always mattered to us as humans, and it is likely that it always will. The ways in which it matters have become increasingly complex, but this

is just a testament to our big brains and the complicated cultures we have developed by using them. The fundamental issue remains that sex is important stuff, in very real ways the stuff of life itself. This is why we have always cared, and probably always will care, about virginity.

What confuses us is when the framework supporting our regard for virginity undergoes renovation. This happened during the early years of the Christian era, when virginity, customarily a socioeconomic and familial concern, was suddenly also mobilized as a primary mode of individual sanctity. And it is happening now, as virginity is drifting away from a religious framework and what remains of its socioeconomic and kinship underpinnings and is becoming instead a way to organize experience and identity.

The concepts of individual autonomy and human rights egalitarianism are philosophical products of the Enlightenment that have been developing over the course of the last three hundred years. They have not only led to things like women's rights, the abolition of slavery and apartheid, and other advances in social equality; they have, in combination with a number of other factors, also revolutionized sex. Increasingly, sexuality is considered a realm of personal autonomy. Families, religious authorities, and governments once faced little opposition to the idea that they had a legitimate stake in people's sexual behavior. Now we are increasingly likely to believe that the primary legitimate stakeholder in an individual's sexual life is the individual him- or herself. Individual consent, informed and self-aware, has become the gold standard by which sexual activity exists in a person's life.

Egalitarian and empirical thinking have also combined to generate a philosophy of sexuality that views it as a broadly universal aspect of the human condition, its glories and pitfalls shared by everyone without regard to sex or gender. Men and women alike are recognized to experience sexual feelings ranging from aversion to desire and beyond. We have learned to use an essentially psychoanalytic model to articulate our perception that human beings experience their individual sexualities as an integral component of the self, something we call "sexual identity." These sexual identities have been observed to encompass not only the statistically (and culturally) dominant heterosexual mode, but also many others as well, notably including homo- and transsexuality. Sexuality, we currently believe, is a constant of which there are myriad possible manifestations.

As our culture digests and assimilates these and related ideals, the ways we think about virginity continue to change. Virginity is still a meaningful term, and the sexual status it indicates is still important. But its importance is increasingly private rather than public, personal rather than institutional or familial. The decision to begin a partnered sex life is now quite likely to be predicated on the internal realities of emotion, arousal, or curiosity. This is a far cry from the days when a woman's partnered sex life was most likely to begin because mandatory marriage had forced the issue.

How one understands and defines virginity has likewise become more centered around the individual. The concept that sexuality is the universal, and specific acts only manifestations of that universal, has begun to noticeably nudge penis-in-vagina intercourse out of its long-held position as the sex act of record. Among gay men and lesbians, but also increasingly among hetero- and bisexuals, oral sex, anal sex, and mutual masturbation are now often identified as being the things that turn virgins into no-longer-virgins. Still other people speak, sometimes jokingly but other times earnestly, in terms of having a virginity for each of the orifices that might be involved in a sexual activity, or for each type of sexual act they might engage in. There are a number of different ways to conceptualize "sexual debut," and many different perspectives from which the notion of a first time can be considered.

Others have begun to redefine virginity according to the sensibility that sexuality is lifelong and ongoing and that a shift from one sexual status to another—the acquisition of genuine carnal knowledge—takes time. Losing one's virginity, in this way of thinking, is not so much an individual physical event but rather a process encompassing the physical, emotional, intellectual, and psychological. We often see evidence of this thinking when people grope for ways to explain a sensation of developing awareness in terms of sex, mentioning, say, a first time that satisfied the technical requirements for the end of virginity, and then describing some later experience or experiences that made them feel as if they had "really understood what it was all about" or "finally felt like I knew what I was doing." This is not necessarily revisionism or doublethink. It is often an honest attempt to express a process of sexual development that takes significantly longer than any single episode of sex.

Virginity loss as developmental phase may seem an odd conceit on some levels, but on others, it makes perfect sense. Just as adolescence is understood

to exist as a developmental bridge between childhood and adulthood, it is not difficult to conceive of a phase of sexual development that bridges sexual inexperience and a sexual status for which we do not have a customary term, but could perhaps be characterized as sexual virtuosity. In a culture that has come to value both egalitarianism and a developmental model of human identity, thinking of a period of sexual learning—a practicum, if you will—as a segment of a lifelong fabric of sexuality has an attractive neutrality, equally applicable to males and females, heterosexuals and nonheterosexuals, irrelevant of chronological age.

The current multiplicity of ways of thinking about virginity is revolutionary in many philosophical and ideological respects, especially insofar as it represents a historically unprecedented view of women as free agents. But conceptualizing multiple virginities, as this book repeatedly shows, is nothing particularly new. Modern thinking has not smashed a virginal monolith for the simple reason that there has never been a monolith there to smash.

The current welter of ways of thinking about virginity is, however, unusual. It spans an enormous range of perspectives and philosophies. Such a chaotic maelstrom of virginities has not existed since the early centuries of Christianity, when the evolving sexual ideologies of Christianity swirled, fought, and in some cases mingled with the social, economic, and ritual virginity ideologies of pagan, Gnostic, and Jewish cultures. The intervening centuries have given us all the time in the world to become set in our ways, to assume that the ways in which the Church-dominated West thought about sexuality and virginity were innate, natural, or the will of God. But now, as new paradigms encounter old ones and evolving ideologies rub shoulders with ones that have been around for millennia, many of the ironclad long-timers are showing rather a lot of rust. People may react to this with fear and loathing, with skepticism and analysis, or with eager enthusiasm, but few people, whether they are virgins or not, seem uninterested.

This is true not just within the developed West, the arena of the broad “Western culture” that has formed the stage for this exploration of virginity’s history, but around the world. Thanks to technological innovations from airplanes to e-mail, the world is, as they say, becoming smaller. Disparate cultures make contact in any number of ways every day. In these encounters, the enormous economic and political power of the industrialized West lends a propor-

tionately enormous cultural impact as well. When we travel, when we export goods, when we provide aid, when we fight wars on foreign soil, we take our culture with us. This includes our culture of sexuality.

Thus the sexuality paradigm shift taking place in the West is not limited to the West at all. But whether it is an unstoppable juggernaut dragging the globe behind it is also debatable. Other cultures have their own priorities, their own philosophies, and their own rationales for handling issues of sex, gender, and virginity, and they are not necessarily any too keen on dealing with sex-culture gate-crashers from foreign parts.

This often leads to conflict. Women’s issues, and particularly issues pertaining to women’s sexual and reproductive lives, are routinely pushed to the bottom of international political and social agendas. When action is taken on these difficult issues, the divergent demands of human-rights philosophy, global-aid outreach, and cultural integrity can make it difficult to know what should be done. In the ongoing crusades to stop female genital mutilation (FGM, also known as “female circumcision”), practiced in many places and particularly in the Islamic world, there is enormous tension between the desire to protect girls and women from being physically mutilated against their wills, and the knowledge that by so doing, the largely Western organizations responsible for addressing the issue may only succeed in being seen as forcing their own cultural priorities and sexual ideologies down the throats of those they seek to help. Attempts to address “honor crimes” (acts of violence, including mutilation or murder, committed upon women who have in some way been judged to have damaged the honor of their families, often through perceived or actual violations of their families’ and cultures’ expectations of their virginity) frequently face a similar fate. Although the United Nations finally filed a resolution condemning honor crimes in October 2004, it is likely that meaningful international confrontations on this issue will be a long time in coming if they ever materialize at all.

Virginity-related practices of violence against women are outrageous violations of human rights, but they are also complicated cultural problems. Neither FGM nor honor crimes are issues that can be easily addressed in isolation. They cannot even be addressed simply as matters of problematic ideologies of virginity, for both FGM and honor crimes encompass much more than just virginity.

No matter how desperate our desire to see such devastating violence against women ended, expecting other cultures to simply stop in their tracks and adopt Western cultural priorities when it comes to sexuality is unrealistic. In so profoundly volatile a territory as virginity, particularly, the paths to doing so are often steep and uncertain. Attempting to negotiate such paths in the darkness of presumption and ignorance only makes the process more difficult. Books like this one—although certainly not limited to this one—are a crucial element of change. Information about the full spectrum of virginity issues and their history, even the awareness that one can study it at all, that virginity *has* a history, is an indispensable weapon when dealing with a social principle that is most often asserted as an irreducible fact of nature.

Anthropologists and historians have made only rare attempts to study virginity, and their attempts provide only spotty coverage: even a survey-style book like this one only skims the surface for a small portion of the world. There is a great deal of information that has yet to be gathered and many books that have yet to be written about virginity. It is my fond hope that they will fill in the many gaps I have left in these pages—as well as the vast territories of virginal history and culture I could not even begin to approach in this limited treatment—and that this subject will become better and better understood.

Historical hindsight is a convenience, and in some ways it is a fiction. Books of history often leave the reader with the sense that history happens according to some grandiose plan. The sheer vastness of the historical record, all the millions of bits of data that no given historian can ever include, however, proves that for better or worse this is not true. Events do not happen the way they do in order for certain well-known outcomes to come to pass. They simply happen. The events that make it into the history books do so due to a complicated mix of initiative, inertia, and plain dumb luck. While it seems evident that Western culture is right now in the throes of substantial shifts in its virginity culture specifically and its sex and gender culture at large, it is impossible to say where those shifts will take us.

Having led this tour throughout the ages of virginity, in the end I find that I can only return to what I stated in the opening chapter. Virginity is an abstract, but an abstract so meaningful to the way we have organized our Western cultures that we have arranged lives around it, built it into our religions, our laws, our definitions of marriage, and our ways of organizing families, and woven it

into our very concepts of identity and self. If nothing else, I feel I can say with certainty that no matter where our changing culture takes us, and no matter how our notions of virginity change, as long as sex is important in the slightest, virginity and virgins will continue to matter profoundly to us all.