

## Catherine Wagner

### *A cornucopia amendment<sup>1</sup>*

In 1993, while living in Baltimore and waiting tables, I had a fantasy about having sex with a man who lived on the street near Cross Street Market in Federal Hill, South Baltimore, an area now thoroughly gentrified but then in transition. The man had rotted teeth; his clothes were filthy, he smelled terrible, and he was very flirty.

I started writing a sequence called “Hole in the Ground,” poems, in the summer of 2007 when I had not had sex in some time. I thought of the poems as “fuck poems,” liking the word “fuck” for its rough sound and layered definition. I had become obsessed with the idea that the past and future sexual relations I enjoyed (or failed to enjoy) were, whatever else they were, performances of the social and economic and political conditions under which they occurred. I wrote the poems conscious that, more often than not, for better and for worse, these conditions were ignored or blurred during sex.

The Baltimore fantasy cropped up in the poems. I was still turned on by it and curious about why, and I wondered why sex between homeless people, in some of the writing I was doing, seemed to represent a realm free from hierarchy and economic impetus: “Gone so low, it’s all flat here, let’s make LOVE.” I suspected my assumptions were crude and unethical. I wondered what associations others made when they thought about homelessness and sex, and what people without homes, in their variety, might think about sexuality.

Here is the text of a postcard survey I distributed in the fall of 2007. The survey was to be returned anonymously. I am embarrassed and ashamed about it: not about its sexual content, but about certain assumptions of mine that it implies:

*The answers to the following survey may be included in a poem I am writing. I intend the questions seriously. The questions assume that fucking is generally pleasurable. Thank you very much for your help. Please drop in a mailbox when complete.*

What is most strange or unpleasant about fucking?

Would you fuck a homeless (poor and unwashed) person? Why or why not?

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<sup>1</sup> I originally planned to publish the quotes that follow, along with this statement, in *My New Job* (Fence, 2009) as part of a sequence called “Hole in the Ground.” My editor was dubious about including what didn’t feel like “poetry” in the book, and though I didn’t share her reasons, I agreed to the edit because I had begun to have doubts about the ethics of appropriating the interview material into a sequence of poems. I feel those doubts even more strongly today, but I would like to publish the material, not as poetry, but as a record of an attempt to correct myself that went wrong, to try to hold myself accountable for the urges and ignorances that led me toward this flawed project.

What advice do you have for readers of this poem about fucking?

If I could take back the horrid second question, I would. It implies that only people with homes are the audience for the survey; it puts people without homes in a special category, implying that they are all the same, all unwashed, all rather disgusting; it insists that the answerer of the question make a decision about an entire category of person when the categorization is dubious to begin with. It might seem that I sent out my survey in consciousness of the nightmarish divisions the second question set up; I might have wanted to trap my respondents into saying things that betrayed their biases and the limitations of their empathy. But in fact I only knew that the question made me itch, and I wanted to put it out into the world and think about it.

The question, on a symbolic level, is about abjection—about touching something that seems unwanted, that reeks of death (will you get cuddly with something that represents what you fear you might be or become?) Yet because the question also functions on the level of the real—because it suggests an actual possible social encounter—it insults its subject and puts its answerers (who were not, as far as I knew, homeless) in a painful position. Awake to the power differential between a hypothetical homeless person and themselves, respondents have to imagine enacting that power relation as it plays out in a decision about whether or not to seek sex. I was struck by the way the answers to the second question divided people. Some did not think about the situation of the postulated homeless person, only about their own reaction to him or her. Some could not imagine themselves in an intimate situation with a person without imagining themselves ensuring that that person had everything she or he needed.

The fact that some homeless people work as prostitutes did not occur to me when I wrote the survey. I do not know whether any of my survey respondents have ever had sex with a homeless person. It is not unlikely that some of them have.<sup>2</sup> I thought about this, and about many other things new to me, when, with help from the Drop Inn Shelter in Cincinnati, Ohio, I had the privilege of interviewing several women in residence there about their lives, especially their sex lives. I wondered what my fantasy about my Cross Street Market acquaintance, and my more idealistic and dumber fantasy about liberated homeless fucking, had to do with our society's fucking of homeless people. Is my fantasy liberated homeless fuckfest somehow a mirror of a illusionary liberated economic paradise for those with capital? Why didn't I realize that my survey reproduced assumptions that bolstered my sense of difference and privilege? Sexual fantasies almost always involve a lopsided power relationship. Imbalance speeds the plot.

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<sup>2</sup> “I don't know, I even met some nice people [sex customers]... People I could have been at the store with my mom and seen someone—“Oh Ma! So-and-so!” I mean, for real.”

Some others said these things:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I have organized quotes in three sections grouped loosely around the questions in the survey. Quotes from surveys and interviews are mixed.

I.

Sometimes you really want to, and sometimes you don't.

—Austin, TX

The person's breath seems more intimate and overwhelming than the fucking. Afterwards, even if you've been with this person for 10 years they can seem too close and too alien at the same time. Who is this person with these smells that's not me?

—Seattle, WA

Mm, [sex is] all right. I don't know, I could do without.

—Cincinnati, OH

Dealing with someone else's body smells and fluids.

—Madison, WI

Perspiration that drips from your partner's face onto yours, the loss of rhythm with your partner when you're tired and the awkward disappointment of losing the rhythm, and a cat staring at you/licking your partner's balls.

—Boise, ID

And I'm bad, if it itches, I'm scratching it. I think if you break it open, they stop itching. God, don't they itch bad?

—Cincinnati, OH

The first man I was with was nineteen [when I conceived my daughter]. He was there for about a year and then he started beating on me and stuff so I got away from him.

—Cincinnati, OH

I would have to say a lot about differences between different experiences...I'm doing this with somebody I [love?]...nothing is unpleasurable. There are no awkwardnesses or bars.

—Oxford, OH

Well, it depends on the fucker or fuckee, doesn't it? Usually, the way the character of the fucking clashes with the character of the relationship both people have out of bed.

—Boston, MA

Overtime a spiritual assault on women.

—New York City, NY

I don't like having no sex. Nope. Don't want nobody touching me.

—Cincinnati, OH

We leave shimmering bits of ourselves behind.

—Portland, OR

Bad heart. I have asthma, I have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, arthritis. I'm on—I take psych medicines. Depression. It's a lot of things. I can't stand long.

—Cincinnati, OH

The strangest thing about fucking is that it is simultaneously wrapped up in its own present and alive with the greatest variety and depth of consequence.

—Seattle, WA

When it was drugs or sex, I chose the drugs.

—Cincinnati, OH

The observing-while-pretending-not-to-be-observing what size, what moves, oh, I guess he doesn't do foreplay. Or, Yeah, FOREPLAY! My brain never shuts off.

—Portland, OR

And really it was that [vaginal sex] or the oral sex. Hell yeah, very hard work. Yeah, that's why I'd rather let them do it the other [vaginal] way and get it over with. That's embarrassing, but it's the truth.

—Cincinnati, OH

I mean, I think that's where I was different than some of them because them girls have been out there [selling sex] for years. A lot of them. Some of them still cute and they've been out there since they were thirteen, and they're like 23 now.

—Cincinnati, OH

When I first had my daughter, that was the first time I had sex, when I was fourteen. Well, my mother was incarcerated, and then I was with my grandma and I didn't want to stay there, so I got no home.

—Cincinnati, OH

It wasn't good. Because it was all on drugs. I mean, we didn't even think about it, or I didn't. It was no. It was no. I didn't really care.

—Cincinnati, OH

When I do crack, I don't want nobody touching me, I don't want nothing, that don't turn me on like it, I just want to sit and get high and enjoy my high and then leave or whatever. Now men, when they get high, that's the first thing that

come out of their mouth—"Give me head, give me this, give me that." Nah, not me.

—Cincinnati, OH

But some, now the guys they say the sex, I mean the drugs are like a, excuse me, like an aphrodisiac for them but, you know, and then guys can't even get hard. You know, but it's so, I don't even, I don't know. I didn't care for it. They would think they were [horny] and after 29 hours [on the street], you're like that's enough, you know?

—Cincinnati, OH

Any kind of sense of anxiety about what people would broadly call coming (being a sense of closure or conclusion).

—Oxford, OH

Now these kids are having sex at thirteen years old, pregnant at thirteen years old. You know, and they all know what an orgasm is. I didn't know what an orgasm was when I was sixteen.

—Cincinnati, OH

I said, "You never had an orgasm the whole time you had sex with my dad? And you had me and my sister?" That's sad! Then I think about my dad and go "Well, what the—You're sick!" It makes me mad about him. But my dad's very affectionate! So I don't understand it at all. Maybe my mother was like me, very shy and self-conscious. And he didn't know how to draw her out, or maybe, maybe she faked it.

—Cincinnati, OH

Yeah, like saying 'Oh!' and moaning and all that stuff, I'm just not good at that.

—Cincinnati, OH

I just, I thought, when I was a kid, I remember hearing my mother!

—Cincinnati, OH

II.

I might, but I might not enjoy it.

—New York City, NY

My boyfriend's in jail; we haven't really seen each other and touched in thirteen months. I haven't had sex in thirteen months.

—Cincinnati, OH

Absolutely because I love women including all of their tastes and smells. Don't

clean a man who loves women wants to be as close to her as possible.

—New York City, NY

I imagine that whatever love or attraction might otherwise have drawn me to have sex, would first draw me to care for their other needs.

—Seattle, WA

Them guys you see with the girls, it's their boyfriends [not pimps]. You know, and then these guys will think they're their pimps. They aren't their pimps. You know, those girls will get their money and they won't come back and then the guy gets mad and he might hit her and these guys are thinking, "Well, look at that pimp. She got a black eye on." He's not a pimp. She was the dirty one. She went out, he's waiting on her, she's coming back with money, he wants to get high too. Now she got dropped off...and hid from him, and did it all herself. So that's what makes these guys mad. Or [the girls] hide the money. Or they're gone for two or three hours. You know, whatever.

—Cincinnati, OH

After a good while of consideration (a month or so) I have decided yes. Sure it's been awhile, but that is hardly why, I really can't think of why not. Sure, diseases can be bad, but sex is soooo good.

—Portland, OR

—And your relationship with your boyfriend—I'm curious about the economics of it. Because it sounds like, what you're talking about, like the girls are doing the work and then giving the money to the guys. The guys are just hanging out, doing drugs, and the girls are going and doing the work.

—Yeah. The girls were doing the work. The guys might get money out of a car that wants them to go get stuff and they take the people's money, that's their little hustle, you know what I mean? Actually, I didn't want [my boyfriend] to do anything. Just wait for me. I mean, I didn't want him to get in trouble. I didn't want somebody to kill him 'cause he took his money...You know, we 63 (?)

argued a lot, because I didn't want to have sex, and he got really jealous and upset because all them guys were getting it and he wasn't. But then I have to say, "Well wait a minute, we've already talked about this, you can't get mad at me now, we're hooked on this drug," and you know, I knew I could go out there and get money, any second of the day. And you go to sleep and get up at two o'clock in the morning and go get dressed and go out there. I mean, you don't even have to have makeup on. You don't, you don't. It's just unbelievable.

—Cincinnati, OH

No. Being turned on by someone's smell is important for my enjoyment of sex.

—Madison, WI

We were together for like a whole year before I ever started doing that crap out there. Meaning the sex, the soliciting, I didn't know, I had no idea. I guess I was naïve, I don't know, stupid. We were together a year before I realized what those women were doing out there. On Vine Street. Right down there in the heart of it all. And tell you what, if I didn't do drugs, back when I was doing that, you could make some money. I mean, that's a bad thing too. It was like being a waitress, 'cause I was a waitress all my life, so you were making like, it was like waiting on tables and getting tips.

—Cincinnati, OH

No. I once saw a man shit into his hand on a street corner.

—Boise, ID

I mean, you know, some of these girls, I feel sorry for them. I don't know, I've never, I'm not better than anybody, but I wasn't...You would never have known that I was doing it. I mean, you really wouldn't have. Yeah, you would never, you know, I didn't dress like it, I didn't act like it. I'd walk out there dressed like this. Some girls, some of the girls walk out there dressed like, you know, hookers. Yeah, and then they got that easy, slutty attitude and I mean, I'm just...I mean, unfortunately I'm...I don't know.

—Cincinnati, OH

There are girls that I know, that are here, that are, you know, out there in the streets, doing stuff for money to get drugs. Well, and they enjoy it! They have orgasms!

—Cincinnati, OH

If I really wanted to, neither poor nor unwashed would be an issue. Poor is poor, but unwashed could well be a turn-on.

—Austin, TX

And I've always been shy, very self-conscious, you know? But if you ain't on drugs you sure ain't going to be out there doing that.

—Cincinnati, OH

But, no, back when I was new it was fun. Yeah, it was fun because it was just, it was really different.

—Cincinnati, OH

No. I can't imagine a situation in which it wasn't possible in some way to relax, wash, be clean, not in a purist sense but in a—the vast majority of situations I've come across around homelessness and rough sleeping, there's a desire . . .



No, because it would be possible to find a more comfortable situation than the situation that the person was in; I could help. If I were another homeless person, then totally.

—Oxford, OH

You know, some of them girls get mad, you're out there on their side. "This is my street," you know? Yeah, and they're real hard. I'm not hard, I'm 38, I've never been in a fight my entire life, ever.

—Cincinnati, OH

No way, I can hardly get myself to fuck someone with a home. The last time I saw Genesis Porridge [*sic*], I smelled him and I thought—is this sexy? Someone actually fucks this homeless-smelling shit just because he's an icon?

—Seattle, WA

He, he was OK with it for a minute, because we were on them drugs. But after [I started], he didn't want me doing it any more. But it was like, "too late, we're already...me, you..." Like right now, you go out there and you make money seven days a week, any time you want to.

—Cincinnati, OH

Smelly and unwashed could be interesting, could be attractive depending on your taste. I might be smelly and unwashed too.

—Oxford, OH

Well, you end up getting your regulars, you know, so you know you're OK, and nobody's going to hurt you. Knock on wood I never got hurt.

—Cincinnati, OH

III.

Don't think unless it's absolutely necessary.

—Boise, ID

Don't pick poems based on their shock value!

—Boston, MA

You take earwax, earwax out of your ear and put that on the head of a man's penis. It'll burn, it'll burn like hell. Sure will. It's time to get up and put your panties on.

—Cincinnati, OH

The more inappropriate the better.

—Portland, OR

The most feminist act is to take pleasure in your own body.

—Oxford, OH

The tenderness and the awkwardness, the abrasiveness, even the edge of violence between people that exists in language has a lot in common with aspects of fucking.

—Oxford, OH

Be careful with others and yourself. Or don't, but then there's awful consequences.

—Austin, TX

Me and my mother always said that a man's visual, he can look and get erect. And us, we got to have the touching and all that crap.

—Cincinnati, OH

Mm-hmm. Birth control pills, and rubbers. I still got some in my purse. I can't do with that, no, you ain't going to give me nothing. Mm-mm. Yeah, my Daddy taught me well.

—Cincinnati, OH

Ask for what you want.

—Madison, WI

Lubricate!

—New York City, NY

My son, he was, hmm, was like fourteen, thirteen or fourteen when he brought his first, his first, uh, uh, when he got [his first erection]. He come to me with it hanging out and what I'm supposed to do with it, you know? I said honey, I said I'm going to tell you, I didn't know how to explain it to him, because I was young myself. Then, later on, I, um, told him, like you know, you getting to be a man now, so you gots to get a gal, a little girl. That's all I could tell him.

—Cincinnati, OH

Fuck a stranger—maybe only strangers—think Samantha from Sex in the City and the FedEx delivery man.

—Seattle, WA

And, kissing? God, that's my all-time favorite. If you can't kiss might as well ain't even going to try the other thing.

—Cincinnati, OH

Women's brains are always r-r-r, so there needs to be something to just slow you down. To calm you down.

—Cincinnati, OH

Be open to the full range of expression contained in it, sufficient to the expression of trying it all on. Consider the words that you might say then while fucking. Consider these words as a preface to or afterword to fucking. In what way these words are also fucking—fuck with these words, let these words fuck you. Language is a form of fucking. Not sure I agree with that actually. Certain language. Maybe I'm back into the territory of the dance of the tongue in the mouth, and of the excitation of the molecules of the breath in the air between people, breathing out the molecules from the body, breathing in the molecules to the body. Not sure I agree with that either.

—Oxford, OH

Mean it.

—Oakland, CA

Well, the man knows how good it feels to him; he should take time and let her enjoy it too. I mean, if you really love somebody, though, I think it comes.

—Cincinnati, OH

A lot of my girlfriends was having babies at fourteen, girl, y'all crazy. I'm cool. No, they were telling me to try and go out—"I gotta find me a babysitter"—well, you know where I'm going to be at. 'Cause I ain't got nothing to do with that, and you should've kept your legs closed.

—Cincinnati, OH

It ain't nothing like what you want to have, but you can't have what...

—Cincinnati, OH

Limber up.

—Portland, OR

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Thanks to cris cheek for helping me think through the project over many long conversations.

Thanks to the generous Pat Clifford at the Drop Inn Center in Cincinnati for setting up the interviews and for several pungently clarificatory comments, e.g.:

C: OK, thanks so much, and I'd still like to talk to some of the men.

P: Well, I wanted to talk to you about that. I think it could get pretty uncomfortable

[interviewing men at the shelter about sex].

C: Oh, I know, but I think I can handle it!

P: It's not you I'm concerned about.

Thanks to Linas Phillips for talking to me about his experiences making his film about homeless people, "Great Speeches from a Dying World," and for encouraging me while I prepared for the interviews. Thanks to Rachel Schramm for her long hours transcribing the interviews as my intern, and to Miami University for making it possible for me to have an intern and for the leave that gave me time to finish this poem and this book. Gratitude and apologies to M, N, D, and P for their participation in my experiments. Many thanks to all the generous people who filled out and returned the surveys.

I am especially grateful to the women who took the time to be interviewed at the Drop Inn Center.

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### **Further Reading**

My New Job by Catherine Wagner

[http://www.fenceportal.org/?page\\_id=173](http://www.fenceportal.org/?page_id=173)

Catherine Wagner Poetry Foundation page

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/catherine-wagner>

Catherine Wagner @ PennSound

<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Wagner.php>