

December 13, 2016 - Conner Habib is an author, a lecturer, a porn performer, and an advocate for the rights of sex workers. His creative work often focuses on the meeting points between the worlds of sexuality, spirituality, pornography, science, and art. In addition to his work as a writing coach, in early 2017 he'll be teaching an online course called *Radical Undoing: Decolonizing Your Mind with Sex, Science, the Occult, and Philosophy*.



As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3986 words.

Tags: Culture, Writing, Film, Sex, Identity.

Conner Habib on changing the way we think (about everything)

... and on being an organic intellectual, the need for new models of education, and the creative potential of pornography.
Your roots are in academia, right?

Sort of. I went to U Mass to get my MFA in creative writing, but I never finished the final piece, so technically I don't have my MFA. I also studied organismic and evolutionary biology. I was teaching at U Mass and at Western New England College, which is now Western New England University. That was the idea-go to grad school, get a degree, get a job as a professor, get tenure, and die. Eventually I saw fit to throw a wrench into the gears of that path.

Was leaving academia connected in any way with your work in adult films? Did you have to give up one in order to do the other?

I'll tell you the story. I remember there being two writing workshops where a similar thing happened, which is that I said something and people gasped. The first time was when I was discussing someone's story and I mentioned that it reminded me of a story that's also in the Koran. Someone gasped and said, "You can't bring that up in here!", which I thought was very weird. In a writing workshop?

The other time this happened was when someone had brought in a story to be workshopped in which the characters were very loud, very intense with each other. There was a sex scene in the story which was sort of like, "And then they had intercourse." Given the nature of the characters involved, it just seemed wrong to me, so I said, "Why don't you have these characters say things to each other? What if one of the characters said something like, 'Fuck my pussy?' since that seems like something this character might say?" Again, people gasped. I just remember thinking, "This is so strange. Even in this academic sphere it's like god and sex are basically off the table." The more I thought about it, the more it occurred to me how much those things were not being seriously discussed, especially sex.

Of course, sex does show up in gender studies and queer theory and that kind of stuff, but when you study queer theory and you study the sexes as they relate to queer theory, you don't actually learn about sex. You don't really learn about any of it. You lose all the feeling for it. All the drives and impulses and the experimental aspects of sex itself are gone and it becomes this analytical thing that tells you almost nothing at all about sex or sexuality.

I knew that was something that I wanted in my life. I'd been wanting to do porn for most of my life, actually. That was sort of just a deferred dream. Then the whole "being a professor and a writer" thing, that was my other dream. I moved to San Francisco and pretty quickly I got a job teaching outside the city, which was crazy. I was offered a job right away. The day I was supposed to start I was just like, "Man, I cannot get on this track." There's this *other* thing I want to do. If I don't stop everything now and do it, it's just not going to happen. I'm going to be a professor, it's going to be too hard-or too risky-to try and do anything else after that happens." I've always had my foot in the door in some way with teaching and I still do in one way or another... it's just not in the standard way anymore, where you just move through the pre-created pathways for doing it.

People's attitudes about sex and sex work have certainly changed dramatically over the years, but that's still a huge leap to make in one's life-especially if you want to work in academia somehow. Once you decide to turn that corner there's no going back.

The idea was that if I were to do this then in order for anyone to ever take me seriously again in the academic world I'd just have to make myself be incredibly awesome. That's still the work I'm in the process of doing, but that was the idea. It was a challenge to myself. I'm not going to accept that the door to this other world is closed to me, but if it starts to close I'm going to make sure that it stays open by working really hard to integrate this with everything else I'm doing. I wanted to explore writing and talking about sex. I wanted to be involved in creating porn. I didn't want that to automatically foreclose on these other options. I asked a few administrators and professors beforehand, some of whom

told me, "Yes, it matters" and some who said, "No, it doesn't matter." At that point I pretty much made up my mind. This is probably why I don't have a ton of money right now, but in general I just decided that I wanted to do things on my own terms and hopefully the rest of the world will eventually sync up. That was back in 2007.

In the years since, you've continued to write and teach as well as do porn, so the two things have not proven to be mutually exclusive. As far as people's reaction, have you been surprised by the ways in which people want to engage with you on the subject?

I've been surprised in the sense that my sex work has opened as many doors as people probably think it closes—but only if you own it and you stick with it. I'm sometimes surprised by the doors I close for myself because I'll think, "They're not going to want to deal with me" for whatever reason, even when that might not be true. There are a lot of ways as a sex worker that you sabotage yourself and that can take a lot of effort. The outer world stuff and dealing with other people... it's not necessarily easier to deal with, but at least there's some precedent for dealing with that stuff. The inner stuff is much more difficult.

For instance, right now I'm working on a book proposal and when I talked to my agent about it the first time I was just like, "Look, I don't know if there's going to be any sex or porn in this book at all." I'm feeling like I have to say this to her defensively. She responds by saying, "Well, yeah, that's fine. I see you as a writer. Write whatever you want," and I was like, "What?" The shock that someone would value what I'm doing without that piece being included... that feeling is omnipresent. And it's not like I didn't want to include the porn stuff because I was ashamed of it or trying to avoid it, it's just not what this particular thing happens to be about. That's for another book. But things like this are always a surprise. It's a surprise to find out how you feel about yourself constantly.

Do you find that your work in porn has informed not only your creative work but also, for lack of a better term, the "academic" work that you do now? Or your teaching?

Yeah, sometimes it intersects pretty directly and sometimes it doesn't. I think it's all of a piece in the sense that I chose to do porn against all the forces and culture that told me not to do it. In essence, that's what like coming out used to be, when the stakes were a little higher. They still are for a lot of people, but in cities—at least here in the US—the stakes have gone down a little bit. But talking about the fact that you do "adult film work" is sort of like coming out. You choose to do the thing that the culture tells you *not* to. That's been the story of my life. I grew up going to and setting up punk shows. I like to argue. A lot of people probably think I'm a jerk on Twitter. Someday my headstone will likely say, "#HeWasNicerInPerson." I have the kind of personality that likes to push back against things. I like doing the thing that is not approved of. In my opinion that is one of the first, huge steps that you have to take in doing any radical or political work or serious academic work.

It's not that you can't affirm things, but it is almost in a sense a poetic impulse, to see something and say, "No, that's not how it is. *This* is how it is." That's how you recreate the world around you. I think that mentality has sort of gone into everything that I do. Also, I think sex workers have a special credential in some sense. Like, look, I actually have put my life on the line. You may not think of it like that. You may just think that people who are in porn, for instance, are just having sex on camera. In fact, they're having sex on camera in defiance of discrimination—job discrimination, discrimination by banks, discriminatory laws, relationship discrimination—and they are doing so in defiance of all the sexual politics of the day. We face a tremendous amount of backlash from that. I was ready for it because I'd looked into all that stuff and I knew that that was coming. People, whether they know that or not, are living their lives against that kind of oppression as a sex worker. I'm not saying everybody does it—or that everyone thinks about it in the same way as I do, or even that all sex workers think about what they do in the same way—but that's how I think about it.

I think it was Mark Twain who talked about the idea of organic intellectuals. These are people who sort of live out their lives in opposition to the prevailing culture, whether they realize it or not. I think doing sex work informs things in that way too. It's like once you take a real risk in culture—which is what everybody who does sex work is doing—you gain so much in many ways. One of the things you gain is the ability to say, "Look, at least I've declared myself in radical opposition to the way things are."

You've been teaching workshops that take on lots of big ideas from different angles. They encourage thinking that's intellectual and academic, but they also addresses the sexual and the spiritual—which are two modes of thinking that often get shut out of academic discourse. How did you come to arrive at doing this?

Part of it was wanting to create new models of education. That's the big project of my life really, beyond anything else I'm doing: creating new models of education, new ways for people to engage with real ideas. That mostly just comes out of loneliness. I have a lot of ideas and I want to discuss them with people. I can discuss them with my friends, but discussing stuff with your friends and having a common project is not the same thing. Creating this space where I can talk about things that are on my mind with people who also want to talk about things that are on their mind, that's the bottom line.

Also, I'd love to see these new models of education in place of the dead models of education we mostly have now. They're really dead. They're gone. I don't really see the value in going to college or grad school... or even probably going to high school. It's not as easy as just stopping, however. We have to start building new ways for people to get the good parts of those experiences, and get what's worthwhile for them, specifically.

That's a big part of it. I include the spiritual stuff because it's part of human life, and it's not included in academia. Like I was saying before, sex and god are off the table. Yet, everybody has thoughts about sex and god. We don't really have language to discuss sex. We do have language to discuss god, but not in the way we experience spirituality and god now. We use the terms that used to mean something to us, and mean very little to us now. For me, the spirituality is really phenomenological, if I look into my experiences I notice that the world is not just made out of things and we don't have a sufficient philosophical framework to explain exactly what is happening. If I lead myself away from materialism, then I have something that I would call spiritual, although some people might object to that term.

When you start talking about what happens in regards to our inner-beings and our experiences, to really talk about things in a thoughtful way and in a real way, then I'm leading myself out of materialistic models. I think if we're really honest with ourselves, we don't experience "things." We experience different states. That's something that's important to me. If I'm going to bring myself in an integral way to a classroom, as a teacher, then spirituality has to show up, in one way or another.

What is your dream creative life? Writing and teaching? Making films?

There's definitely the side of me that is really just interested in all the writing modes that already exist. I want to write nonfiction books, I want to write stories, and there's also a part of me that's like all I care about is writing fiction, even though I've not published any fiction yet. That's all I want to do—just read and write fiction. But there is this other part of me who just wants to make porn movies, and who maybe wants to make music, and direct a film. There's part of me that's so in love and enamored with all those forms and will never stop loving them. There's another part of me that understands that I'm drawn to a life of activism—though that isn't quite the right word—but let's say engaging with the world through ideas in an intense way that requires taking action.

When I was in San Francisco for two years I did a spirituality and science discussion group based on Rudolf Steiner, and we would just get together every two weeks and I would give readings and I would moderate the discussion. We would do some conceptual exercises and talk to each other in different ways. The way that that radiated out into my and the members of the group's everyday lives, and therefore into everything, was pretty profound, at least for some of us. For me, that act of engaging with other people in the space of talking about ideas and how to form them...it changes our engagement with the world and that is really important.

I'm teaching this course on how do we look at the present, what is the human being right now in this moment, and then what can we do? Everybody wants to jump to, "How do I help, how do I help, how do I help," and nobody knows how because nobody can even assess the situation. Nobody's really doing it. Somebody is drowning and there's 11 people standing around, and none of them are equal to the person who can jump in the pool, grab the person, pull them up, and knows water, and knows anatomy, and knows CPR, so I'm trying to do things that really change the way we think about our experience of the world before moving forward into action somehow. I think there are a lot of thinkers that are trying to advocate for this right now.

I understand that there is urgency and I'm also taking action at the same time. It's not giving up the activism, but there needs to be a space in our lives where we start to change the shape and the motion of our thinking, so that the actions that we do take can be more effective and creative.

Lots of very smart people have written about what pornography means and how it functions in society and people's lives. What do you think of the idea of making porn as a creative act?

Yeah, I would say porn is art. I wish more people could see it that way. That being said, it's mostly bad art. Because it's so repressed and oppressed it's very difficult to figure out how to even make good art in that sphere, because we're not supposed to think of it as art. We're not supposed to go on creating it, societally. I think that there are a lot of creative avenues for porn that remain unexplored. I also think porn, whether it's bad art or not, often ends up being a really creative act for the performers, more so than for the viewer. We could also say porn is the most creative art form because the people that watch it create half the substance of life every time they view it. We can sort of see that something pretty profound is happening there. Because it's so bound up in this classical, psychoanalytical, repression, desire complex, it's very difficult to bring porn into a new space where creativity is really possible. So many of our desires are really bound to repression right now.

We don't really have a sexual consciousness yet. It's very difficult to make truly sexual art. It's completely coming out of the unconscious in some ways. Obviously the set work, and the design, and hiring the performers, and what the performers do, and how the performers perform, that is all conscious. That's why it's more of a creative act for the people involved, but once we get a better sexual consciousness in our culture we'll have better porn. Hopefully we can reverse that too and say, "Once we have better porn, we can start getting a better, brighter sort of sexual consciousness." I hate when people are like, "Why can't we have romantic porn, where everyone is in love?" If you laid that kind of specific demand on any other kind of art you'd be seen as a fascist. I think that the demand for specific kinds of content for porn across the board is really stupid, but I think that we can still be better as people who are making porn and just raise the bar for the standard, whatever that means.

Conner Habib recommends...

BOOKS: Start Now! by Rudolf Steiner.— a collection of exercises to refine your personhood and deepen your spiritual engagement with the world. Steiner is a late 19th– early 20th Century scientist, mystic,

philosopher, and architect. He's the guy that created Waldorf education and biodynamic farming. He also created a new system of medicine, beekeeping, jewelry making, and more. No slouch! He's as dense as any postmodern philosopher, so this is a good place to, uh, start now!

The Quick & the Dead, *Breaking and Entering*, and *Honored Guest* by Joy Williams - Read Joy Williams and be terrified. As a reader, as a writer, into your soul. Maybe the Sun will go out, maybe not. You'll wonder. This is witchcraft. (I wrote an essay about her work [HERE](#))

LIVING: Fucking - Sex is a Mystery. A REAL Mystery. That means you'll always learn more from it than you will about it. It will always be one step ahead of you. Have sex and pay attention to your experience before, during, after. Don't worry about total immersion or obliteration of your consciousness, don't worry if it's perfect or exactly right. It's like a conversation - sometimes good, sometimes boring, sometimes in between. But still, you engage and see what happens.

MOVIE: *Rosemary's Baby* - You may have already seen this. Watch it again. And again. it's perfect. The world is a paranoid fantasy, and it's also correct. The neighbors are kind and normal and evil. Everyone is against you. Then again, maybe not. Maybe you're just crazy. Maybe you've assembled the world around your fantasy. This is probably the best film describing of the political psyche ever made.

It's also complicated by commerce—the idea that people only make the kinds of things that other people want to buy. Do people want to pay for better porn? More artful porn?

It's the classic cliché. If you make it, they will come. I think that you can make whatever kind of porn you want and some people will respond to it. Typically, what people try to do, which I find really annoying, is that you'll have someone like John Cameron Mitchell making a movie like *Short Bus* where it's like, "We're going to make a real movie that has real sex in it!" It's completely stupid to do it that way because on the one hand you're making a fictional movie, which is just supposed to be evocative, and then on the other hand you have these pornographic parts which are merely imitations of porn in some weird way, not depictions of the way real people have sex. I haven't fully developed this idea yet, but I think it's fine to say, "It is just two different art forms." The porn we think of is "films", but actually it's not. It's actually it's own thing, and balancing those two things is difficult. Trying to just cram them together very rarely works. I don't think people understand that. I think there's a responsibility to the art form of porn itself. It's not just making a good film that has sex in it.

I'm not saying that people should model their sexual lives on pornography, but a lot of people might have healthier sexual experiences if, say, porn provided some better frame of reference—something that was both aspirational but also instructional, about what sex could be.

I always talk about that, especially for gay kids that might be growing up in some sheltered, conservative place. For them, gay porn is the first time they might see positive representations of sexuality. It might be the first time they hear someone say "cocksucker" not as an insult, but as a description of what someone is actually doing. It really makes you understand that you're not alone. I used to joke that every gay porn is like an "It Gets Better" video. You see that, oh, that *is* possible. Porn still has an important function for people in marginalized communities—especially for people with marginalized identities, marginalized sexualities—and it definitely has a liberating effect for people that are in places where their imaginations are criminalized. You see the representation of this thing that you're not even supposed to be thinking about. That brings a tremendous sense of comfort and release.

For some people, porn is their sex life. It really is medicine in some sense. That's why it's so prevalent and it's everywhere. It's Tylenol for the pains of sexual repression, but like Tylenol, it only really gets rid of the symptom. What we need to do is get porn that's like real medicine—something that heals us and makes us feel good at the same time.

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Vocation

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Fact

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