



Reviews

Faith in Exposure: Privacy and Secularism in the Nineteenth-Century United States. By Justine S. Murison. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023. Pp. 280. \$55.00 hardcover.)

In 1890, Samuel D. Warren II and Louis D. Brandeis published a *Harvard Law Review* article advancing the idea that individuals have a “right to privacy.” Their essay became a touchstone for countless twentieth-century legal rulings, including *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), a named precedent in *Roe v. Wade* (1973). As Justine S. Murison explains in *Faith in Exposure*, the Warren–Brandeis essay maintained that privacy deserves legal protection as a set of feelings bound up with marriage, domesticity, and one’s authentic self, a formulation that crystallized the tremendous value that Americans had come to give privacy over the previous century. This understanding of privacy was thoroughly secular, as it associated a person’s true self not with religion or the soul but with a sacrosanct domesticity and a complex yet self-contained individuality. Giving expression to long-simmering American cultural beliefs, the essay effectively codified privacy as “sacredness in a secular key” (210).

Faith in Exposure elaborates on the Warren–Brandeis article in its final chapter, but readers who turn to that discussion first will grasp more quickly the still-relevant legal stakes of this book’s cultural and literary history of privacy. The book’s core argument is that under American secularism, privacy came to function as a powerful locus of meaning associated not simply with discrete spaces such as the home or church but with “an affect and a performance of an authentic—and authentically moral—self” (24). Building on Saba Mahmood’s claim that

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secularism produces distinctive affects, Murison presents privacy as a “secular sensibility,” with “sensibility” signaling a period-specific merging of aesthetics and morality (3–4).

How does one track a sensibility? Through novels, of course, as “the literary form most closely associated with modern subjectivity and the private lives of individuals” (2). The novels Murison analyzes represent a satisfying variety of genres, from sentimental fiction to city mysteries to high realism, discussed alongside relevant cultural documents such as essays, pamphlets, periodical articles, and engravings. Together these materials illuminate how nineteenth-century American literature mediated the country’s faith in exposure, or its collective drive to achieve moral purity by making the private public. The book unpacks the regnant secularist logic surrounding privacy: because privacy authorizes personal morality and public trustworthiness, everyone is obliged to perform their own privacy, however selectively, and to discover and judge what other people do behind closed doors.

Murison traces privacy’s significance in nineteenth-century American literature across six chapters with provocatively ambitious titles: *Infidelity*, *Matrimony*, *Nudity*, *Conspiracy*, *Hypocrisy*, and *Secrecy*. Chapter 1 provides a crucial backstory by elaborating the early Republican mindset that equated privacy with the interlinked constructs of moral, religious, and sexual purity and that regularly charged supposed deists, notably Thomas Jefferson, with private immoralities that disqualified them from public service. Murison’s point here is not to adjudicate Jefferson’s morality or rehash his misdeeds, but to make visible privacy’s potency as a secular political concept.

The second and fifth chapters most clearly advance the book’s argument. Chapter 2 develops the book’s recurrent claim that under secularism, Americans imagined marriage not as one relation among many but as the preeminent guarantor of private morality. But thus conceived, marriage was tasked with too much. As it underwent a well-documented shift from public good to private contract, it staggered under “increasingly competing mandates: moral purity, religious freedom, companionate marriage, and authentic selves” (62). New religious

perspectives that challenged the Protestant, heterosexual dyad highlighted the ideological tension within secularism between moral purity, widely understood in implicitly Protestant terms, and religious freedom. To illustrate the purity–freedom conflict, Murison turns to fictions such as Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s “Matty Gore” (1845) and *Redwood* (1824), where the threats to proper, so-called traditional marriage are Catholicism and Shakerism, respectively; and to anti-polygamy novels such as Maria Ward’s *Female Life among the Mormons* (1855) and Metta Victoria Fuller Victor’s *Mormon Wives* (1856). Her nuanced readings clarify Americans’ cultural conundrum. If religion and marriage were now private, then why not rethink these institutions altogether? Whose business were they except the individuals involved? Why not marry a Catholic or join the Shakers or become a second wife, if one so chose? Faced with such unsettling challenges, these fictions contended that one’s private choices regarding marriage—and, one might add, childbearing and childrearing—had urgent public import. What mattered was having the right kind of privacy: married privacy, with one man and one woman, both Protestants.

Chapter 5 explores how nineteenth-century Americans of every political stripe hurled accusations of hypocrisy against their opponents, charging that public pretenses of virtue hid private—or, rather, secret because shameful—sins and religious unbelief. No matter one’s views, exposing others’ misdeeds did the moral work of invalidating the hypocrites’ public claims and purifying the nation. Just as abolitionists like David Ruggles, William Wells Brown, and Harriet Jacobs denounced southerners for secret violence toward and sexual exploitation of enslaved people, so anti-abolitionists derided Harriet Beecher Stowe and other white sentimental women writers for their hypocritical show of concern for the enslaved, which, they claimed, cloaked voyeurism and prurience. Stowe plays a prominent role in this chapter. While she fueled northern delight in exposing southern crimes in her antislavery fiction, she also used *The Minister’s Wooing* (1859) to “think through the very real puzzle of hypocrisy” (169), or the intransigence of well-meaning white northerners unwilling to oppose

slavery if the economic stakes seemed too high. A highlight of this chapter is its apt pairing of *The Minister's Wooing*, which uses the Calvinist minister Samuel Hopkins to mull the challenges of “anti-hypocrisy, or ‘disinterested benevolence’” (148), with John Brown, read as the era’s icon of righteous, anti-hypocritical action. As Murison points out, scholarship today often recycles the gendered nineteenth-century rhetoric surrounding Stowe and Brown, with Stowe cast as the hypocritical sentimental woman and Brown the staunch, transparent warrior. If nineteenth-century Americans were preternaturally quick to accuse others of hypocrisy, they also celebrated white men’s violence in the name of God as indubitably authentic and pure-minded.

Chapter 6 spells out the privacy–secrecy distinction: to keep privacy morally pure, Americans sought to protect it from shameful secrets, or any behaviors outside “the mainstream Protestant secular moral order” (181). This chapter also traces how the Beecher-Tilton scandal prompted free-love advocates to defend “the right of privacy” (190) and to call upon Beecher and Tilton alike to live and love whomever they wished, without hypocrisy. One of the chapter’s canniest insights is that secrets could come to be felt as portals to one’s true self. In a perceptive reading of *The Bostonians* (1886), Murison explores how Verena Tarrant allows her *sub rosa* meetings with Basil Ransom to redefine her precisely because their secrecy seems to provide access to an authenticity with greater value than either her private life with Olive Chancellor or her public speaking career.

Chapters 3 and 4 are connected more loosely to the book’s focus on privacy, secularism, and marriage. Chapter 3, “Nudity,” would seem mistitled, as it offers surprisingly little of the article in question. Rather than elaborating the various circumstances in which naked and partially clothed bodies were and were not considered private, or whose naked bodies were private and whose were not (questions with answers inevitably tied to race, class, and gender), the chapter focuses on clothing and fashion as tools of performance and disguise, a lens used to read Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* (1855) and several of Herman Melville’s

fictions, including *Typee* (1846) and *The Confidence-Man* (1857). Chapter 4 centers Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), interpreting it as a savvy effort to uphold Black equality while sidestepping the rhetorical stalemate of abolitionists' and anti-abolitionists' reciprocal conspiracy charges. Borrowing terminology from Simone Brown, Murison unpacks how this novel employs strategies of "undersight," including irony, jokes, and self-aware performance, while avoiding many of the narrative clichés that accumulated in an exposé-obsessed culture.

The book's distinctive achievement is to detail how American secularism created privacy as a cultural sensibility with incalculable moral meaning, one intertwined with marriage and policed by public opinion. Arriving shortly after *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), *Faith in Exposure* is an all-too-timely study of how Americans have both valorized and violated privacy. It drives home the point that the right to privacy that Warren and Brandeis championed is not absolute or even all that comprehensive; it is now and always has been subject to public scrutiny and limitation. An epilogue suggests, with a nod to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), that what Americans need now is a "more equitable and more *private* form of privacy than was built in the nineteenth century" (219). Privacy thus reconsidered would allow for more dignity, more freedom, and, yes, more secrets. It is an appealing vision, but Americans have a long history of delightedly peering into other people's private lives and denouncing and delimiting what they find there. This privacy-breaching habit does not make them voyeurs according to this cultural logic, but rather, as *Faith in Exposure* explicates so well, the preservers of national morality.

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