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New collection examines the lasting effects of purity culture

In a new edited collection, UC Santa Barbara writing scholar Victoria Houser examines the lasting cultural and personal impact of evangelical purity culture.

In “Purity Culture, Bodies, and Beliefs: Stories of Religious Trauma” (Penn State University Press, 2026), Houser and co-editor Mari Ramler bring together contributors whose essays explore how high-control religious environments shape understandings of sexuality, gender, race, disability and bodily autonomy. Through critical autoethnography and personal narrative, the collection reframes religious trauma not only as a theological or psychological issue, but as an embodied experience.

“The book is really people’s stories about their experiences within purity culture and other high-control religious environments, and the ways that they are navigating that now as adults,” said Houser, an assistant teaching professor in UCSB’s Writing Program.

Broadly defined, purity culture emerged from the abstinence-only education movement of the 1990s and early 2000s and was closely tied to evangelical Christian teachings about sex and marriage. Organizations such as True Love Waits and Silver Ring Thing encouraged young people to abstain from sex until marriage, often promising emotional fulfillment and stronger relationships in return.

“The purpose of it, as articulated by these religious movements, was to create a space that encouraged young adults to not have sex until they got married,” Houser said. “But the promise was always that they would end up having really amazing sex inside of their heterosexual marriages.”

Houser’s research is also informed by her own experience growing up inside the Institute in Basic Life Principles, the religious organization associated with the Duggar family of the reality television series “19 Kids and Counting.” Raised in rural Alaska and homeschooled within the movement, she was immersed in a particularly strict version of purity culture from a young age.

“I was not ever allowed to be alone with a member of the opposite sex,” she said.

Though Houser began questioning many of those beliefs as a teenager, she said she did not fully identify her upbringing as cult-like until later in life, after watching the 2023 documentary series “Shiny Happy People,” which examined the same religious movement.

The collection grew in part from Houser’s dissertation research on purity culture and rhetoric, which explored how religious language shapes cultural understandings of sexuality and the body. This is work that she continues to explore in her research and on the [Sexy Jesus](#) podcast she co-hosts with Sean McGrath. From the outset, she and Ramler wanted the volume to foreground a wide range of perspectives and lived experiences.

“We wanted it to focus more on storytelling,” Houser said. “We wanted a really wide range of people’s stories and representations of queer stories, people of color, not just white women.”

The volume includes 15 chapters organized around themes including bodily harm, healing and embodiment. Contributors address topics such as eating disorders in religious spaces, disability and queerness, Black spiritual identity and tattooing as ritual healing.

For Houser, the chapter on tattooing was especially impactful.

“I had not conceptualized tattooing as a kind of art and also a healing practice that one could utilize as a way to exercise autonomy over their body,” she said.

The collection also situates purity culture within a broader political and cultural history. Houser notes that the movement emerged during the culture wars and was deeply connected to debates around feminism, sex education and “family values.”

Today, she said, many people are still grappling with the emotional and psychological consequences of those teachings.

“I have a lot of people sharing that they are still in their 30s and 40s really wrestling with the guilt and shame that they feel about sex and their body,” Houser said.

Ultimately, she hopes the book offers readers both recognition and solidarity.

“One of the big takeaways is that we want our readers to feel seen and understood and heard,” Houser said. “These experiences were not niche. They were really far more widespread than most people even know.”

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