

The Global Lovers
AUTHOR'S STATEMENT
Rhonda Pettit ©

How is it that our collective humanity can know about the horrors it wages upon itself, and yet do little or nothing to eradicate them? How do we address this broad question when it is narrowed to a specific horror – sex slavery – and a specific individual – an American woman? Is there so great a distance between the language of avoidance – the language of escape and entertainment that helps drive an economy – and the language that addresses situations we would rather not, but must, face? This is one of the themes that *The Global Lovers* sets out to examine by juxtaposing poetic language with several other language forms: the jargon of advertising, the ordinary language of journalism, even the musical language of song. It also considers the question, What does it take for someone to begin, in Theodore Roethke's words, "creeping toward the news"?

This project began as a manuscript of poems in the voice of, and about the experiences of, a fictional sex slave, based in no small part on Aisha Parveen, the Pakistani girl abducted, drugged, beaten, raped, sexually tortured, and forced to work in a brothel, as described by Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times* in 2006. It evolved into a poetic drama when I found myself bothered by the jarring contrast between fashion and travel advertisements targeted at the wealthy, and responsible journalism about sex slavery, honor killings, mass rape, genital cutting, and forced child marriages often found along side these ads in the *New York Times*. The language and imagery of the advertisements that keep the newspaper (or any media source) viable so that it may report on such horrors is also the language and imagery that distracts and placates us, and that commodifies through artificial sexualization the female body. Does this commodification lead a man or woman to become prostitutes? No, though poverty, greed, or ignorance might influence them. Does it help create a market for prostitution, forced or otherwise? I think it must, at least on a subliminal level. Could this commodification, seeing as how it is tied to our images of comfort and success and normalcy, influence a reader's response to sex-related crimes? I think so. Tomorrow will bring a new tragedy in a different part of the world, but "sterling silver . . . cutout & hammered cuff" bracelets will still be for sale.

The jarring contrast between the language of advertising and the language of news reporting regarding a topic like sex slavery is so common-place, so taken for granted, that it fails to assault us. And why should it? We know that the point of the ad is to sell the product through manipulation of our senses and desires. We know that the point of the news story is to provide useful, verifiable information. We have to be capable of holding contradictions like these in mind in order to function as responsible humans in a complex world. But what if, in a literary work, the jarring contrast itself became the focus of examination? In the fall of 2007, after one and a half years of writing and revising poems about sex slavery, collecting articles about it, and clipping advertisements, I drafted a poem – "Art Says" – that explores this contrast. Without realizing it at the time, I had created the character of Kentucky Woman Reading the Newspaper, and had prepared the seed ground for a dramatic version of *The Global Lovers*. By February 2008, while teaching among other courses a drama workshop, I was drafting stage directions for a

drama I hadn't yet fully conceived. Much of the material for it, however, was already in existence – in the poems I had written, and in the articles and advertisements I was clipping.

To a certain extent, language needs to be interpreted with its context and audience in mind, but this is largely an academic enterprise. In practice, the associations we have with certain words often jump contextual borders, influencing us beneath the surface of reason, for better or worse. (When for the better, we have what Jorge Luis Borges calls, in *This Craft of Verse*, an understanding “with a deeper imagination.”) Hence the connotative and poetic power of language. Whether one uses this power to sell out truth or seek the truth is the question.

The Global Lovers uses both original poetry and dialogue, and excerpts from advertisements and news articles, many of which appeared in the *New York Times*, as well as from other sources. The use of these excerpts is not intended to serve as an indictment or accusation against the products, advertisers, authors, or source publications. Most of these excerpts are used as a way of exploring, through this poetic drama, our culture's use of language as it regards the female body and sexuality. Sources and notes for specific excerpts and allusions are cited below in the order in which they appear in the poetic drama. Advertisements for which there are no specific dates were collected in 2007 or 2008. Text selections were based on the language alone, not on the designer, product, manufacturer or retailer. Source frequency was not a consideration in my selections; again, the language used was the key determinant. Some of the excerpts have been slightly modified. Some phrases, such as “catalog available” and “blowout sale” are generic.