

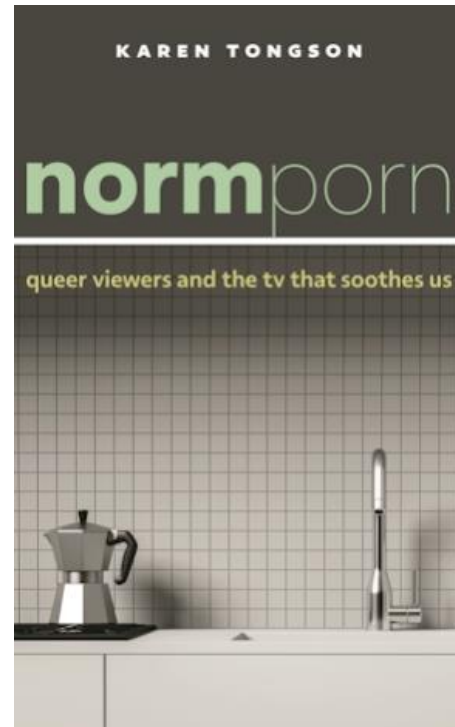
Karen Tongson, **Normporn: Queer Viewers and the TV That Soothes Us**, New York: New York University Press, 2023, 203 pp., \$21.00 (paperback).

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Although the violence of settler-colonialism, imperialism, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia is continuous, the intensification of reactionary sentiment that characterized the first Trump administration was decried as “not normal,” while the Biden inauguration was celebrated as a return to normalcy. As newly privileged queer subjects were among those expressing relief over this reinstatement of so-called normal politics, Karen Tongson argues in her book, **Normporn: Queer Viewers and the TV That Soothes Us**, that reconsidering norms and normativity is exigent. Tongson’s book contributes to this project through analysis of what she terms normporn, understood as a genre, a viewing practice, and an aesthetic sensibility.

The book’s introduction defines normporn as a subgenre of sentimental realist network television drama circulating since the debut of *thirtysomething* (1987–1991) in which privileged, liberal, and mostly white families navigate the dramas of bourgeois everyday life in imagined post-queer, post-racial milieus (p. 11). Considering normporn as a way of watching television, Tongson argues that genres such as HGTV and political procedurals might be consumed as normporn in conditions where repeated viewership coincides with an attachment to middlebrow aesthetics. For Tongson, normporn as viewing practice is imbricated in both guilt and grief. In the introduction, she discusses watching normporn as a grieving practice following the loss of her friend, the queer scholar José Esteban Muñoz. After describing how her desire for ordinary experiences with Muñoz and other lost loved ones prompted repeated viewing of sentimental realist drama, Tongson scales normporn-as-grieving by discussing the broader confluence of mourning with television viewership during the mass loss marking the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tongson invokes porn in her term to highlight queer viewers’ affective responses to the genre. In the introduction, she argues that the sentimental realist drama she considers overcomes viewers with “basic feelings” in the form of involuntary tears (p. 11). This release, for Tongson, is both horrifying and titillating for queer viewers who have historically disavowed the mundane’s “stylistic inevitability” (p. 151). Additionally, the genre and viewing practice approaches porn because it induces shame for creative-class queers whose privilege affords the time and resources to endow everyday moments with meaning. In this way, normporn viewership carries the guilt of assimilation.



Except chapter 2, which features a detour through queer theory and normalcy's aesthetics, each chapter analyzes media texts that either constitute normporn or offer a foil to the genre. Chapter 1 considers *thirtysomething*, establishing the show as normporn's originator and urtext (p. 25). Tongson argues that *thirtysomething* "[set] the bar for cathartic explorations of the self and new configurations of family" in network television (p. 46), in part through its ability to show both TV creators and audiences just how dramatic the minutia of the everyday could be. In chapter 2, Tongson maps the origin of normcore as an aesthetic sensibility, arguing that the rise of "normcore" in the 2010s facilitated the later reboot of normalcy in normporn as genre and viewing practice. Analyzing the white paper that launched the normcore fashion trend alongside critiques of queer theory's valorization of an antinormative subject, Tongson argues that the archetypal resistant queer subject has been incorporated into the mainstream. Bringing Lauren Berlant's work on the shifting nature of norms to bear on homonormativity (Duggan, 2002) and antinormativity alike, this chapter questions the attachments produced by queer subjects' desires to opt in or out of normative demands.

In chapter 3, Tongson takes up *True Blood* (2008–2014) as a foil for the normporn genre (p. 71). She argues that the show's parody of liberal gay efforts for inclusion offers insight into the forms and styles of mainstreaming efforts. Tongson contends that by staging "the struggle for normalcy" while seeking "to do something new with it" (p. 75), the series unmasks mainstreaming's impulses as themselves contradictory and thus queer. Chapter 4 focuses on *Gilmore Girls* (2000–2007), arguing that while the show resists normalcy through its celebratory portrayal of a marriage-averse single mother, its seamless assimilation of difference makes the series normporn (p. 93). Much of the chapter consists of an ideology critique of *Gilmore Girls*' reproductive politics from a post-Dobbs vantage: Through analysis of Lane Kim's pregnancy, Tongson shows how women of color become "a vehicle for the joke" within the series' family friendly white feminism (p. 112). While Tongson's critique is apt, this chapter's detour from the normporn framework places it somewhat outside the scope of the book's inquiry. In chapter 5, Tongson argues that *This Is Us* (2016–2022) marks the end of normporn because, despite emulating many of normporn's generic and aesthetic features, the show refuses to flatten difference (p. 117). Tongson's poetic claim that the program's resistance to assimilatory politics signals the end of the genre itself proves difficult to support, although a comparative analysis of similar programs from this period might have constituted a first step. The epilogue returns readers to the introduction's theorization of grief: In a confessional register, Tongson reflects on losing loved ones just as she achieved the "thriving gay adulthood" that made investing in everyday moments possible (p. 153). Here, she further explicates her term, arguing that normporn is neither "aspersion" nor "aspiration" (p. 153); it is merely descriptive.

Although Tongson seeks to theorize normporn as a genre, viewing practice, and aesthetic, her most significant contribution is her mapping of normporn as a genre. Her clear demarcation of the generic features of the programs she analyzes makes her term a helpful shorthand for cultural studies scholars. Additionally, Tongson's accessible application of canonical queer theoretical concepts to popular culture texts makes the book useful within undergraduate gender studies and media studies classrooms. More attention might have been offered, however, to normporn as a viewing practice. While Tongson primes readers to consider normporn viewership as a technique for processing grief, each chapter primarily analyzes how the chosen media text fits the generic and aesthetic criteria for normporn or offers ideology critique of the version of normalcy deployed by the media text. Although Tongson interjects with comments about her affective state

while watching and rewatching the programs she analyzes, these brief anecdotes centering her tears and attendant shame are under-theorized, especially considering the conceptual scaffolding for normporn as a viewing practice provided in the introduction. Engagement with media studies scholarship on affect and television's imbrication in everyday life might have added further complexity to Tongson's understanding of normporn as a queer viewing practice for negotiating loss. Nevertheless, Tongson's first-person discussion of navigating a contradictory relationship to normalcy in the contexts of guilt and grief is likely to speak meaningfully to the experiences of queer scholars of her generation.

Given the centrality of normalcy to the inquiry, more sustained interaction with queer and trans studies scholarship on anti/normativity would be beneficial. *Normcore's* understanding of shame as necessarily attending queer desire for normalcy lacks nuance in extending a particular educated, bourgeois, cisgender gay sentiment to gender and sexual minorities generally. As trans scholarship has long critiqued queer theory's arrogation of trans subjects for its politics of antinormativity (Chu, 2017; Prosser, 1998), work in the discipline illuminates a vector of normalcy that promises to enrich the author's argument. Dialogue with scholarship on norms and normativity beyond canonical queer theory texts would offer depth to *Normporn's* analysis of normalcy's shameful pull in viewership contexts. Other work, such as Andre Cavalcante's (2018) *Struggling for Ordinary*, combines media analysis with reception studies to understand how trans subjects use media to generate a felt sense of normalcy. While Tongson's book considers the personal through autotheoretical approaches rather than reception studies, her understanding of normalcy might be refined through further engagement with contemporary scholarship intersecting media studies and queer and trans studies.

Another area that could be further developed is *Normporn's* theorization of the pornographic. While the author offers some justification for her use of porn in describing the generic features of normporn, the following chapters' case studies are not analyzed for their pornographic nature. Where she describes her personal affective responses to media texts, Tongson focuses on involuntary tears, an affective response film scholars have tended to consider in the context of melodrama (Williams, 1991). Because *Normporn's* implied argument that televisual displays of normalcy approach pornography is provocative, readers would benefit from further interaction with porn studies scholarship, perhaps through analysis of sentimental realist drama as a body genre.

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