



Body problems: what intersex priest sally gross teaches us about embodiment, justice, and belonging

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David A. Rubin

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BOOK REVIEW

Body problems: what intersex priest sally gross teaches us about embodiment, justice, and belonging, by M. Wolff, Durham, Duke University Press, 2025, 328pp., £29.95, ISBN 978-1-4780-2878-9


In *Body Problems: What Intersex Priest Sally Gross Teaches Us About Embodiment, Justice, and Belonging*, M. Wolff offers a theoretically capacious, extensively researched, and compelling account of the amazing life, key contributions, and ongoing relevance of intersex scholar-priest-activist Sally Gross (1953–2014). As a member of the first-generation of transnational intersex activists, Gross's agitation for social change went well beyond single-issue identity politics. Wolff correctly and insightfully argues that Gross's multipronged agitation deserves far wider recognition and engagement. Tracing Gross's role in founding Intersex South Africa and her involvement with the African National Congress, Wolff carefully interweaves religious studies and critical intersex studies to show that Gross's life offers deep lessons about embodiment, social justice, and responsible relations. Drawing on theology, decoloniality, and feminist and queer theory, Wolff's *Body Problems* constitutes more than a biography of Gross—it is a call to follow Gross's example of critically questioning the medical, religious, and political construction of bodies.

The first book-length publication on Gross, Wolff's *Body Problems* seeks to understand how and why medical, religious, and political orders deem particular bodies—especially bodies that do not fit neat categories and binaries—to be problems. Against the medical model which views intersex variations as problems in need of a surgical and/or hormonal fix, Wolff argues that the problem is actually 'institutional bodies regulating individuals' (p. 3). In this way, Wolff highlights 'the need for agitating bodies to work tirelessly for clearings wherein we might resonate as beloved' (p. 3). Gross learned that she was intersex at age forty while serving as a Catholic priest at Blackfriars, a Dominican order in England. She integrated her Jewish identity with Buddhist practices and Christian community. Gross held citizenship in three countries and agitated as an activist in each. Religious, civil, and medical institutions struggled to categorize her body because 'bureaucracies tend to insist upon legible taxonomies in exchange for goods and services' (p. 4). In the face of societal rejection and ostracism, Gross devoted her life, at great personal sacrifice, to 'holding unjust political and religious bodies accountable' (p. 4). In essence, Wolff distills from Gross's life story two main lessons: first, 'to reject the notion that our bodies are problems' and second, 'to choose to become a problem to disciplinary bodies by agitating and initiating breaks, to create clearings where diverse bodies resonate' (p. 5).

Body Problems is a meticulously researched book. Wolff conducted over forty in-depth interviews with Gross's friends and comrades in Cape Town and Johannesburg, her former brethren, friends, and comrades throughout England, and her brother Raymond. Wolff also conducted extensive archival research at the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action archives (GALA) in South Africa and was given access to hundreds of pages of Gross's correspondence, academic lectures, church sermons, photographs, writings, talks, and documents. *Body Problems* is structured in four parts. Part I introduces the concept of 'body problems' as a framework for attending to Gross's body and the bodies of other marginalized subjects as a site of harm. Part II turns our attention to the regulating bodies that seek to manage marginalized populations. It covers Gross's priesthood in the Catholic Church (1981–93), her misdiagnosis as transgender, and the subsequent paperwork she navigated to conceal and

then reveal her female role, and her turn to racial justice work in South Africa. Part III explores activism and the purposeful choice to become a problem to governing bodies by exposing injustice and inequality. It details Gross's religious and political activism across a range of contexts and emphasizes the material costs of this activist work, including Gross's impoverishment and premature death. Part IV returns to the cyclical process of initiating breaks to make space for clearings and sutures that restructure regulating bodies. It is here where it becomes most clear that Wolff's book is not simply a biography of Gross or her historical context. Rather, *Body Problems* is an invitation to learn anew 'about our context' in order to envisage sociality otherwise (p. 10).

In the book's Postscript, Wolff discusses ways to honor Gross's legacy as a first-generation intersex activist who made way for the next generation. Here, Wolff introduces readers to Hiker Chui, Pol Naidenov, and Nthabiseng Mokoena to showcase the new and innovative contributions of contemporary South African intersex activists whose work readers might support. In addition, Wolff critically discusses Gross's limitations, including her racial blind spots. Calling for racial and religious literacy and awareness, Wolff's *Body Problems* embodies the ethical lessons of Gross's life and work, including self-reflexive critique. Wolff writes, 'By increasing our capacity to embrace complex people like Sally, we will better cope with our own unruly excess' (p. 6). Learning to cope with our own unruly excess, in turn, also entails learning to freedom dream with Gross of 'a world in which intersex is not stigmatized, whether by governments, statutes, courts, forces of law and order, religious or secular institutions or individuals' (p. 233). Wolff's beautifully written *Body Problems* creates a much-needed clearing for readers to join Gross in this collective act of freedom dreaming and, in so doing, helps us to reconsider humanity as a member of a broader ecology, at once spiritual and material.

David A. Rubin
University of South Florida
 davidarubin@usf.edu

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