UMMNI KHAN, *VICARIOUS KINKS: S/M IN THE SOCIO-LEGAL IMAGINARY* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014)

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Between its release in February 2015 to June of the same year, the “50 Shades of Grey” film made more than \$569 million in global ticket sales, surpassing all of the “Best Picture” nominees from the 2014 Academy Awards combined.¹ This is not a final figure: the film franchise is still turning in new profits. A sequel is in the works. All of these profits count above and beyond the money made by the bestselling book series on which the film is based. In addition to making colossal amounts of money, the “50 Shades” franchise has sparked controversy for its depiction of what the filmmakers and author label an S/M relationship and critics call nonconsensual intimate partner abuse. It is widely accepted that controversy fed the notoriety of the film and, without question, drove up its profits. In a new book, *Vicarious Kinks: S/M in the Socio-Legal Imaginary*, Carleton Legal Studies Professor Ummni Khan argues that it is not just the film franchise that feeds on the controversy. The converse is also the case: normative narratives condemning the film are themselves sexual kinks. Khan considers “50 Shades” to be a complicated, “ambivalent intervention” in the discourse about S/M and sexualities.²

Khan’s new scholarly monograph challenges the authority of law’s regulation of sexuality by skillfully arguing that normative storytelling about taboo sexuality in films such as “50 Shades of Grey” is a form of epistemic pleasure and violence. The author compellingly argues in the book that feminist critiques, legal regulation, and scientific research, are forms of “vicarious kink” themselves. *Vicarious Kinks* turns its gaze on what Khan terms the “parasitic relationship”³ between the practices law and society seek to condemn, and the truth claims made in film, feminist discourse, writing in the human sciences, and, significantly, law made about sadomasochism and its practitioners. The book troubles the truth claims of the regulatory gaze. *Vicarious Kinks* incisively challenges widely held - even cherished - assumptions about law as an objective adjudicator of sexual truths. The book has solid theoretical grounding in foundations found in Foucault’s theorizing about how the process by which power constructs knowledge is both sexual and pleasurable.⁴ The author also develops reasoning from Kristeva’s understanding of abject, disgust and expulsion pleasures.⁵

The book, of course, does not limit its discussion to the “50 Shades” controversy but situates the franchise within discussion of S/M in the socio-legal imaginary. It explores historical narratives of the development of S/M, debates between feminists in the “sex wars”, and the engagements of cinema and entertainment industries with S/M, legal cases considering pornography and S/M practice. Khan interrogates how feminist critics, legal authorities and formal discourses of the law have tended to be confident, uncritical and unreflexive when spinning stories about, and stepping in to delineate where

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¹ Total box office takings for this film (and others) can be found updated at BoxOfficeMojo.com <<http://www.boxoffice-mojo.com/movies/?id=fiftyshadesofgrey.htm>>.

² Ummni Khan, *Vicarious Kinks: S/M in the Socio-Legal Imaginary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014) at 209.

³ *Ibid* at 12.

⁴ *Ibid* at 16.

⁵ *Ibid* at 20.

“normal” sexuality ends and “perverse” sexuality begins. In doing so, as the author notes, Canadian legal cases that deal with sexual assault have often conflated non-consensual sadism with consensual S/M. Critically considering the relationship between narratives about pornography and the putatively pornographic objects of that knowledge, Khan unpacks ways in which truth claims become the basis for legal regulation of sadomasochist pornography and practice but are in themselves often forms of vicarious pornography that traffic in imaginary of the real.⁶

Vicarious Kinks is an engagingly written, original, well-researched monograph. It presents a scholarly contribution that is accessible, valuable, and of great relevance to scholars researching sexuality. Moreover, it is valuable also to those working across disciplines of social and legal scholarship, to understand cultural production generally and more specifically processes by which formal discourses of law and broader social processes together govern. The book is broadly relevant to questions about what happens when social activities are rendered as objects of knowledge by social participants. At Canada’s contemporary social moment, with the confluence of the Jian Ghomeshi case and the release of “50 Shades of Grey” bringing normative narratives about non-consensual S/M and about consensual taboo sexuality to the forefront of the public imaginary, *Vicarious Kinks* also has a broad, mainstream relevance and the potential to itself intervene in how stories about taboo sexuality are spun.

⁶ *Ibid* at 12.