Ours is a world in vertigo. […] We are all alienated – but have we ever been otherwise? It is through, and not despite, our alienated condition that we can free ourselves […] nothing is so sacred that it cannot be reengineered and transformed so as to widen our aperture of freedom, extending to gender and the human. To say that nothing is sacred, that nothing is transcendent or protected from the will to know, to tinker and to hack, is to say that nothing is supernatural.

#### Laboria Cuboniks, *Xenofeminist Manifesto*, 2018

You will find your answers in the secrets of strangers.

#### Frank Warren, *reluctant oracle*, 2004

# Introduction: anonymous identity

An anonymous caller’s voice played over the laptop’s speakers. “Hi, Dan. This is a 26 year old bisexual man in New York, and I have a somewhat strange question. Watching the HBO show Westworld, I’ve been thinking… if there were hyper-advanced sex robots and you were to have sex with one, would that be cheating? I mean, isn’t it just like a really fancy sex toy? Or is there some other component, like, if you had an emotional connection that means something else. I don’t know. What do you think?”

The recording clicked off. Dan Savage, looking both mischievous and a bit world-weary, waited a beat, then leaned into his microphone and spoke. “Joining me in our studio today to tackle this very important question about robots, Westworld, and AI is Blaise Agüera y Arcas, who is the head of Google’s AI effort in Seattle.”

We dispatched the caller’s question pretty quickly— “It’s cheating if your partner thinks it’s cheating, period, the end”— then went on to have a fun back and forth about robot sex, the state of machine learning today, the way we project feelings onto inanimate things, and what the Turing Test might look like— in bed. Bad puns about uncanny valleys were made.

(In case you’re not familiar with it: the Turing Test was a thought experiment proposed by computer pioneer Alan Turing in 1950. He pointed out that, since we have no objective way of determining when a machine goes from being an “it” to a “who,” we may as well simply ask it to convince us that it can stand in for a human in an online chat. As for the “uncanny valley,” the phrase was invented by Japanese robotics professor Masahiro Mori in 1970 to refer to that in-between situation in which something humanoid is just realistic enough to be creepy— without being realistic enough to be convincing. The characters in the 2004 animated movie *The Polar Express* are an oft-cited example.)

As we bantered, I remember hoping, somewhere in the back of my mind, that I wouldn’t get in trouble with my employer when this episode of the Savage Lovecast aired.[[1]](#footnote-23) Sometime after we’d wandered off into the thickets of whether consciousness is an illusion, and when people with *Avatar* kinks would get their very own giant blue sexbots, Nancy Hartunian, the Lovecast’s long-suffering producer, rolled her eyes and signaled for us to wrap it up.

The recording stopped, but conversation continued. The ethical conundrum of how advanced a sex toy needs to be before we start having to ask for its consent was a welcome distraction, but I didn’t really have robots, sexy or otherwise, on my mind that day. I was thinking about people. How were they voting? It was Election Day: Tuesday, November 8th, 2016. It was hard to think of anything else.

Dan, normally a worrywart, was uncharacteristically confident that Hillary had it in the bag. So was everyone else in Seattle, a famously/notoriously progressive little blue dot near the upper left corner of the American map. Despite an unspoken agreement not to jinx it, the mood was expectant, even festive. Parties were being planned for the evening, including one at our house. There was champagne chilling in the fridge. Nancy and her family would be dropping by.

I was less certain. I’d been checking Nate Silver’s FiveThirtyEight polling site obsessively, and while it, too, favored Hillary, her lead was far from decisive. Everyone seemed to be ignoring the margin of error, and it was substantial.

Although not on the same scale as all of those big national polls, my own data had me wondering, too. I’d been running surveys using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk platform, which lets you code up questionnaires and crowdsource responses from people all over the country. I had learned about Mechanical Turk because it was a frequently used tool for generating training data for AI, but I just wanted to use it to satisfy my own curiosity. At first, my questions were straightforward. They ran along the lines of: Who will you vote for? What issues do you care about? What do you believe? Who are you?

I didn’t want to be exploitative, so I was paying my respondents decently— and this was turning into an expensive hobby. Still, it was cheap and easy compared to the phone banking or field operation it would have taken to run such a survey a few years ago. Now it could all be done from a laptop, and with a turnaround time of a few hours. I felt like I was learning a lot about my fellow human beings. Every insight suggested more questions I wanted to ask, hence a new survey, more graphs, more analysis. It was addictive.

As soon as I’d begun these experiments, in the summer of 2016, it had become clear that the way people would vote had less to do with policy positions than with identity: “Who are you?” turned out to be the key. It was about “us” versus “them.” Granted, tribalism is a part of human nature, but it seemed like an especially powerful driver during this election cycle. Much of Donald Trump’s brand was based on the idea of building a wall to protect “us” from “them,” and it had become increasingly clear that “they” included not only undocumented border crossers, but minorities of all kinds within the United States. It included immigrants, people of color, LGBTQ+ people, academics, people who aren’t Christian. At times it seemed to include women too, and anybody with a disability, and everybody living in the city.[[2]](#footnote-24) Of course the resulting “majority” then turns out to be a minority— but one that had firmly held the reins of economic and political power last century, during the half-real, half-mythical era people had in mind when they chanted “Make America Great Again!”

In response to the free text question I had begun adding to my surveys (“Is there anything you’d like to add?”), I had seen comments like “I believe that as a society we have moved in a positive direction regarding inclusion in recent years and this will only benefit everyone in the long run.”[[3]](#footnote-25) On the other hand, I had also seen:

I am an Anglo Saxon European American male. The most hated discriminated group in America. I am looking forward to the civil war. Oh, and not the Anglo Saxon side which conspired with these Jews to rip Americans off. I am from the side that didn’t get paid.

#### A 55 year old from Raleigh, North Carolina

Beyond the numbers, it was responses like these that were going through my head as I confessed to a skeptical Dan and Nancy in the podcast studio that I thought Trump might win. We’d been debating whether we’d need to empathize with machines in the future, but in the meantime we humans weren’t even managing to acknowledge each other.

The Stranger, Seattle’s alt-weekly newspaper, has been home to Dan’s sex advice column, Savage Love, since its very first issue in 1991. Nancy had cajoled him into podcasting when that medium was still new, in 2006. The Stranger’s smart, cheeky, lefty, and often smutty sensibility feels very much like the voice of the city itself; in fact it’s much like the voice of many American cities. In places like Seattle, sentiments like those of my Anglo Saxon European American respondent could seem distant and irrelevant. But my statistics told me that he was far from alone.

I was thinking about him as I unlocked my bike in front of The Stranger’s offices, on a street that would briefly become, four years later, part of the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone. His call for civil war was still in my head when, a few hours later, we huddled around the kitchen table with our friends, listening soberly to the returns coming in from one swing state after another, our drinks untouched.

“Who are these people?,” someone asked.

Being able to respond to questions about who you are in an anonymous survey is actually a remarkable achievement. To understand why, consider first the language we need to use to make such questions precise. “Did you vote for Jill Stein?” and “Do you use the men’s bathroom?” are straightforward enough, but what about “Do you identify as liberal?” or “Are you bisexual?” These questions are about identity, and they’re different from questions about behavior. To understand why, it helps to step outside our modern human frame of reference for a moment.

If you were any other higher primate— a chimpanzee, say— identity questions wouldn’t make any sense, because chimps lack what we’ll call “anonymous identities.” They don’t “identify” in any collective way. This doesn’t mean that they lack *individual* identities, or relationships, or that they can’t experience friendship or love. In fact, while AIs might not be “persons” (yet), it’s easy to argue that nonhuman primates are. If you watch documentary video of the groundbreaking primatologist Jane Goodall interacting with the chimps in Tanzania’s Gombe National Park, it’s hard not to come away convinced that they have rich inner lives, that they experience much the same range of emotions we do, and that like us, they can love, quarrel, scheme, problem solve, and so on. And if you have a cat, dog, or parrot at home, you probably feel that many of these things apply to your nonhuman friend too. We’re animals ourselves, and in almost every respect we’re much like the other big-brained creatures we share our planet with. However, there are two important things that set humans apart. One is complex language, and the other, which I believe to be closely related, is our ability to form what I’ll call “anonymous societies.”

We all know what language is, though it’s not accurate to claim that it’s *uniquely* human. There are open questions about languages among whales and dolphins, for example; chimps and gorillas can be taught sign language; and prairie dogs, amazingly, can warn each other about the color and shape of an invader.[[4]](#footnote-27) Parrots can even learn our spoken languages. Researchers and animals who have established true symbolic interspecies communication— like Koko the gorilla with Francine Patterson, or Alex the parrot with Irene Pepperberg[[5]](#footnote-28)— should convince us that humans don’t hold a copyright on speech. However, these rare connections also highlight a gulf in depth and degree. Humans have a gift for language that’s almost certainly unparalleled on Earth, and has been key to developing the cooperative strategies, technologies, and cultures that, over the course of many generations, have set us apart from other animals.

Symbols are at the heart of language. These are abstractions that “digitize” the analog world around us, turning a welter of continuous perceptual impressions into discrete things with names: fruit, tree, rock, chimp. Recognizing an individual person and assigning them a name— like “Alex” or “Irene”— is an especially important case. We have every reason to believe that many animals with big brains have individual recognition, and some can even use names. (In 1983, for example, Koko the gorilla asked for a cat for Christmas, and was eventually allowed to choose a kitten from an abandoned litter. She named him “All Ball,” and loved him.) In a primate troop, everyone recognizes everyone else individually. However, there’s no evidence that nonhuman primates have anonymous societies, the way humans do.

In an anonymous society, a person isn’t (or isn’t only) identified by their individual name, but by symbolic markers of group identity, such as race, nationality, tribe, class, sexuality, membership in a club or guild, political party, and so on. This is what I’ve referred to as “anonymous identity”— a seemingly paradoxical phrase, but an apt one, since when we say that a person “identifies” as “an American Gen Xer,” they have both identified themselves *and* remained anonymous.

Curiously, we find anonymous societies mostly in animals with very *small* brains, like ants and bees. Ants, for instance, can live in colonies with a very large number of individuals, and cooperate closely within the colony— but may be at war with ants in other colonies. They discriminate “us” from “them” using pheromones. There’s really no other way to do it, since their numbers are so large (and their brains are so small) that it would be impossible to distinguish “us” from “them” using individual recognition. So instead, they use the chemical equivalent of team jerseys. In this important respect, humans are more like social insects than like other primates. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt had something like this in mind when he called us “90 percent chimp and 10 percent bee.”

A chimp colony could never grow to the size of an ant colony or beehive— let alone a human city— because chimps rely on individual recognition. In fact, when Jane Goodall and her colleagues observed a troop of chimpanzees they referred to as the “Kasakela community” undergo a violent splintering into two communities, afterward referred to as the “Kasakela” and the “Kahama,” they may have been projecting a human idea onto a non-human situation. Chimps who don’t already know each other are mutually mistrustful, but may over time develop a bond, or at least a relationship with established parameters (with one dominant over the other, for example). These dynamics, together with the bonds that arise from mating and child-rearing, will naturally lead to clusters of individuals that are comfortable— or comfortable enough— being near each other.[[6]](#footnote-29)

From our perspective, we might identify a cluster of chimps as a community, and give it a name. However, from the inside, there is no collective identity; no community name, tribal flag, or team jersey. What looks from the outside like one community splintering into two might feel, from the inside, like a web of relationships that has frayed, in which friendships don’t have enough force to overcome enmities, and in which some individuals who no longer hang out together become estranged over time. We might still say that troops or colonies “exist” as a phenomenon we can observe, in the same way that clouds or patches of clover exist, but they don’t correspond to a concept in the minds of the chimps themselves. As far as we know, chimps don’t identify with communities. Nor do any other primates, aside from us.

One could argue that community is just as fundamental to humanity as language is. This isn’t just for the reasons everyone talks about— because we need friendship, love, and emotional support; chimps need and have those things too. It’s because, as we’ll explore in the last section of this book, the development of culture and technology requires the concentrated interaction of a lot of people. Language is *how* those interactions take place; community is *with whom*.

When it comes to community, size really matters. Throughout our history, wherever the number and density of interacting humans is very low, we not only find that technologies and cultures develop more slowly, but that they can actually regress. The isolated Tasmanian people, for example, forgot over the generations how to fish and make many of the tools their ancestors on the Australian mainland used; the Sentinelese, comprising perhaps 50-200 people living in isolation on North Sentinel Island off the coast of India, seem to have forgotten how to make fire. As far as we understand, they keep fires lit in front of their dwellings all the time, and would need to rely on “harvesting” wildfire from a lightning strike if those fires were to go out.[[7]](#footnote-30) They didn’t end up in this situation because they’re any less intelligent than anyone else. It happened because knowledge, like those lit fires, must be nurtured and passed down from generation to generation. If there are few enough people, the risk of loss with every generation is a roll of the dice.

It would follow that the answer to the question “how many humans does it take to screw in a lightbulb” is probably a few million, given the complexities of mastering electricity and industrial manufacturing. Yet we can’t achieve the critical mass needed for evolving this kind of advanced technology without anonymous societies to allow for large, stable communities. When we consider that no vertebrate on Earth other than us has societies larger than 200 individuals or so,[[8]](#footnote-31) it should make us wonder whether our individual intelligence is really humanity’s special sauce. To an alien visiting the Earth 100,000 years ago, small groups of human hunter-gatherer-scavengers might not have stood out particularly relative to the planet’s other large-ish fauna.

On the other hand, we’re animals that talk. While nobody knows for sure how anonymous human societies first arose, my guess is that they’ve been with us for a very long time. This is because language itself *creates* group identity, in that it distinguishes speakers of different languages— and if there ever was a Tower of Babel time in which we all spoke the same language (unlikely), it wouldn’t have taken long for this one language to splinter into many. Over generations, language evolution produces linguistically differentiated populations in much the way genetic evolution produces new species. Language, culture, and group identity would have co-evolved and reinforced one other, creating rifts in the process. Everyone would have been aware of an “us” (people who speak the same language) and a “them” (people who don’t). The latter would often have been further broken down into those speaking different recognizable but incomprehensible foreign languages. Hence, the names of many of today’s most popular languages are also the anonymous identities of the people who first spoke them: French, Vietnamese, English, and so on. The fact that these terms also correspond to the names of countries defined by well-delineated polygons on the world map is a more recent development.

Unsurprisingly, the word for “person” or “people” in a language has also often turned into the name of the people who speak that language. For instance, Dena’ina, Dene, Dine’e, Gwich’in, Innu, Inuit, Iyiniwok, Lenape, L’nu’k, Maklak, Mamaceqtaw, Ndee, Numakiki, Numinu, Nuutsiu, Olekwo’l, and Tsitsistas are all Native North American tribes whose names simply mean “people” or “the people” in their respective languages. Hence the one word which really ought to encompass everyone— “people”— spoken in many languages immediately implies many distinct tribes. Kwakwaka’wakw (the tribe commonly known today as Kwakiutl), meant “speakers of our language”; “Cherokee” or “Tsalagi” was from a Muskogee word for “speakers of another language.”

Unlike species membership, though, belonging to one language group doesn’t preclude membership in another. Multilingualism means that certain people, in any era, belong to multiple linguistic groups, literally able to “code switch” between accents, dialects, or languages. During the long stretches of prehistory when people spent their lives roaming over vast distances, this undoubtedly eased cooperation, trade, and knowledge exchange, allowing for practices and technologies to diffuse over “culture areas” spanning whole continents.

Over the last 10,000 or so years, though, certain populations became increasingly dependent on farming and the year-round settled lifestyle that implied. These conditions would have caused anonymous identities to further crystallize. Regardless of ideas about property and ownership (it was often collective), individuals would have begun to think of themselves as tied to permanent dwellings, and to the surrounding cultivated land. Hence place names became common symbolic markers of anonymous societies in their own right. Since farming made it possible to support much larger concentrations of people in one place than could have known each other personally, a shared anonymous identity would have been at least as important a “technology” as farming itself in order to allow for the cohesion of large communities with common norms, customs, and laws.[[9]](#footnote-32) Settled societies also gave rise to increasingly fine-grained division of labor, which would have produced yet more anonymous identities— of the kind eventually institutionalized into so-called “voluntary associations” like guilds, councils, and clubs. Finally, farming would have allowed (or required) big extended families to grow in place over many generations without the continual fission and fusion that characterizes a more mobile lifestyle. This is presumably how clans arose.

Today, compound names are often made up of an “individual symbol” (first or given name) and a “team symbol” (family or surname) based on one of the above properties: place (as in Jack London), profession (as in Anita Baker), and ancestor (as in Sinéad O’Connor). Notice that anonymous identities would almost from the start have been multiple: an individual would have identified in all of these overlapping ways at once. An ancestral O’Connor might not only have been a member of the O’Connor clan, but also a blacksmith, and a resident of Dublin.

The parallels with ants are striking. They, too, have anonymous identity “smells” that come in part from a place (a common environment and diet), from their version of a profession, or “caste” (worker vs. drone vs. queen), and from a genetic line (chemical markers inherited from a shared ancestor). In this sense, while chimps have only first names, ants have only last names, something like “O’Connor-Smith-Dublin.” As Jonathan Haidt’s “chimp plus bee” formula implies, modern humans combine both kinds of identity; and unlike ants or bees, we have repurposable mental machinery— language— allowing us to coin new symbols and form new identity groups at will. Hence for us, identities don’t develop at the leisurely pace of biological evolution, but at the increasingly breakneck speed of cultural evolution. Today, every new hashtag on Twitter offers a potential identity marker.

The onslaught of new and overlapping identities can be exhausting. You might be fantasizing about what life would be like without identity politics, but insular, “first name only” societies are far from peaceable paradises. Inequality and oppression still exist in the context of individual relationships. Squabbles can turn violent, murder and rape can be commonplace, escaping an abusive situation can be near-impossible, and bonds of friendship or kinship with wronged parties can lead to cycles of revenge and feuding. Life is precarious, whether you’re a bullied underdog or a paranoid “alpha,” on top for now but always looking over your shoulder.

In anonymous societies, greater social cohesion, shared norms, division of labor, and sheer scale (which allows for more consistent resource sharing, diversification, and risk pooling) can give us a lot more individual security. Laws, customs, rights, and social safety nets let us live together with less anxiety, not having to rely on continual one-on-one negotiation, patronage, individual goodwill, or under the constant threat of violence. On the whole, this seems to me like progress.[[10]](#footnote-33)

However, it comes at a price. The moment there’s an anonymous collective identity, there’s also an “us,” or in-group, and a “them,” or out-group, on a scale that dwarfs individual friendship or enmity. Super-colonies of Argentine ants might seem peaceful and cooperative, until we find the places where one super-colony borders another; there, the carnage is brutal, an invisible boundary shifting in a slow tug-of-war over the bodies of the dead. It recalls the trenches of World War I. Individual German and English people in that war had no quarrel with each other, as the famous Christmas truce of 1914 vividly demonstrated. For a short time, soldiers on opposing sides of the Western Front put down their arms, played football, and sang carols together; but their national identities soon prevailed, turning every Hans or Gunter back into the anonymous “Jerry,” every William or Robert back into the anonymous “Tommy.” Then, violence was inhibited neither by the shared norms of an anonymous in-group, nor by individual empathy. Can there ever be an “us” *without* a “them”? Our future may depend on the answer to this question.

Today, one of the most important things we do with language is to form communities— negotiating their boundaries, naming them, identifying with them. Those overlapping communities are the social laboratories where culture, specialized knowledge, and technology develop. There may be widely agreed-on prerequisites for belonging to certain communities, some of which are very hard to change, such as skin color or sex characteristics. Some, like language, accent, skills, clothes, and hairstyles, can be acquired to one degree or another, though it may be costly in time, effort, or resources. Yet other communities may be quite abstract. When membership in a community relies on a document to prove or disprove, like a passport or a union card, it has clearly become so unmoored from an individual body that it has entered a realm of pure ideas.

A chimp, then, wouldn’t be able to answer questions on a survey about identity, because even though they can acquire enough symbolic language to understand “first names,” they lack anonymous identity. This also means that their natural mistrust of strangers is neither softened by the idea that the stranger, on account of some kind of team marker, is “one of us,” nor are they especially prejudiced against strangers who are “one of them.” That’s why neither the “build a wall” campaign nor the characterization of an opposing group as a “basket of deplorables” (to use the tribal language in play in the 2016 election) would work in chimp politics. Unlike ants or people, it would be pretty hard to get a chimp to go to a rally or march in the street, let alone die for a country, a political party, or a cause, because that would require identifying with one of those things.

This implies a profound difference in *purpose* between a population that has anonymous societies and one that doesn’t. It’s an oversimplification to claim that everything we do is driven by any single purpose, but let’s suppose, as Darwin did, that an organism “succeeds” insofar as it manages to reproduce. For a chimp, success means making baby chimps. For ants, success means reproduction of the whole colony, which isn’t the same— it’s entirely compatible, for example, with sacrificing individuals in war. The colony is more like a single body than like a collection of individuals; we wouldn’t say, for example, that a large person is “more successful” than a smaller person, just because the larger one’s body is made up of more cells, nor do we mourn the death and sloughing-off of our skin cells, or worry about the fact that our white blood cells only live for a couple of weeks. Since ants within the same colony are genetically very similar (or even clones!)[[11]](#footnote-34) and their brains aren’t wired for individual relationships with other ants, the analogy between ants and cells in a body is actually quite close. Arguably, the colony *is* the organism.

So where does this leave humanity? I would argue that we’re in the midst of a great transition. “Humanity 1.0” was more chimp-like, while “Humanity 2.0” is more ant-like— though we remain very much a mixture of the two. Can we really still think of ourselves as “90% chimp,” though? Success for us used to mean biological reproduction, but it’s now shifting to mean cultural reproduction. It’s not hard to see this transition playing out in front of our eyes, once we know where to look: trends in the birth, death, and reproduction of our bodies; and trends in the birth, death, and reproduction of our identities. This is why my surveys eventually led me to questions about gender and sexuality, which lie right at the crossroads between reproduction and identity.

The chapters that follow tell a story about human identity and how it’s evolving, based on five years’ worth of surveys answered by tens of thousands of Americans. It’s a story I’ve pieced together by combining data analysis, my bread and butter as a researcher, with study and consultation from experts in fields where I have no formal training— including ethnography, sociology, psychology, gender studies, and medicine. I’ve also learned a lot directly from the thousands of pages of candid comments from a wide range of survey respondents. The picture that emerges by bringing all of these elements together has surprised me at every turn, and feels important to share.

To focus so much of this book on gender and sexuality may puzzle some readers, given the many other identities fraught with marginalization and systemic bias— especially, in the American context, race. While we’ll touch on race in the context of urbanization, we’ll do so only tangentially. My focus on gender is motivated by the way it’s so bound up in the fundamentals of biology and reproduction. As the feminist writer Shulamith Firestone put it in her 1970 book *The Dialectic of Sex*,[[12]](#footnote-35)

The division yin and yang pervades all culture, history, economics, nature itself; modern Western versions of sex discrimination are only the most recent layer. […] [F]eminists have to question, not just all of Western culture, but the organization of culture itself, and further, even the very organization of nature.

Beyond Firestone’s “yin and yang,” we’ve also built a great modern tangle of gender, sexual, and relationship models, power structures, taboos, preferences, kinks, and orientations. Yet the foundations of these cultural structures trace all the way back to the evolution of sex itself by single-celled lifeforms that predate even the distinctions between animals, plants, and fungi. In this sense, the biological reproduction-focused “Humanity 1.0” is not only far older than the U.S., but far older than humanity itself. Our transition to “Humanity 2.0,” the reproduction of identities, may be a shift as profound as the emergence of multicellular organisms 600 million years ago.

You may be wondering how it’s possible to draw broad conclusions about humanity based on a sample of respondents from just one country. In general, that should arouse skepticism, and these conclusions should be regarded as tentative. The American focus emerged through a combination of the limitations of my surveying methods and the difficulties in trying to measure some of the things I wanted to across language and cultural barriers. While many of the trends we can see in the American data are clearly being felt elsewhere too, the specific questions one would want to ask to get at those underlying patterns would require nuanced local knowledge to frame.[[13]](#footnote-36) The United States is itself far from culturally uniform, and as we’ll see, there’s plenty of evidence that even here we lack a fully agreed-upon conceptual vocabulary. Still, as a large country with disproportionate influence around the world, whose language is spoken by the largest number of people on Earth, and whose technical infrastructure allows for this kind of surveying, it’s a reasonable place to begin. As we start to resolve the deeper patterns underlying many of the trends we’ll see in the American data, it’ll also become clear that many of these aren’t specific to any one country, but are functions of demography, urbanization, technology, and media— shifts that are increasingly global, not local.

Although neither I nor anyone else can claim to have a “view from nowhere,” I’m writing in a spirit of open-ended inquiry. The research that went into this book has been, for me, an extended and at times thrilling process of learning. I’d like to take you on a guided tour of the insights, as I experienced them. This means doing more than just offering up unattributed conclusions or statistical factoids to bolster an argument; the idea is to show, not tell. That’s why there are so many graphs in this book, rather than a percentage cited here and there. Graphs are harder to fudge than out-of-context “lonely numbers”, to use public health expert Hans Rosling’s term:

It is instinctive to look at a lonely number and misjudge its importance. […] Never, ever leave a number all by itself. Never believe that one number on its own can be meaningful. If you are offered one number, always ask for at least one more. Something to compare it with.[[14]](#footnote-37)

A graph can tell a rich and nuanced story, show margins of uncertainty, and reveal how the same raw information could be used (or misused) in the service of very different agendas. By showing my work, I hope to convince you of some things that, frankly, I wouldn’t have found believable had I not seen the data myself.

In approaching the evidence both openly and critically, you’ll become a data scientist too. This will let us explore questions about causality, sources of error, and different possible explanations for what we see. It feels more honest— and it’s more interesting— to delve into ambiguities when we find them, rather than sweeping them under the rug to make the narrative tidier. Reality is often surprising, but seldom simple.

If you’re more of a stories person than a numbers person, I hope you, too, will find much to enjoy here. There’ll be no equations (except in the *Appendix for Data Nerds*), no final exam, and everything will be explained in plain English. Also, in the “show, don’t just tell” spirit, the book is full of quotes and accounts directly from respondents, experts, and historical sources. Some of this, too, may need to be seen to be believed. We’re living in a time of such rapid and uneven changes in norms that it’s easy to become disconnected from those not in our geographic, generational, and cultural cohort. It can be disorienting to confront the views and lived experiences of people outside our bubbles, especially when these seem outlandish but are (or were) mainstream within their own communities. Yet this exposure feels crucial, both to understand the bigger picture, and to counteract the forces pulling us apart today.

Many of us are finding ourselves bewildered, unable to understand large segments of our society. Most of us don’t understand, either, how alien the recent past was. This is an opportunity to listen and learn.

*Who are we now?* is in three parts, mirroring my own journey through this territory and working like the stages of a rocket. Fueled by data and stories, each of them will lift us into a higher orbit, then detach, allowing us to take a breath, reorient ourselves, then fire up a new stage and venture farther out.

The first stage, Chapters 1-3, is like a booster rocket to get us off the ground: *Handedness*. The majority status of right-handedness is built into our biology. Across many cultures, it has almost universally resulted in a right-handed in-group and left-handed out-group with real social consequences. This often unnoticed human trait may seem inconsequential— but it isn’t. If you’re left-handed, you’re probably nodding knowingly as you read. If you’re right-handed, you’re probably puzzled. That’s partly the point.

Beyond raising our consciousness, handedness offers us a kind of practice run for a second rocket stage: *Sex and gender*, covered in Chapters 4-15. This is the heart of the book, treating the aspects of identity that many people consider the most private, and that are in dramatic transition, particularly for young city dwellers. This stage brings us from the familiar territory of (apparent) sexual and gender-conforming majorities to a population overview that reveals a more unfamiliar reality. It’s as if we’d begun at ground level on Main Street, USA, but the houses and storefronts were revealed to be a Potemkin village from above: many people’s private lives and selves are not as they present them publicly.

For our final stage, *Humanity*, we’ll be in a position to study ourselves quite literally from outer space. Chapters 16-19 zoom out to consider the forces that attract people to each other, not just individually but collectively, and how these have resulted in profound changes to our planet that can easily be seen from orbit— especially on Earth’s night side, our cities glowing like fairy lights. Accelerating urbanization in the past couple of centuries has generated unprecedented cultural innovation and has been fundamental to the creation of the new identities explored in previous chapters. It’s also now polarizing us culturally and politically in dangerous new ways. We’ll conclude with some guesses about (and hopes for) a broader, more inclusive future, predicated on a broader, more inclusive human identity.

In the quiet moments after each of these rocket stages has finished its burn and fallen away, I hope you’ll experience something similar to what I did at certain points throughout this project. It feels related to the so-called “overview effect” astronauts have described when they look back at Earth from outer space and confront the reality that we’re all living on a tiny, fragile ball hanging in the void. As [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Overview_effect&oldid=959479674) puts it:

“From space, national boundaries vanish, the conflicts that divide people become less important, and the need to create a planetary society with the united will to protect this “pale blue dot” becomes both obvious and imperative.”[[15]](#footnote-39)

1. The segment aired a few weeks later, on Dan Savage and Blaise Agüera y Arcas, “The Sex Robots Are Coming!!!,” Podcast, *Savage Lovecast*, November 22, 2016, https://savage.love/lovecast/2016/11/22/the-sex-robots-are-coming/. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
2. Ginia Bellafante, “Why the Big City President Made Cities the Enemy,” *The New York Times*, July 24, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/nyregion/trump-cities.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
3. A 28 year old from Burnsville, Minnesota. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
4. Patricia Dennis, Stephen M. Shuster, and C. N. Slobodchikoff, “Dialects in the Alarm Calls of Black- Tailed Prairie Dogs (Cynomys Ludovicianus): A Case of Cultural Diffusion?,” *Behavioural Processes* 181 (December 2020): 104243. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
5. F. G. Patterson, “The Gestures of a Gorilla: Language Acquisition in Another Pongid,” *Brain and Language* 5, no. 1 (January 1978): 72–97; Irene M. Pepperberg, *The Alex Studies: Cognitive and Communicative Abilities of Grey Parrots* (Harvard University Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
6. Scientists who study animal behavior call the result “fission-fusion societies,” where the clusters can change either over the course of a day (for example, as foraging parties go out in the morning but reconvene at night) or over longer periods of time (as when a few individuals decide to strike out on their own, or join an existing group). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
7. [[]] Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 2005), 312–13; Adam Goodheart, “The Last Island of the Savages,” *The American Scholar* 69, no. 4 (2000): 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
8. Mark W. Moffett, “Human Identity and the Evolution of Societies,” *Human Nature* 24, no. 3 (September 2013): 219–67. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
9. There have also been large-scale societies that didn’t rely heavily on farming, but spent part of the year roaming over a large area, only convening seasonally to create “temporary cities,” as described by Robert H. Lowie, “Some Aspects of Political Organization Among the American Aborigines,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 78, no. 1/2 (1948): 11–24. Obviously, this way of life also requires a shared anonymous identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
10. Agreement isn’t universal on this point, though. Large anonymous societies can bring with them feelings of alienation. As David Graeber and David Wengrow point out in their 2021 book *The Dawn of Everything*, “‘Security’ takes many forms. There is the security of knowing one has a statistically smaller chance of getting shot with an arrow. And then there’s the security of knowing that there are people in the world who will care deeply if one is.” David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Penguin UK, 2021), chap. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
11. Denis Fournier and Serge Aron, “Evolution: No-Male’s Land for an Amazonian Ant,” *Current Biology: CB* 19, no. 17 (September 15, 2009): R738–40. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
12. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex : The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Morrow, 1970), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
13. The historical materials, too, focus on the United States and Western Europe, both because of my own limitations as a researcher and to offer timely context for the survey data. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
14. Rosling et al., *Factfulness*, 2018.Hans Rosling, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Rönnlund, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think* (Flatiron Books, 2018), chap. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
15. “Overview Effect,” *Wikipedia*, May 29, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Overview\_effect&oldid=959479674. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)