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Beyond porn literacy: drawing on young people's pornography narratives to expand sex education pedagogies

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ABSTRACT

As online pornography has become more readily available and accessible, educators have begun to grapple with how to address young people's engagement with it. Much of this discussion centres the view that pornography is an inherently problematic genre that young people should be inoculated against through comprehensive media literacy education – an approach that often ignores the nuance of young people's engagements with porn and which often isolates pornography as outside of and infringing upon young people's everyday lives. Using thematic narrative analysis, this paper examines excerpts from focus groups with undergraduate students at a Canadian university examining their experiences with and thinking on pornography and sex education. Findings suggest that participants' pornography-related narratives are connected both to their own personal, lived experiences with pornography and to the broader structural and relational aspects of their sexual and social worlds in ways that complicate traditional media literacy interventions. Small-group discussions on pornography therefore emerge through this study as potentially productive pedagogical sites for educators seeking to develop a more expansive and ethically oriented approach to sex and sexuality education.

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Young people and pornography

As online pornography has become more widely available, it is unsurprising that young people are increasingly watching it. While exact figures vary by location, age range, race, religion, gender, participant intention (intentional viewership or unintentional exposure) and time-frame studied, an overview of representative data from a variety of international studies (Goldsmith et al. 2017; Tsaliki 2011; Weber, Quiring, and Daschmann 2012) suggests that upwards of 90% of young people aged 9–24 years have in some way engaged with online pornography. In recognition of this new reality, sex educators are increasingly grappling with questions of whether and how to address pornography in the classroom. This question is complicated, however, by the contentious nature of the debates around young people and pornography that are currently playing out in social, political and academic circles.

Both pornography and young people's use of it have been and continue to be constructed as deeply problematic; as a 'public health crisis of the digital age' (Culture

Reframed 2019). These constructions are rooted in the critiques levied by both Christian conservatives, who see porn as problematic for its existence outside of, and potential to disrupt what Gayle Rubin (1984) has identified as the 'charmed circle' of 'good sex' (namely, sex that is heterosexual, marital and procreative), and by anti-pornography feminists who argue that pornography reproduces and eroticises misogyny and violence against women (Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988; Dines, 2010). Together, these discourses produce pornography as an inherently problematic object that will inevitably cause misery for those who come into contact with it, and this is considered particularly true for young people. This is because young people (and white, middle-class young people in particular) have been understood through the lens of the 'Romantic child', as 'naturally asexual' and 'pure' (Irvine 2002, 13) and as therefore at risk from the perceived unruliness of their sexual desires (Lamb, Lustig, and Graling 2013). Furthermore, young people are often constructed as malleable and uncritical, and porn is therefore construed as capable of directly influencing their behaviour and beliefs in linear ways (McKee 2009; Smith 2003).

This view has been bolstered by a spate of quantitative media effects studies that have sought to demonstrate causal or correlational relationships between young people's engagements with pornography and many of the behavioural or attitudinal outcomes decried by anti-pornography activists. This research includes, for instance, examinations into the links between pornography viewership and favourable attitudes to uncommitted/non-marital sexuality (Brown and L'Engle 2009; Lo and Wei, 2005), early onset of sexual behaviour (Brown and L'Engle 2009; Lim et al. 2017), the sexual objectification of women and/or increases in sexually aggressive behaviour (Peter and Valkenburg 2007; Rothman and Adhia 2016), and increases in 'risky' behaviour (such as anal or oral sex, sex with multiple partners or unprotected sex) (Lim et al. 2017; Luder et al. 2011).

While this kind of research does provide insights into the generalities of young people's pornography habits, it also tends to isolate pornography, suggesting that 'of all the various factors that might cause negative attitudes towards women, pornography is, if not the most important, at least a key component' (McKee 2009, 636). Such studies also tend to problematise non-dominant youth sexual expressions and conflate all pornography with heterosexual pornography, ignoring the growing genres of feminist and queer porn. By contrast, a range of qualitative and mixed-methods studies have offered more nuanced takes on young people's engagements with porn. These studies are generally rooted in 'media practices models' that highlight 'connections between adolescents' identities and media selection, interaction, and application' (Escobar-Chaves et al. 2005, 304) and have found, for instance, that pornography is a valuable source of sex education and knowledge acquisition for young people (Allen 2006; Hare et al. 2015) and particularly for LGBTQ+ young people who are traditionally under-served in mainstream educational spaces (Arrington-Sanders et al. 2015; Kubicek et al. 2010). Other such studies have found pornography to be a site of leisure, entertainment and play for young people (McKee 2012); a space for exploration of their fantasies and desires (Attwood, Smith, and Barker 2018); and a tool used to relieve boredom, release stress and find pleasure (Attwood, Smith, and Barker 2018; Bale 2011).

Taken together, this range of studies suggests that young people are not a monolithic category and that their engagements with pornography and reasons for accessing it are as diverse as young people themselves. The question for educators, then, is how to

account for young people's engagements with pornography in ways that recognise both its pedagogical and erotic value, while also grappling with its potential to reproduce and re-circulate those problematic representations and relations that many of us are invested in contesting.

Pornography and sex education

Because pornography is widely considered a problematic object for young people, and because people under the age of 18 (in most countries) are not legally supposed to be watching pornography at all, educators interested in tackling sexually explicit media in their classrooms have noted that their desire to do so renders them suspect to parents, students, colleagues and administrators (Carboni and Bhana 2017; Mulholland 2013; Noble 2014). Where pornography has been included as a topic, this has generally occurred under the rubric of 'media literacy' or 'pornography literacy' (Albury 2014; Rothman et al. 2018; Vandenbosch and van Oosten 2017), an approach which seeks 'to make young people aware of how media is produced and advertised, teaching them critical thinking skills, with the hope that they will be less likely to engage in unhealthy behaviours promoted by the media' (Braun-Courville and Rojas 2009, 161). This view is reflected, for instance, in Rothman et al.'s (2018) description of their pilot pornography literacy study, wherein they explain 'the purpose of the class was ... to give [students] tools for critical analysis that would enable them to make selections about pornography that were consistent with their values' (4), while for Vandenbosch and van Oosten (2017), the hope was that through engaging in pornography literacy pedagogies, educators might be able to 'attenuate unwanted media effects over time' (Vandenbosch and van Oosten 2017, 1029).

Attempts at implementing some form of pornography literacy have shown some promise in changing students' understandings of, for instance, the legality of making/viewing porn (Rothman et al. 2018). However, the emphasis in such models on reducing the negative effects of pornography on young people's attitudes and behaviours and/or on empowering them to make good choices about pornography does tend to reproduce some of those limited understandings of pornography and young people that negate the complex ways in which young people engage with porn, suggesting again that all young people come to the same porn in the same way. A media literacy approach also tends to rely on a top-down model of education wherein the teacher passes their knowledge down to students, emphasising 'correct' readings or interpretations of porn and its practices. This approach not only reflects a neo-liberal perspective that puts 'the responsibility back onto young [people], as self-governing subjects to deconstruct sex texts' (Quinlivan 2018, 96), but also ignores the fantastical, psychical, affective and somatic elements of engaging with porn that complicate any notion of educating young people straightforwardly around it.

Some sexualities educators are moving away from the model of sharing knowledge to attenuate harm suggested by literacy approaches, embracing instead what Carmody (2005) calls an 'ethical erotics' approach to sexualities education; one that centres the social and ethical quality of young people's sexual relations, rather than their individual experiences of knowledge acquisition and decision-making power (Cameron-Lewis and Allen, 2012; Carmody 2005; Lamb, Lustig, and Graling 2013). Such an approach seeks to better attend to what Fine, Michelle, and Sara I. McClelland (2014) call young people's

‘thick desires’; a concept that aims to interrupt ‘visions of sexual desire that insisted on only locating desire in hearts, minds, and genitals’ (Fine, Michelle, and Sara I. McClelland 2014, 16) in order to encourage ‘researchers and policy makers alike to situate desire as an “entry point” ... a window through which we might begin to notice the extensive web of factors in a person’s life, family, community, and nation’ (Fine, Michelle, and Sara I. McClelland 2014, 12). The framework of thick desire suggests that young people desire more than just sexual pleasure, but rather require conditions of equity, justice and care in order to live meaningful, safe and loving lives.

Starting from an ethically oriented approach to sex education necessitates a different way of thinking about how to address pornography in the classroom. As Kath Albury (2014) notes, it is doubtful that ‘simply adding a critique of porn to an existing sex and relationships education programme will address broader cultural inequities – particularly if other areas of the curriculum do not directly address questions of power, gender relations and sexual negotiations skills’ (174). Pornography is not produced, nor consumed in a vacuum, and rather than tacking pornography on as a kind of curricular addendum, Albury (2014) suggests that we might instead seek to understand how ‘young people’s readings of pornography ... can reshape the broader curriculum of formal sex and relationships’ (178).

In response to Albury’s suggestion, this paper examines the narratives that arose within a focus group study undertaken by the author with Canadian undergraduate university students around their thinking on, and experiences with pornography and sex education to consider how such narratives connect to a range of complex sexual, social and relational issues that extend beyond the topic of pornography itself. Drawing on this analysis, this paper concludes with a consideration of how small-group discussions on pornography might be utilised to develop a broader ‘ethical erotics’ and social justice-oriented sexualities pedagogy that moves beyond traditional media literacy interventions.

The pornography and sex ed study

Most provinces and territories across Canada do not explicitly address pornography as a topic in their school-based curricula (Public Health Agency of Canada 2008), likely reflecting those concerns around pornography and schooling discussed above. To fill in some of the gaps in research around pornography and sex education in Canada, I conducted a focus group study with undergraduate students at a university located in the outskirts of one of Canada’s largest cities on the topics of pornography and sex education. The aim of the study was to gain access to young people’s narratives of their experiences with pornography, past and present, as well as to provide an opportunity for them to voice their recommendations on how educators might address pornography in a formalised way within school-based curricula. I chose to use focus groups because they produce ‘rich and meaningful multilateral conversations’ between participants (Johnson 1996, 523) that allow participants to steer the conversation towards what interests them, more closely mimicking conversations had in everyday life. By bringing individuals together in real time and space, focus groups also more closely resemble the dynamics of the actual sex education classroom, and thereby make visible some of the affective and emotional complexities of talking about personal, difficult and intimate topics such as sex, pornography and desire with others.

Four focus groups were ultimately conducted (one all-female group, one all-male group, two mixed-gender groups), involving a total of 27 participants, primarily ranging in age from 18 to 25 and reflecting a diversity of gender, sexuality and race/ethnicity identifications (see Table 1–4). I offered focus groups in several different gender configurations to allow participants to choose where they would feel most comfortable discussing these topics, and also as a way of making visible whether and how different groupings of individuals might impact on the kinds of topics discussed, as well as the overall affective tone of the conversations.

In addition to the focus group sessions themselves, participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire on their pornography habits, past and present, and were sent a follow-up questionnaire asking them to reflect on their focus group experience with further anonymity. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus explicitly

Table 1. Focus group 1 participant demographic information.

Name	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Sexuality
Bella	African	Female	Heterosexual
Emily	African-Canadian	Female	Straight
Zoey	Asian	Female	Straight
Daria	Caucasian	Female	Hetero-Romantic
Karmah	Middle-Eastern	Female	Gay
Sara	Mongolian/Persian with 10% European	Woman	Straight but not narrow
Chantel	Caribbean-Canadian	Female	Bisexual
Anita	Hispanic	Female	Straight

Table 2. Focus group 2 participant demographic Information.

Name	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Sexuality
Abdi	Black-African	Male	Straight
Tim	Guyanese	Male	Bi-curious
Omar	Muslim	Male	Heterosexual
Jay	Chinese-Bangladeshi	Male	Straight

Table 3. Focus group 3 participant demographic Information.

Name	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Sexuality
Adina	African (Ethiopian)	Female	Straight
Tay	Irish-Egyptian	Transgender/non-binary	Queer
Adriana	Italian-Canadian	Female	Polyamorous and straight w/bisexual tendencies
Marco	Italian-Canadian	Male	Heterosexual
Elena	Hispanic	Female	Mostly Heterosexual
Dave	White	Male	Heterosexual
Andrew	White	Male	Straight
Lisa	White	Female	Heteroflexible

Table 4. Focus group 4 participant demographic information.

Name	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Sexuality
Alisha	South Indian/Goan	Female	Bisexual
Ken	Asian	Male	Bisexual w/preference for males
Harry	White	Transguy	Demisexual/gay
Nina	Italian-European	Female	Heterosexual
Kim	Black	Female	Heterosexual
Zhang	Chinese	Female	Heterosexual
Remy	Caucasian	Trans/non-binary	Pansexual

on the discussions within the focus groups for the insights they provided into the kinds of topics that arose and that might be addressed in the interactive space of the sex education classroom. All names used are pseudonyms, and all demographic information (gender, sexuality and race/ethnicity) reflects participants' self-ascribed identifications as provided in their questionnaires.

Analysis

To make sense of the focus group conversations, I undertook a thematic narrative analysis, which begins with the basics of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), but extends this process by looking at sequences and stories to develop themes, rather than thematically coding for keywords or phrases only (Riessman 2008, 74). A range of themes emerged through this process, showing that young people have complex and ultimately ambivalent relationships with pornography; a finding in line with other qualitative studies around this topic (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson 2010; Parvez 2006). I will focus in particular on three of the themes of harm that emerged across all four focus groups, each of which reflect common concerns about pornography and young people that are widely circulated in both research and the media: 1) pornography as offering unrealistic representations of sex; 2) pornography use as leading to deviant or extreme behaviour in viewers; and 3) pornography as exploitative of performers.

In the analysis below, I analyse these themes as they appeared within a few select individual and group narratives. While some of the narratives indicated first-hand, personal and intimate knowledge with the notions of harm outlined above, many of the narratives were speculative or hypothetical in nature. The prevalence of these kinds of narratives suggests the possibility that young people have deeply internalised normative discourses around pornography and/or that they were performing the kinds of narratives deemed acceptable around these contentious topics. However, without discounting the potentially performative nature of these narratives, I want to suggest that to the extent that these kinds of concerns appeared to be at the forefront of participants' minds when talking about pornography – often arriving unprompted through the free-associative nature of the focus group – they must also be heard and treated as indicative of young people's very real concerns and anxieties around issues related to pornography, mediated sexuality, deviance and exploitation (among others). These narratives therefore tell us something about the larger issues an ethically oriented sexualities pedagogy might address.

Findings

Pornography as unrealistic

Some of the most common discourses around young people's engagements with pornography reflect the notion that pornography distorts 'normal' adolescent sexuality through its reproduction of unrealistic representations of sex (Attwood and Smith, 2013; Johansson and Hammarén 2007). These concerns were expressed in all four focus groups, with female/trans/non-binary participants focusing on the ways pornography's representations might affect others, while male participants focused more on their own engagements with porn.

For instance, Elena shared that she has ‘a lot of guy friends and they all started watching porn early on and they kind of have this expectation for women to act certain ways if they’re having sex with them’, and so she educated them that “whatever you see on there, it’s not how it is in real life most of the time.” Zoey shared a different kind of narrative about a ‘young girl’ she had read about, who ‘had watched porn for her first time and ... started crying because ... she thought that was what love is or whatever.’ Meanwhile, Remy, a young trans/non-binary participant, pointed out that unrealistic representations and expectations occur in relation to gay, lesbian and bisexual porn as well:

Just generally in the heteronormative section there’s a lot of unrealistic expectations in general but even more so if you go in the gay, lesbian, bi ... It’s basically just fetishised, right? It’s not seen as an actual relationship ... you exist only for ... the straight man’s pleasure.

In the excerpts above, Elena, Zoey and Remy discussed the potential impacts of porn’s unrealistic representations on generalised or hypothetical others (‘guy friends,’ ‘a young girl,’ ‘you’), while seemingly constructing themselves as able to see right through those same representations; a tendency known as the ‘third person effect’ that is common in pornography research (Scarcelli 2015). However, that these participants so readily shared these particular understandings of porn’s representations and its potential impacts on others points to the possibility that Elena, Zoey and Remy are indeed concerned about broader issues relating to young women’s, queer and trans folx’s vulnerable positioning in a patriarchal society that continues to construct all sex and desire in very male-centred ways, while rendering invisible and illegible other ways of expressing gender and being sexual.

In contrast to these hypothetical narratives, Bella, a young Black African woman, shared a more personal narrative in which she made important connections between the racialised representations of Black women’s hyper-sexuality prevalent in pornography (Hill Collins 1997; Miller-Young 2010) and how she had been treated by certain ‘white males’ in her life:

I have found that a lot of white males have come to me due to, I can tell by from them watching porn ... like I’ve gotten requests where this guy wanted to try anal and I found out from a friend that he wanted to try it because he’d been watching a lot of “ebony” porn and finding black girls very attractive and they’re very sexy and all that kind of stuff and he just wanted to try it on me ...

Bella’s narrative demonstrates the real harms that can arise when the racist norms and expectations common to much mainstream pornography are unilaterally brought into real-world encounters, and points to the specific vulnerabilities young women of colour face in social and sexual worlds structured by long-standing intersections of racism and misogyny that persist to this day.

Unlike female/trans/non-binary participants, male participants were more likely to discuss porn’s representations as impacting their own personal sexual expectations and experiences. For example, Omar alluded to the fact that pornography had shaped what he viewed as ‘normal’ during sex:

Omar: I have experienced ... a situation where I ... kind of was expecting certain things, and, um, she was uncomfortable with it and to me

Alanna: Based on what you'd seen in porn?

Omar: – what I'd seen. And I thought that it was a normal, a normal act, you could say. So, I think ... it may have changed my views on what I consider normal ...

Abdi, too, also appeared concerned about the potential impacts of pornography's representations on young men's sexual relations, though his narrative focused more on the possibility that pornography (and masturbation) could impact one's ability to stay aroused during in-person encounters:

If you're ... watching porn, you're used to porn and you're used to getting off by yourself, or whatever – Once you're with a woman it doesn't—it doesn't feel the way it looks ... you might not be as interested or as aroused when you're with a woman ... you can't even get hard.

While Abdi utilised the more impersonal pronoun of 'you', his narrative suggests that he may have some personal experience with this issue, particularly as he states that 'it doesn't feel the ways it looks.' Whatever Abdi's personal experience with impotence and pornography, both of these narratives suggest that these young men are concerned with the impact that pornography's representations might have on their own experiences with or understandings of what normative sex looks like and what good, hegemonic masculine sexuality should be (namely virile and always ready to go).

Taken together, all of the above excerpts suggest that young people's discussions on and experiences with pornography's representations and the perceived impacts of those representations are complex; they are both engaging with normative discourses around pornography as unrealistic, but are doing so in ways that cannot be isolated from their individual, relational and social experiences of gender, race, sexuality, power, bodies and the intersections between.

Pornography as leading to deviant behaviour

A second theme that emerged across all focus groups was the notion that porn acts as a kind of gateway object that has the power to engender a tendency towards more 'extreme' or 'risky' behaviour in viewers. Participants regularly took up these kinds of discourses, often through frameworks that construct young people as particularly malleable and their use of porn as akin to other forms of addiction; two frameworks that have dominated the research and media in circulation around young people, pornography and sexual behaviour (Braun-Courville and Rojas 2009; Johansson and Hammarén 2007). However, the kinds of risks they focused on were often rooted in deeply gendered constructions around what health and deviance look like and around what good, gendered subjects should be.

For example, in the all-male focus group, Jay discussed the possibility that watching pornography could lead men to engage in deviant or even criminal behaviour:

Jay: So, once you see one type of porn, you want to get something more intense ... And then I guess that's maybe where fetishes develop or, for example, the public masturbators, right? So maybe they'll get off doing things alone? So, in order to escalate their, um, escalate their arousal ... they have to go to do some more extreme stuff.

That pornography was constructed as the point of origin for a crime like public masturbation points to the power of the addiction-deviance discourse that circulates around young men's use of porn. And although Jay was constructing a fantasy of an imagined public masturbator, Abdi did later share a more personal-seeming narrative on this same issue:

Abdi: You watch something, you're, you watch like for a while and, and now after a while it just doesn't really arouse you

Alanna: Have the same effect?

Abdi: – arouse you anymore. So you go into more hardcore. You go into more extreme things to get that rush. And you just keep going and going.

Here Abdi was relating a belief that watching porn can open a sort of Pandora's box for young people, leading them into more 'hardcore' interests and he used the language of addiction (getting 'that rush') in doing so. However, these kinds of narratives were centred almost exclusively around young men, reproducing the discourse that young men are inherently aggressive in their sexuality in ways that other young people are not. By contrast, the discussion on young women and porn centred around whether it was potentially lowering their sexual inhibitions. For example, Zhang shared,

Young girls ... once they watch porn ... like their brain is not fully developed yet into that adult stage yet, so some of them will be like watching porn and stuff and will be posting their own body on the website ... so eventually they're gonna post like their own body image on ... like social media, like Facebook, Instagram, and I feel like that's not safe for, like, young girls.

Zhang seemed to be pointing to very real concerns around the ways images of young women's bodies get circulated online as a mode of harassment or extortion. At the same time, she was reproducing the idea that young women are only susceptible to porn's supposedly problematic aesthetics because 'their brain is not fully developed yet into that adult stage'; a discourse that fails to make space for the possibility that these young women may enjoy experimenting with their sexual self-expression online in ways that defy the oversimplifying discourses of susceptibility and harm (Renold and Ringrose 2011).

Not all participants addressed porn's influence on young women in such definitive ways. Zoey pushed back against this narrative, recounting a time when she was considering going into the porn industry herself:

I remember I was telling one of my friends, 'Oh I'm thinking of being a cam girl,' and he was a guy and was like, 'Oh that's disgusting.' And I'm like, 'Okay, you're gonna jack off to these girls, but then when you know one personally it's disgusting?' Like, it was a double standard ... So I think I'd like boys to know that girls can like, show their bodies and be smart and like get a degree, like, we're multidimensional.

Here, Zoey critiques the view, rooted in sexist and misogynist understandings of young women's worth as tied to their sexual purity, that sees those who participate in sex work or the porn industry as damaged, disgusting, one-dimensional and worth less.

As this small sample of excerpts shows, some participants' expressed notions that porn might make young people do things or want things they might not otherwise want or do, or that it might make them sexual in ways they should not be. While these

notions reproduce normative and often simplistic understandings of young people as malleable and of porn as damaging or addictive to adolescent brains, these narratives also pointed to some of the many deeply gendered issues around sex, respectability and the commodification of desire noted by other researchers working with young people (Bale 2011; Mulholland 2013; Quinlivan 2018), as well as broader questions of worth and value, health, childhood and deviance, influence, susceptibility and agency (constructions which also intersect in important ways with gender, race and class) that young people might be grappling with, both in relation to pornography, and more generally in their sexual and social lives.

Pornography as exploitative

Across all focus groups, participants also discussed the practices of the porn industry and what some saw to be the inherent exploitation of porn performers; a theme rooted in anti-pornography activism that continues to circulate as given and common-sense. These discussions again divided along gendered lines, with female participants expressing concerns around the treatment of porn performers—a finding in line with other research around female pornography consumers (Parvez 2006) – while male participants rarely touched on this issue, or did so with much less certainty. Trans and non-binary participants did not discuss this issue in depth, likely reflecting the ways that heterosexual porn continues to be centred as the only ‘real porn’ worth investigating or critiquing.

For instance, Emily explained her thinking about porn performers (which she attributed to the many documentaries she has watched about the pornography industry):

When I used to think of porn it was just like this thing that people do, did, to make money and it made them a lot of money because they reveal their bodies and stuff and like now I see porn as like something, like I will automatically associate it with pain.

This association between porn and pain was also expressed by Anita in a narrative in which she conflated the treatment of female porn stars’ bodies with her own body:

I feel that the whole ... view of the woman as being exploited and all that, I think it just goes, just with physiology, like, we’re the ones getting fucked, like we’re not doing the act, right? So, I think that’s why it’s treated as like ... the man’s intruding that woman’s ... I don’t know, that’s how I see it.

The language of the man as ‘intruding’ the woman, and of women as the ones who ‘get fucked’ and the discursive shift from ‘the woman’ to ‘we’re’ in this narrative, suggests that Anita is concerned not only with porn’s representations of heterosexual sex and the perceived exploitation of female porn performers, but perhaps also with the lack of power and control young women (and in particular racialised young women such as Anita and Emily) have over their own bodily autonomy more generally.

On the other hand, male participants only occasionally touched on the inner-workings of the porn industry and seemed much less certain as to whether it was exploitative of performers or not. For instance, Jay related his knowledge of how porn performers prepare their bodies for the rigours of performative sex this way:

I know that um, if, for example, for anal sex? They have to fast, they have to use, um, dia – no, what are those called? Um, laxatives! In order to clear their bowels out. I don't think it's very comfortable for them. Um, but it's their choice, so.

For Omar, the category of 'porn' itself included only that which is consensually undertaken, as shown in this exchange:

Alanna: What comes to mind when you hear the word 'porn'?

Omar: Uh, 'consensual.'

Alanna: Consensual? Okay ... So what do you mean by consensual?

Omar: I mean that the parties involved, um, they know ... that they can stop at any time type of thing. So, it should not be forced or things like that ... to that effect.

Whether Omar took up this position because he truly believed it or whether he thought it was the right thing to say (to me, a female researcher) given the ongoing discussion around consent currently in circulation is impossible to know. But this narrative – and Jay's narrative above – points to a desire amongst these male participants to construe porn as that which is always engaged in knowledgeably and consensually and of performers' own free will; a narrative in line with neo-liberal, post-feminist discourses that emphasise notions of choice and agency (Gill 2007) and that therefore absolve young people like Jay and Omar from any responsibility to care for or about the porn performers whose labour they are consuming.

While differently situated participants across the focus groups at times reproduced those discourses that construct pornography as inherently exploitative of performers, or rejected the possibility that exploitation could or might occur (leaving very little room for nuanced spaces in between), what is evident from the discussion above is that participants have much to say on the porn industry, and its relation to what they perceived to be pain, exploitation and harm. Interestingly, none of the participants brought up the emerging genre of feminist porn, which seeks to centre the ethics of production, suggesting that there is still much work to be done to expand the field of understanding around what constitutes pornography and to make visible intersections between pornography and notions of work. Regardless of the kinds of pornography discussed, however, what these narratives suggest is that differently situated young people are deeply interested in thinking about and talking about what it means to equitably and ethically live, love, work and consume.

Discussion

The narratives examined above reflect but a few of the many, many different ways participants in the focus groups engaged with the topic of pornography. Indeed, because pornography is so vast and varied, it seems that participants were able to latch on to those elements of porn and the discourses around porn and young people that provoked them, and, in doing so, made both explicit and implicit connections to larger issues of gender, race, sexuality, representation, power, deviance, impotence, labour, pleasure, desire, consumption and consent (among others). These moments provide insights not only into what participants think about, know about and have

experienced in relation to pornography, but also into what they think about, know about and experience more generally as differently situated subjects living in and navigating through deeply unequal worlds. At the same time, participants' critiques of porn, and their other and varied expressions of resistance, joy and pleasure in relation to porn and porn's many tangents, reaffirm the notion held by a growing number of sexualities educators of young people as agentic sexual subjects who need a sexualities education that moves beyond hyper-individualistic discourses of sexuality as intimate, personal and singular to attend to the social, relational and ethical aspects of sexuality as well (Cameron-Lewis and Allen, 2012; Carmody 2005; Lamb 2010).

In thinking about what such an educational space might look like, the rich narratives offered in this small-scale study suggest some intriguing possibilities for educators. Rather than addressing pornography as a subject to be taught only through a top-down pornography literacy framework that focuses on pornography's harms and effects, this study shows that when spaces are created for non-linear and interactive conversations around complex topics like pornography, those conversations will likely expand into many of the areas that ethically oriented sexualities educators are interested in addressing. Kathleen Quinlivan (2018) similarly notes the value of this kind of 'slantwise' approach (89) to sexualities education, as she found that using visual art to spur discussion in a sex education classroom provoked 'open-ended, volatile, and unpredictable pedagogical encounters with the complexities of sexualities' (98) amongst students in ways that had the potential to challenge 'instrumental, facts-based approaches' to sex ed (89).

Not only did the focus groups discussed in this paper offer valuable openings for coming in slantwise to topics connected to pornography, but, importantly, participants also seemed to genuinely enjoy engaging in these encounters. Indeed, participants in the first focus group even ended their session with a wish for a weekly Porn Club that would enable them to continue their conversations. This wish points to the potential of the recurring small-group discussion format for enlivening traditional sex education classrooms through engaging students iteratively in conversations around topics they are particularly interested and invested in. However, just because many students enjoy small-group discussions, does not necessarily imply that all students will feel equally represented and equally safe and validated in these spaces, as was made evident through the general reticence of trans/non-binary participants in this study. This limitation points to the need for future studies that explicitly bring together this under-researched cohort for further conversations on pornography, education and other sexuality-related topics. Still, even silence tells us something important, and in these focus groups, it demonstrated the continuing privilege afforded to cis students—including LGBT cis students – a privilege that could also be made visible and taken up by educators within an ethics-based sexualities pedagogy.

Aside from the imbalances that inevitably arise in these kinds of encounters, a further issue with implementing this form of pedagogy is the riskiness of opening these kinds of spaces in the highly regulated school environment, as some young people may take up controversial or problematic positions on issues relating to pornography for their shock value, or for the ways they contravene the norms of the classroom or the desires of the educator (Allen 2006); or may uncritically reproduce homophobic, misogynistic, racist or other oppressive discourses as normative and given (Mulholland 2013). Furthermore, such open-ended learning approaches present a direct challenge to the testing and assessment

imperative of modern schooling (Quinlivan 2017). Indeed, balancing these risks and challenges with the possibilities afforded by a pedagogy that expands outwards in directions that resonate with students is, perhaps, one of the central tensions of sex education. Yet, as Mulholland (2013) found in her work with young people in Australian schools, discussions around pornography and its tangents already circulate as a kind of 'public illicit' that is 'tangible ... spoken about easily ... known' (106). Young people are talking about these subjects in and outside of the classroom, and bringing these conversations into our pedagogies in more deliberate ways so that they might be both facilitated by and drawn upon by educators as a starting point from which to make connections to broader social structures and young people's 'thick desires' seems to be, at the very least, a pedagogical avenue worth exploring further, whether those conversations ultimately take place in classrooms or in other kinds of learning environments.

Conclusion

Even though research around young people and pornography indicates that young people have complex, idiosyncratic engagements with pornography that run the gamut from disturbing, to mundane, to educative, to downright ecstatic, those engagements have almost exclusively been framed through a one-sided lens of inherent and inevitable harm. Under this framing, educators are very limited in what they can do when it comes to addressing pornography in school-based curricula, with the framework of media literacy and its top-down, teacher-centred emphasis on deconstructing pornography currently serving as one of the only acceptable ways of getting discussions on porn into schools.

However, as I have argued in this paper, when we do not start from the infantilising position that constructs young people as necessarily out-of-control and at risk in their sexualities, and instead draw on the more expansive framework of 'thick desire', we can begin to recognise all of the ways in which young people are always already deeply embroiled in the power relations of our society, and can recognise the ways in which their discussions around concepts like harm, deviance and exploitation in relation to pornography extend outwards to touch on the social, political, economic, relational, personal, erotic and the intersections between. And even if participants in this study were at times reproducing normative narratives around young people, porn and harm, such narratives still tell us something about what it is that is on young people's minds; while other participants' silences tell us much about who cannot yet speak at all. This small-scale study therefore suggests the need for more research into the nuances of young people's engagements with porn, the ways differently situated young people think about and talk about porn, and the work we might do as educators to develop pedagogies that address pornography – not as a kind of special object to be defended against, but as one node in a larger network of social relations that must be both acknowledged and put in its place.

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