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Sexting and the politics of the image: when the invisible becomes visible in a consensus democracy

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Sexting is a highly contested form of image production, particularly when it involves people under the age of 18. Adolescents who are legally prohibited from making pornography are deciding to generate and distribute new forms of sexual material. Public responses to sexting reveal that the dominant image of adolescent sexuality is maintained by heteronormative structures. The educational, legal and social action against sexting is aimed at protecting this dominant image. This article argues that sexting's visualization of age, race, class and gender ruptures 'consensus democracy' – the space of appearance of the people. This rupture occurs because adolescents have increasing access to the means of making and sharing their own images, entirely independently from the system that purports to speak for them. The impact of sexting goes beyond issues of adolescent sexuality; it raises fundamental questions that may redefine how representation relates to notions of the real and the body.

Keywords: sexting; pornography; Rancière; distribution of the sensible

Positioning sexting

Once people had an interest in how their souls appeared to God; today they have an interest in how their bodies appear to their political surroundings. (Groys 2008, 5–6)

The phenomenon of 'sexting' (the production and transmission of sexually explicit or suggestive photographs by mobile technologies) has generated extreme public reactions, particularly when it involves adolescents. In the popular media, sexting is almost universally vilified as dangerous and abusive, citing cases of teenagers bullied to the point of suicide for producing, sending or sharing these photographs (Celizic 2009; Hastings 2009; Perry 2009; Caron 2011). The concern surrounding sexting is being questioned by academic research which suggests that the harm might be exaggerated and the punishment excessive (Chalfen 2009; Price 2010; Albury and Crawford 2012; Draper 2012; Karaian 2012, 2013; Long 2011; Mitchell et al. 2014). Most researchers agree that more empirical study and theoretical consideration of sexting is required in order to understand this emergent phenomenon (Weiss and Samenow 2010; Drouin et al. 2013; Reyns et al. 2013). Many questions are raised by the increasing visibility of sexting. This article discusses the visual politics of sexting as a rupture caused by the invisible being made visible.¹ Using Jacques

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Rancière's construction of politics, I argue that sexting's visualization of age and gender ruptures 'consensus democracy' – the space of appearance of the people. Sexting demonstrates how the boundaries of contemporary visual culture are created and policed. What the emergence of sexting has revealed is that the dominant image of adolescent sexuality is generated and maintained by white, middle-class, heteronormative frameworks. The educational, legal and moral action against sexting is ultimately aimed at protecting this dominant image through active censorship of the new voices offered by sexting. The ultimate power of sexting is the way it makes visible for the first time the image of adolescents by adolescents for adolescents. However, until this image is recognized as an expression by and for adolescents, the mechanism of its censorship provides an insight into the functioning of the distribution of images.

This article aims firstly to provide a theoretical framework that accounts for how sexting could be understood as a rupture in the distribution of the sensible. Secondly, the article demonstrates, through the case study of the New South Wales Government's 2009 campaign 'Safe Sexting: No Such Thing', how the policing of image production and distribution reinforces existing heteronormative, white, middle-class representational structures. The politics of this policing is largely played out through the hyper-visualization of white, adolescent female bodies, raising the important issue of how terms such as 'girls' (Ringrose and Renold 2012; Renold and Ringrose 2013), 'self-exploitation' and 'self-sexualisation' (Duschinsky 2013; Hasinoff 2014) are currently being used to control and shape the appearance of the sexualized adolescent body. An important distinction needs to be made between the highly visible educational, legal and sensational reporting of sexting (which is the focus of academic and media attention) and the much larger category of invisible, quotidian sexting. The article concludes with a speculative analysis of this larger category of invisible sexts. Through positioning sexting not as an exception but as part of a broader approach adolescents are taking to self-design (in which selfies are exemplars), it is possible to suggest how sexting may be a radical form of play that is destabilizing heteronormative representational frameworks.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau discusses the process of the reinforced victimization of documentary photography, describing it as 'a double act of subjugation: first, in the social world that has produced its victims; and second, in the regime of the image produced within and for the same system that engenders the conditions it then represents' (Solomon-Godeau and Nochlin 1991, 176). For Solomon-Godeau, the act of taking the photograph is itself a form of abuse, followed by the second subjugation – the display of the photographs back into the system that generated the original conditions of abuse. For Rancière (2004) this second subjugation is enacted by 'the distribution of the sensible' or politics. It is here that images gain their meaning by being placed and ordered into the public realm of images. These images become the replacement (the sole representation) for the majority of people who cannot afford the luxury of playing with words and images. It is this luxury that Rancière ascribes as the primary division currently operating in the world (Carnevale and Kelsey 2007). Rancière and Solomon-Godeau are clear that those who do not have the tools to generate their own representations are represented by images that serve existing structures. As Solomon-Godeau states, 'dominant social relations are inevitably both reproduced and reinforced in the act of imaging those who do not have access to the means of representation themselves' (Solomon-Godeau and Nochlin 1991, 180). In relation to

sexting it is important to note that this process also occurs in groups who have the tools of representation but do not have the power to determine the meaning of that representation. The physical act of taking a photograph does not rupture this larger, secondary system. The sequencing, captioning, policing and public use of the photograph reproduces dominant social relations.

Photographic images remain the dominant medium for the capturing and claiming of absolute accountability. Any new photograph must pass through the process of being distributed into the sensible. The act of 'correctly' distributing all photographs into the sensible is the basis for the claim that everything has been considered and accounted for. The existence of the distributed photograph precludes the invisible. The assumed ubiquity of the availability of photography has increased the perception of absolute vision. As such, the meaning of a photograph cannot be challenged by those it claims to represent, as the photograph already represents them. This produces a consensus democracy:

[Consensus democracy] is the absolute removal of the sphere of appearance of the people. In it the community is continually presented to itself. In it the people are never again uneven, uncountable, or un-presentable. They are both totally present and totally absent at once. They are entirely caught in a structure of the visible where everything is on show and where there is thus no longer any place for appearance. (Rancière 1998, 103)

The process by which images become a tool of total accountability in a consensus democracy relies on the image being read as real. Contemporary politics functions entirely through the perceived reality of the image. Paradoxically, success in politics depends on the denial of the image through imagery (Groys 2009). Representation in politics only functions when the image appears real (defined as the meaning and content being recognized as the same). However, the performed belief in designed realness necessitates an addendum to Solomon-Godeau's system of double subjugation. Where an image has been censored, or prevented from entering the second layer of subjugation, we witness the fear that there are images which cannot be distributed. The power of these images derives from the fear that the meaning and content of certain images may touch, independent of their distributed meaning. Therefore it is the censored image that reveals the ultimate subjugation, for it is an acknowledgement that the invisible threatens to break through because of the perceived autonomous power of certain images to rupture the fiction of realness. Any instance of this occurring would threaten the claims of a consensus democracy. It is this established system of image politics that sexting encountered. The attempted prevention and censorship of sexting raises the question: what fiction of realness does sexting threaten? Analysis of sexting clearly reveals that not all images were deemed to be too threatening to censor. The images that are capable of reinforcing existing dominant, heteronormative frameworks are images of white, middle-class, adolescent women. It is in this realm that the politics of sexting has played out, yet it is in the totally censored realm of differently class, gendered and raced bodies that the real fear lies.

The control of sexting

The existence of sexting demonstrates that adolescents are not only capable of producing their own image, but are able to offer a radically different picture of adolescence.

Sexting visualized adolescent sexuality without coercion from a ‘demonic’ adult predator – the latter dominates discussion around child or adolescent sexuality (Critcher 2002). Sexting appears to have emerged as an independent voice.

Part of sexting’s resilience comes from the impossibility of completely censoring these images, at least to the intended recipients. The sexted image is unique in that it is generated and desired by the represented. As such, censoring on behalf of the sexting ‘victim’ is not an option. Crucially the attempted censorship is not aimed at preventing the images’ production, but at punishing those who keep sexts rather than those who delete them. The practical application of the law makes a distinction between the two; the latter is generally not considered a crime, yet the former results in the serious crime of the possession of child pornography (Chalfen 2009). This attempts to generate a form of self-censorship through retrospective invisibility. The rapid rise of Snapchat where the image deletes itself after one to 10 seconds is a commercialization of this legal distinction. The image may be viewed, but the actual proof of the image’s existence must be eradicated. These deleted images are considered safe because they have no agency in the distribution of the sensible. Or more precisely, they cannot operate outside the control of the distribution of the sensible to generate an alternative, coherent meaning that challenges dominant discourse.

Sexting’s resilience is also generated because the genesis of sexting was outside the distribution of the sensible. By the time these images became visible they had already established their own meaning, function and value within the invisible strata of adolescent sexuality. Therefore, the only effective method to control these images is to generate a meaning for the sext that attempts to distribute it into the already ‘complete’ realm of sexual imagery. The attempt to reverse engineer the invisible which has become dramatically visible is an example of how a sudden shift can disrupt, or at least lay bare, the mechanics of a consensus democracy. Distorted representations of gender, race and class are the primary method through which sexting is being distributed into the sensible. The recent relaxing of the harsh laws surrounding sexting may be evidence for the success of this distorted distribution. The educational, legal and social efforts have reduced the adult fear associated with sexting, and while this would suggest a more sensible approach, it is evidence that the rupture of sexual categories has been repaired. Images are freer to enter this system now that their meaning has been fixed.

Positioning sexting as a form of pornography is also part of its forced distribution into already existing categories. The stereotypical sext appears to mimic the conventions of pornography, with images that are aesthetically similar to the mainstream amateur and gonzo pornographic styles. It is this similarity which has generated the assumption that adolescent sexters are producing pornography. While much can be gained from analyzing sexts as pornography, it is important to note this seemingly obvious categorization is part of a larger project to associate any exploration of sexuality which seeks its own visibility and visibility as necessarily pornographic. The most significant aspect of adolescent sexts is that they rupture established boundaries of pornographic imagery. For a generation who have grown up with a diversity of and easy access to pornographic images, the boundaries between porn and non-porn are fluid. The separation of pornography as a sealed category of representation is held in place by the conservative construction of pornography as necessarily outside mainstream socio-political concerns. Adolescent sexting is one of the emerging areas of representation that challenges the validity of such partitioning.

Sexting: just a ‘girl’ thing?

As Albury, Funnell, and Noonan (2010) note, what becomes immediately apparent in the literature on sexting is that the vast majority of examples cited and the educational material produced is aimed at ‘girls’. This is far from the reality, because just as many or more sexts are taken by adolescent males of their own bodies (Chalfen 2009).² The most recent survey of adolescent sexual health in Australia confirms this, suggesting that adolescent men send almost three times as many sexts as adolescent women (Mitchell et al. 2014). Yet once sexting became visible, the photographs of ‘boys’ were immediately dismissed. Adolescent males taking photographs of their genitalia are not considered sexual but harmless play, whereas the same act by an adolescent woman is seen as sexual and (self-)abusive. It is imperative to make the distinction when discussing sexting that the public response is not to adolescent sexuality, but specifically to adolescent female sexuality. The debate cannot be simplified to protecting childhood innocence, because only girls’ innocence is deemed to be necessary to protect.

By examining the educational material produced by the New South Wales Government, Australia, this bias becomes immediately clear. The government campaign entitled ‘Safe Sexting: No Such Thing’ (New South Wales Government 2009) highlights not only the fear-mongering but the gender politics of this issue. The title contradicts research which suggests that for the vast majority of sexters there are no negative consequences (Alapo 2009) and that the internet and social media are a positive influence on healthy sexual development (Mitchell et al. 2014). This perceived harm is also contested in legal scholarship which suggests that sexting should be classified either as victimless crime (Jaishankar 2009) or as *mens rea* (guilty mind), allowing judges to discriminate between malicious and harmless sexting (Price 2010; Long 2011). The campaign is aimed at parents, with the majority of practical information listed under a ‘Tips for Parents’ section. This section conflates sexting with paedophilia, suggesting that parents ‘warn [children] about sexual predators’ (New South Wales Government 2009). Sexting is framed from an adult perspective. The danger, to be clear, is that sexting appeals to adult predators and that it will affect the adolescent’s adult life: ‘They [sexts] are there forever and can damage future career prospects or relationships’ (New South Wales Government 2009). The campaign uses what Smith (2010) has referred to as ‘scary futurology’ to define adult harm. This is evidence of a general inability to address adolescents on their own terms and blindness as to what those terms might be. The only harm that can be conceived is necessarily adult.

The educational material demonstrates a clear gender bias. The New South Wales Government (2009) is open about this, stating that ‘young girls [are] most at risk’. ‘Girls’ are being taught that any exploration of their sexuality which seeks a public voice is abuse, even when that abuse is perpetrated by the ‘victim’. The official narrative that is imposed onto these images is simple – the abuse perpetrated is the abuse a woman does to herself through a demonstration of control and interest in the image of her sexuality.

Examination of educational material from other countries reveals a similar gender bias and also race and class bias. Karaian’s analysis of the Canadian campaign One Webcam, Countless Peeping Toms found an ‘over-representation of young, white, middle-class, heterosexual, female would-be sexters’ (2014, 284). Interestingly the few images in ‘Safe Sexting: No Such Thing’ show a diversity of race and gender,

which seems to contradict the text. However, the Australia wide campaign ‘Megan’s Story’ – which was launched a year after ‘Safe Sexting: No Such Thing’ – does support Karaian’s findings. ‘Megan’s Story’ was an initiative by the UK Child Exploitation and Online Protection Center developed by the Australian Federal Police. Albury and Crawford (2012) discuss this campaign at length, but do not address one of the most striking elements – the feature video in which ‘Megan’s Story’ is dramatized has all white actors (ThinkUKnowAustralia 2010). Not only is Megan, a white adolescent woman, the focus of the video, but every other character from her classmates to the teacher are white. It is quite apparent from the video that only certain types of body are allowed to have and to judge sexual agency.

The self-exploitative ‘girl’

The term that is commonly used to describe adolescent women who sext is ‘self-exploitative’ (Leary 2007; Walker and Moak 2010; Cannon 2011; Duschinsky 2013; Egan 2013). The ‘girl’ is apparently unaware of her own actions against herself. This is reinforced in the educational material, describing sexting as a ‘silly mistake’ made by adolescents ‘without a real understanding of the consequences’ (New South Wales Government 2009). How adolescent female sexters can be both aware and unaware of their actions in order to become self-exploitative is revealed in the terminology of this debate. Sexters are rarely labelled children (except in material produced for parents that specifically addresses their ‘children’), as if the act of sexting itself excludes them from this category. The terms ‘adolescents’ or ‘teenagers’ are often used, but ‘girls’ is also very common. The use of ‘girls’ suggests this is an issue only for females and because ‘girls’ encompasses both children and adolescents, sexting can more easily be framed as an act of self-predation. In other words, it is the ‘girl’ adolescent who preys on her ‘girl’ child. Karaian summarizes the current narratives framing adolescent female sexuality, all of which are ‘not of girl’s own making’ (2012, 64). These narratives include the unwitting seductress, uncontrollable hormones, the victim of increasing sexualization of popular culture, the victim of technology, and patriarchal oppression. The common factor in all of these narratives is that the ‘girl’ does not know what she is doing, she has been tricked, by others or her own body, into doing something wrong.³ The harm done is to the construction of ‘girl’ and not any individual body, as Calvert makes clear when referring to Leary’s (2007) research: ‘the self-exploitation that occurs in any single instance of sexting by a young girl harms all girls generally’ (Calvert 2009, 27).

All of the case studies offered in the New South Wales Government’s educational material are of ‘girls’ sexting, or of images of ‘girls’ being found by ‘boys’. One case study was ambiguous as to the gender of the sexter, yet even in that example it was a ‘boy’ who found the images and distributed them. The case study that is the most revealing is the following:

Colin, the father of three teenage daughters, was shocked when a workmate showed him footage on a mobile phone of a 15-year-old girl having sex with two men. He could clearly see the girl’s face. He said he would be horrified to think that pictures of his daughters might be shown around by strangers. (New South Wales Government 2009)

Here we see expressed the real danger of sexting – the fear of the father seeing the ‘girl’. It is notable that the ‘girl’ is involved in a threesome, which is further categorized as

being with two men. This unusual level of detail of the adolescent's supposed depravity effectively excuses the 'workmate' for casually showing the father child pornography. It is not the adolescent who is injured in this scenario, but rather the father. The true horror is expressed in the psychodrama of the realization that the father (of three daughters) might happen upon images of his own daughters. The protection of 'girls' is uncovered as the protection against this patriarchal fear. As Rancière points out:

The protection of the person and his/her image thus produces an operation that is indissolubly political and ontological. It tends to subtract, along with a certain type of judgement and of political judgement, a part of the visible. (2010, 50)

Sexting has the potential to instigate a debate as to these images' appeal to adult, predominantly male, interests from a source that is independently sexual. Within a heteronormative patriarchal society based on the asexual family unit, the sexts of adolescent women not only reveal the fallacy of asexual suburbia, but invite (intentionally or unintentionally) a desire which could break the stable performance of heteronormativity. The image of a 'boy' sexter does not offer the same threat because it is too far outside heteronormativity for men and is not disruptive to women because their expression of sexuality is surplus to the maintenance of heteronormativity.⁴ The more desirable (in terms of being recognizable as close to the dominant image of sexualized women – namely young, white women) these images become to the system, the more obscene they are labelled, underlining the fear. Bataille recognized the true meaning of obscenity: 'obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognized and stable individuality' (1986, 17–18). The stable individuality of the loving husband and moral father is upset by sexting. It is this representation that is ultimately being protected, as it is this image that forms the foundational image of contemporary western politics.

It is within the context of white, middle-class suburbia that the politics of sexting plays out. As Karaian points out, sexting represents the:

adults' fear [that] 'good' girls will not only be (dis)graced, but that raced and classed boundaries will be blurred, marring them as 'white trash' – immodest, immoderate and subject to under/un-employment, thus simultaneously devaluing the moral authority of the white, middle-class, heterosexual family in the process. (2013, 291)

Because the moral authority of the patriarchal family cannot be questioned, it becomes reliant on 'girls' to self-censor and self-regulate their own representations. The risk of self-representation by the 'good girl' is dealt with through extreme visualization and 'slut-shaming'. The adolescent girl who has become suddenly visible is held accountable for a meaning (and a visualization) that is not of her own making; a meaning which was formulated to be the exact fear it then attempts to protect the 'girl' from.

'Megan's Story' (ThinkUKnowAustralia 2010) is a clear example of how the meaning of the image is formulated through the act of other's viewing. The majority of the video depicts the spread of the image around the class (importantly, while the image is sent using mobile technologies, it is only sent to people in Megan's class). The image is viewed by various, all white characters (the 'weirdo', the 'nerd', a group of girls) that look at Megan judgementally. The penultimate viewer is the youngest looking adolescent male in the class, who looks at her, confused, shaking his head

slightly. The final figure to receive the image is the white, male teacher and it is at this point that the girl literally removes herself from the sphere of the polis by running out of the classroom. It is the teacher who concretizes the meaning of the image, calling her name out loud and shaking his head, essentially 'slut-shaming' her, despite the fact it is the teacher who has just committed the crime of viewing child pornography. It is in these last two figures that the narrative becomes clear – the adult, white male's judgement is enacted to protect the confused 'child'. Both of these figures are beyond moral reproach and so it is the 'girl' who is responsible for maintaining the boundary of heteronormative sexual imagery. The 'girl' is made to retreat and allow others to represent her, as she has been proven incapable of representing herself. With it, as Rancière states, part of the visible is removed, and the distribution of the sensible operates to close the rupture.

It is important that researchers in this field acknowledge that the visible tip of sexting is entirely politically constructed. The paradox is clear; the attempt to criminalize, ostracize and censor sexting involved a massive campaign of visualizing white, adolescent women.⁵ The 'girl' is maintained, as Driscoll claims, as a 'radical singularity constituted in relations of power between statements and visibility' (2002, 193). Educational campaigns such as 'Megan's Story' and 'Safe Sexting: No Such Thing' attempt to reinforce this singularity. Therefore it was not the content of image that was the threat, but the growing network of images which threatened to establish aesthetic links between differently classed, raced and gendered bodies that was the potential rupture to the radical singularity of the 'girl'.

The threat to the symbolic child

In a consensus democracy, children and adolescents remain the only acceptable groups that can be openly accounted for by others (we could add to the list prisoners, foreigners, the disabled and the environment, although these are usually ignored rather than spoken for). The United States has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a convention that protects the child's right to freedom of expression. The symbolic child is the only child that is represented in a consensus democracy. The symbolic child is a foundational image of western democracy and is one of the key organizing principles of the distribution of the sensible. As Edelman argues, 'the fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought' (2004, 2). Edelman suggests that the symbolic child functions to limit the possibilities of politics; it becomes the ultimate image which cannot be surpassed. As such, the symbolic child is the pivotal figure in politics, unable to be rethought because children are totally invisible (the lived reality of children having no relation to their image), yet symbolically explicit.

The present political reality is founded on a futurity of our children (that impossible and always coming generation). Actual children when they finally become actors in politics (usually signified by the right to vote) suddenly find themselves no longer the proper subject of politics and instead charged with protecting the very construction of symbolic innocence which had ensured their invisibility. The symbolic child is thus constituted as the impossible and total future, for which the present fight is justified. The constant oscillation between productive desires (to prepare an environment for the production of children) and conservative fantasies (to preserve the environment

for the coming symbolic child) justifies the urgency of political action. It is for this reason that the thresholds between representations of the child, adolescent and adult are so contested.

The child is different from the adolescent (as are the images of the ‘child’, ‘girl’ and ‘teenager’), and therefore outside the parameters of this article. However, sexting encroaches on both the symbolic territory of the child and the political territory of the adult. The adolescent is moving from symbolic to productive, and hence is in a position to make a claim to representation. Sexting is one of the territories where this claim becomes dramatically visible. As the world is divided between those who can and those who cannot generate their own image, it is adolescents who are the most proximate to the means of making and distributing their own images, entirely independently from the system that speaks for them. It has only been in the last 15 years that adolescents have had access to uncensored image production.⁶ It is significant, then, that sexting is the one of the first manifestations of this invisible image leaking back into the system which represents them.

While sexting offers very specific challenges to constructions of sexuality, the meta-structural disruption it causes is far more seismic. The distribution of the sensible is the domain of adults – it is where power is sought and consolidated. The distribution of the sensible currently controls and depends on the image of the child, but sexting has demonstrated that the image of adolescents is a contestable field.

Redefining sexts

Despite the awareness campaigns of the uncontrollable spreading of sexts to adults, adolescents are still sexting. In fact, sexting has become a fairly quotidian activity, with around 20% of teenagers having sent a sext (Chalfen 2009).⁷ This figure seems to be growing; the latest study on student sexual health in Australia shows a rise in sexual expression using mobile phones, with around 40% of adolescents having sent or received a sexually explicit photograph (Mitchell et al. 2014). The same report also suggests that, despite the fear campaigns, adolescents see the activity as low risk. As easy as it is to label this a result of ignorance, it is far more difficult to suggest that adolescents are actively and capably engaging with sexuality in the realm of images. Contemporary adolescents are the first generation that have grown up with the simulacra forming a constant part of their identity – to simply suggest that they do not understand how images operate is not sufficient. Adolescents are aware of what images are and how they function, particularly when the image pertains to their own body. With extensive government anti-sexting campaigns in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia over the last five years, it is likely that most adolescents are aware of the potential severe legal consequences of sexting but are still choosing to produce them. What sexting offers is considered by adolescents important enough to risk these legal and social consequences. How might we begin to define what this value might be?

Sexting’s success may be because its image is one of play. Rancière (in Kelsey and Carnevale 2007, 267) explains the importance of play within a consensus democracy:

For me, the fundamental question is to explore the possibility for play. To discover how to produce forms for the presentation of objects, forms for the organization of spaces, that thwart expectations. The main enemy of artistic creativity as well as of political creativity is consensus - that is, inscription within given roles, possibilities, competences.

In sexting this play may serve many functions, yet the one which is most counter to assumptions made about sexting is that it has very little to do with indexical bodies – it is not sexts' documentary value that is being traded, desired or requested by the intended recipients and producers. An indication of this can be found in the terminology itself; whereas adults refer to sexting and sexts, adolescents do not place such definite boundaries between sexts and selfies. Play involves a fluidity of boundaries, an ability to produce new objects and images that are capable of multiple (and sometimes simultaneously contradictory) meanings. While media, legal and educational efforts are explicit about the meaning of sexting, the actual use of these images is likely to be more fluid. Sexual communication may be present or absent in any image an adolescent produces.

It is important to note that this play is not necessarily fun, particularly for the 'girls' who are responding to very defined roles. Ringrose and Renold's research shows that adolescent women's fantasies and desires often attempt to re-territorialize heterosexualized violence:

Thus, as we can see, girls ... are embroiled in the heterosexual matrix of everyday sexualised performance and 'play', but their narratives tell of ambivalence, and with ongoing convictions to be constituted somewhat differently, as active agents able to enact violence back upon boys. (2012, 469)

Play is the fight against the inscription within given roles, and while it is impossible to know whether sexting is play in this sense, it is useful as a method to attempt to dislodge sexting from the almost universal assumption that this is a debate about the sexualization or pornification of adolescents. It may even be useful to discuss these images as not entirely or even primarily about sexual expression, but rather as part of the much larger questions of autonomous representation and identity politics.

For adolescent sexters the fictional is not juxtaposed to the documentary. They have grown up with the camera as play equipment, not a tool protected and directed by adults. To a generation that sees no problem with images and bodies being interchangeable, the debate around perceived realness is not central to constructions of identity. Sexting may not be about the truth of an exposed body, but rather addresses how 'the real ... emerges ... as a question of the technique and practice of self-design – a question no one can escape anymore' (Groys 2009, 6). Sexting may be a marker for the imperative of self-design, not interested in capturing realness as much as exploring technique, practice and play. Self-design finds an appropriate method in the selfie because it offers the capacity for peer assessment as well as a completely insulated self-assessment. While the tool for taking selfies is almost always the same tool for sharing and displaying these images, it does not necessarily mean these images are created to be shared. The majority of selfies may never be seen by anyone other than by the person they depict. It would be wrong to assume that these images are simply 'mistakes' that are not worth sharing; they have an important role in offering the exploration of alternative self-design models outside heteronormative pressures.

Sexting is often used as an example of the 'pornification' of adolescence because the stereotypical sext seems to mimic standard pornographic poses. This assumes that there are standard pornographic poses, which for a generation who grew up with the diversity of pornographic images available online is not something that can be presumed. It also assumes that highly visible examples of sexting are representative

of the whole, an assumption this article has questioned. However, even if sexts are a demonstration of mimesis, they may be produced from a position of play that destabilizes 'standard' pornographic and sexual categories by treating them as questions of technique and practice. This is self-design play, using the body (through gestures, postures, performance) and technology (through capturing, editing, sharing) to dislodge a political fixation with the development of a unified image and body. Therefore, what has been categorized as self-exploitation is actually part of a process of self-design that does not assume representation solely operates as the fixing agent of identity, politics and hierarchies to particular bodies.

In this final section I have tried to suggest different ways of understanding sexting beyond the confines of the current debate. These claims are necessarily speculative, as they attempt to address the much larger network of images that remain invisible to academic and political examination because they exist outside heteronormative concerns. It is these concerns that have made visible the current area available for research, but it is important to move the discussion beyond the visible and to acknowledge the potential radical forms of play which can contest the distribution of the sensible.

To incorporate sexts into the extant categories of images is to ignore what their emergence signified. Sexting has demonstrated the disruption that occurs in a moment of poesis when the invisible suddenly becomes visible. The rapid, spectacular visualization of sexting necessitated a distortion of how these images appear. The reaction to these images revealed a heteronormative fear of self-expressive and fluid adolescent female sexuality. The visible edge of sexting has been deliberately revealed by the dominant heteronormative voice to protect the existing class, race and gender boundaries, yet the invisible majority of sexts remain invisible – the truth of what and whom they actually represent hidden. This invisible mass may function outside a representational (either political or documentary) register. It may speak of a body disinterested in realness, ready to morph for the purpose of self-design. It may demonstrate a movement away from trust in traditional content providers towards trust in the communication networks that allow their broadcast, seemingly without censorship or judgement, of the invisible and unaccountable. However, the precise function and political potential of this imagery is yet to fully emerge.

Notes

1. This article can only discuss the visible edge of sexting as all other forms of adolescent sexting are illegal and not able to be studied. The article only addresses the politics of the images which are visible, although it does suggest some possibilities for the potential meaning of the assumed existence of the much larger category of sexts which are not visible to the broader public or researchers. The vast majority of sexting presumably remains invisible, either because it never escapes the nexus of the producer/consumer (which importantly can be the same person), because they are successfully censored once they reach the public realm of images, or because they are not of sufficient prurient interest or concern to the public and are therefore ignored.
2. As Lounsbury, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2011) point out, statistics on sexting are very unreliable. One of the reasons why adolescent men are often reported as sexting less than adolescent women may be because of the framing of these images. Adolescent men who take and share naked images with other men may not be defined as examples of sexting. See note 5.
3. The terminology used in this article specifically avoids the use of the word 'girl' or 'boy' in relation to sexting because of the connotation these terms bring up. I have used adolescent

- male or female in an attempt to neutralize the issue, but these terms are not entirely adequate and point to a serious lack of vocabulary for discussing childhood and adolescent sexuality.
4. This article continues the bias towards analyzing sexts as being produced by adolescent women precisely because that is the bias in the sext which is made visible. It is important here to note that images of naked adolescent men exist both outside heteronormative frameworks and entirely within them. While the public edge of sexting remains sensationalized images of adolescent, white women, there are at least as many images of adolescent men which are circulated. These images are usually framed as non-sexual despite the display of genitalia. They are heteronormative in the sense that they are homosocial. They are an accepted part of male display towards other males. While the sexual nature of these images is undeniable, what is important is the performance involved to prove that these images are not sexual (usually framed as a joke). This category of display of genitalia seems to more easily apply to adolescent men than women, in that the slightest hint at female genitalia is usually associated with an explicit sexual content. The specific analysis of adolescent male sexts, as well as more broadly homosexual, lesbian, intersexual, transsexual and bisexual sexts, is an important task, but it is not the focus of this article.
 5. This is not a new approach to censoring through the radical visualization of white, middle-class women. Marsh's (1985) study of Pre-Raphaelite paintings showed how it was newly formed middle-class women who were charged as the keepers of Victorian morality. The narratives of Pre-Raphaelite paintings are surprisingly similar to the campaigns against sexting, with tales of the suicide victim, the pariah, the 'slut' and the economically destitute women resulting from early heteronormative sexualized behaviour. Men were excused as being unable to avoid temptation, or symbolically too moral to be tempted (as the father, husband, teacher and politician).
 6. Analogue media such as polaroids, VHS and Super-8 film did offer the potential for uncensored image making (Albury and Crawford 2012); however, the free, invisible and easily transferable nature of digital images on mobile devices allows for the rapid development of adolescent pornography outside the public realm of images. It should be noted that sexually active adolescent women have always had a public appearance; adolescent pregnancies are a constant symbol contracting the heteronormative narrative. However, this article addresses the ability to produce and distribute images independently from adult censorship and mediation.
 7. It is important to note that the statistics on sexting are unreliable (Lounsbury, Mitchell, and Finkelhor 2011). Sexting does occur, but any attempt to quantify it precisely is impossible.

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