

The Politics of Pleasure in Sexuality Education: Pleasure Bound

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In introducing *The politics of pleasure in sexuality education: Pleasure bound*, Louisa Allen, Mary Lou Rasmussen and Kathleen Quinlivan (2014: 4) talk to the notion of “meeting at the crossroads” in order to make sense of their editorial endeavour. They present the book as a site where diverse critical views of pleasure’s possibilities and challenges, in and outside school, encounter and converse. In offering a collection of chaptered contributions from diverse geographies, disciplines and concerns about pleasure’s inclusion in comprehensive sexuality pedagogies, they work to “putting pleasure under pressure”, by bringing together perspectives that both illuminate and question, in various ways, the politics for its inclusion. Instead of “ruminating about how far a discourse of pleasure and desire has progressed in sexuality education” (2014: 10), they invite us into the crossroads as a place made to “provoke a reconfiguration of thought” and allow for “new beginnings” (2014: 4). Indeed, as the editors hope for in their After-Word(s), the collection stimulates “an intra-activity that produces new possibilities for thinking about pleasure in sexuality education” (2014: 186), as opposed to an inter-active set of ideas kept apart from each other. Not only can “the chapter boundaries ... be seen as porous and unfolding into each other” (2014: 186), but the book also premises that pleasures’ uses (and absences) in sexuality education are, from the outset, political and intra-actively shaped. This is an important framing, since it acknowledges not only the complexities intrinsic to understandings of pleasure, but also their “necessary exclusions”.

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It is at this place of intra-activity and new beginnings that this book review is voiced. Standing at the crossroads, I shall highlight (in addition to the authors' discussion of pleasure in the curriculum) three themes that circulate in and within the chapters: the discourse of pornography as an (im)possible pedagogic subject and material; the tensions between religion and secularism within the liberal state, and the politics of morality as a possible new beginning to thinking about sexualities education.

Opening the collection, Sara McClelland and Michel Fine revisit and extend their work on school-based sexuality education. The chapter provides readers with "the tapestry" (2014: 17) of theoretical and methodological propositions, from Fine's seminal 1988 piece on "the missing discourse of desire" to the subsequent development of their framework from 2006 onwards, "thick desire". By understanding sexual desire outside "hearts, minds, and genitals" (2014:, 16), they could view the interweaving implications of neoliberal ideology and evangelical Christian morality in the US public policy aimed at adolescents, and in Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage federal-funded programmes, in particular. They observed how, in this environment where desire is "no longer missing but vilified" (2014: 14), young bodies, especially female, same-sex desiring and of colour, are hastily considered "at risk" and "excessive", under increased surveillance thereof. The standpoint of thickness also led them to problematising the privileged role of young participants' voices in feminist research, in which they found expressions of pleasure and desire being too easily translated as evidence of freedom.

The next four chapters engage with the idea of missing discourses in sexuality education and, more particularly, in the classroom. Drawing from her own teaching experience in the UK, Julia Hirst offers practical ideas to effectively engage students in open discussions on sexual pleasure, and to strategically use a health and human rights agenda to support this in educational settings surrounded by anxieties with sexual initiation and risk-taking behaviour. This is a relevant contribution for comprehensive sexuality educators dealing with school environments where pleasure's curricular inclusion is expected to incite young people to precocious and deviant experiences of sexuality.

Similarly, Roger Ingham notes the silence in which masturbation is kept in Sex and Relationships Education programmes in the UK, especially concerning young women. He attempts to make way toward its curricular inclusion by drawing on health discourses that correlate masturbation with the sexual well-being and safety of the young. Although recognising the heightened contestation that such a call would encounter within current institutional and political arrangements, Ingham envisions a pedagogical reconfiguration and suggests that "parents and carers can do more to normalise activities that their children experiment with to achieve pleasurable feelings" (2014: 74). Families are also to play an important role in warranting children's right to pleasure.

Quinlivan addresses the question posed by a student, Aroha, in a Year 9 Health classroom – “What’s wrong with looking at porn?” (Her teacher never answered this question.) This question, she argues, “acknowledges that the global commodification of sexuality produces complex and paradoxical dilemmas for young people (and adults alike)” (2014: 81). With this in mind, Quinlivan engages in a conversation with artist Linda James about the possibilities of using her paintings in sexuality education classrooms to make sense of, and engage students in discussions about mainstream representations of bodies and sexualities, “the ways in which sexualities are commodified in an era of consumption” (2014: 79). Despite the insightfulness of their talk, I believe Quinlivan’s chapter reflects on Aroha’s question without really answering it. Like Aroha, one is left thinking that there might be something wrong with looking at pornography, although it is never clear as to what the problem may be. It is also not clear to what extent porn has room in comprehensive sexuality education – simply as subject and/or as representation, if taken up only as an *issue* and a matter of *negotiation*, or also as a possibility for pleasure, humour and criticality.

Certainly, none of the contributions mentioning porn express any discontent about introducing the subject into schools. Indeed, Hirst’s strategies to initiate discussions in the classroom include brainstorming that “inevitably list” the topic of pornography (2014: 44), and Allen registers mainstream porn as “a legitimate source of information” about bodies and pleasures (2014: 174). However, I am of the opinion that Allen too quickly abandons the thickness of her argument to conclude that mainstream porn “is unlikely to be helpful in enabling young people to experience sexual activity in mutually negotiated and pleasurable ways” (2014: 174). At the crossroads of these arguments, I see the looming of familiar oppositions between art and low culture, the erotic and the explicit, soft and harmful representations of sexuality; I see an opportunity for a set of moralising ideas to take root, all of which have been challenged in the critical debates on ‘sexualisation’ and ‘pornification’ referred to in the editors’ Introduction and After-Word(s). If Aroha’s question invites “an (admittedly contentious) exploration of the politics of pleasure that recognise the mutually intertwined affordances and limitations of ways in which understandings of pleasure are currently being shaped” (Quinlivan, 2014: 81), it would be useful, for the sake of this project, if educators and researchers could explain what, in their opinion, is wrong with porn, and attempt to signal the pleasures and modes of sexual representation that their views (and possible lack of knowledge about the plethora of existing pornographies) necessarily exclude. One is obviously aware of how unbearably contested it would be, even within the most progressive school settings and communities, to promote discussions with students about pornographic cultures and aesthetics, various mainstream trends, alternative, gender-subversive forms of pornographic representation, or even – God forbid – to watch, read, and listen to these in the classroom. Nevertheless, as I believe most critical theorists of ‘sexualisation’ would agree, the fact that comprehensive sexuality education researchers do not acknowledge pornography as pleasurable, and as a possible space of resistance against normative discourses and oppression leaves a field of silences

available to be re-colonised with old anxieties and moralistic rhetoric about porn's effects (not to mention sex work).

Fida Sanjakdar focuses on the missing discourse of pleasure in Australian Islamic sexuality education, which she finds to merely replicate the (secularist) pedagogical mode adopted in many other schools. Working "to reposition the place and value of religious interpretation in discourses of sexuality" (2014: 97), she offers a thought-provoking chapter that advocates the inclusion of the Qur'an and other religious texts in Islamic schools' sexuality curricula. Sanjakdar explains that "lovemaking in Islam is viewed as an art form", and that Islamic scriptures underline "the importance of artful lovemaking and refining pleasure, and people should be encouraged to venerate the flesh, to attend to the preliminaries of lovemaking, to sexual play, and to fantasy" (2014: 104). While this may be a useful frame to engage students with positive understandings of pleasure and sexual exploration, it is important to bear in mind that the art of pleasure, Islamic or otherwise, also works as a technology of power over bodies and relationships. This is not an alien argument in this chapter, as we are told that "Islam regulates appropriate sexual pleasure keeping it in certain boundaries and clearly demarcates specific gender roles" (2014: 103). Sanjakdar performs a thoughtful attempt to reconcile Islamic sexual scripts with feminist perspectives on gender asymmetries in heterosexual relationships. My immediate concern, in this instance, is with young people who may find it difficult to recognise and make sense of their sexual subjectivities within (any) religious texts where anal, oral and sadomasochist sex, and non-marital and homosexual experiences of sexuality are explicitly forbidden or condemned. What does it mean for the Muslim queer pupil to be "a responsible agent of one's own sexuality" (2014: 108) when navigating within scriptural discourses about "the harmony of sexes, the union of the sexes, and their mutual connections" (2014: 110)? Considering that, "when perceived as sinful or aberrant, sexual pleasure could be experienced with guilt and turmoil" (2014: 109), what might then be the role of religious texts in promoting queer pleasures and visibility in, and outside the classroom? If "focusing Muslim students' attention on the life experiences of persons whose sexual orientation differs from those of the majority is important" (2014: 109), then these questions must be considered.

The following two contributions engage with 'thick desire' more critically. Mary Lou Rasmussen argues that Fine and McClelland's work "is characterised by the frame of sexualism" (2014: 156), meaning it assumes sexual liberation as "the fruit of secularism" (Joan Scott, cited by Rasmussen, 2014: 166). Drawing on a critique that meets Sanjakdar's claims for cultural diversity in comprehensive sexuality education, Rasmussen illuminates the divide between secularism and religion embedded in progressive politics, which forcefully opposes preoccupations with public health and young people's human rights (on the secular side) to morality and the realm of the private (on the religious side). She cautions that this frame pushes researchers and educators to disregard "the legitimate and profound differences within communities and relationships about how pleasure might be ethically constituted" (2014: 166).

Catriona Macleod and Louise Vincent critique the human rights rhetoric underpinning ‘thick desire’, arguing that this framework, while resisting a neo-liberal discourse of individual responsibility, ultimately relies on one’s responsibility to access state support and struggle against injustices. Engaged with feminist, queer, and disability-focused re-workings of citizenship theory, they introduce a critical pedagogy that positions sexual and reproductive citizenship in the interstice of status and practice, and of the public and private. Using examples from South Africa, they make a case for the adoption of this framework as a way for “educators-as-learners and learners-as-educators” (2014: 131) to engage more reflexively with the moral dilemmas and political paradoxes currently grappled with in comprehensive sexuality education.

Finally, the contributions of Sharon Lamb and Louisa Allen challenge the pleasure imperative widely reproduced in feminist discourse. Both chapters address the implications of a pleasure-positive paradigm in feminist understandings of sexuality education, although by means of different repertoires. Lamb draws on feminist constructions of pleasure whose expectation she considers too high and hard to manage, as these “can be manipulated to serve a number of emancipatory or repressive themes” (2014: 148). Allen lists a number of feminist hopes for including a discourse of pleasure in sexuality education and illustrates how these may be unexpectedly undermined, concluding that “it is impossible to put pleasure to work for particular ends” (2014: 182). These two chapters do offer a fertile soil to rethinking feminist moral agendas.

Overall, I consider that the book’s chapters point towards critical pedagogies of sexuality and reproduction that understand agency, not as an attribute of knowing subjects, but rather as “the parts that we continuously play” (Editors, 2014: 187) in the moulding of pleasures and desires; pedagogies that use frameworks of citizenship that in advance interrogate the meanings of a “responsible, healthy, and productive citizenship” (Sanjakdar, 2014: 104). I long for philosophies of pleasure that remind us about a simple yet crucial matter: “pleasure does not necessarily feel good” (Annamarie Jagose, cited by Allen, 2014: 180). And, in all this, I see a landscape emerging that could be regarded as the politics of morality in sexuality education. That, however, is the beginning of a new conversation.