The Pure, the Pious and the Preyed Upon; A Celebration of Celibacy and the Erasure of Young Women's Sexual Agency

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The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

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THE PURE, THE PIous, AND THE PREYED UPON; A CELEBRATION OF CELIBACY AND THE ERASURE OF YOUNG WOMEN’S SEXUAL AGENCY.

A Thesis

by

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Thesis Abstract

Thesis Title: The Pure, the Pious and the Preyed Upon; A Celebration of Celibacy and the Erasure of Young Women’s Sexual Agency.

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Abstract: 
Using content analysis of the three largest United States Newsweeklies this thesis explores representations of young women’s sexuality during the early 2000’s. While popular culture during this period is focused on “Girls Gone Wild” causing widespread feminist concern over the “third wave’s” definition of a feminist sexuality, no young women with sexual agency are presented in the magazines. Instead the women presented, who are overwhelmingly white, are either too pure to posses any information regarding sexual activities, engaged in sexual activities that they are coerced or forced into, or are celibate. The combination of these discourses expose a narrative of female empowerment through chastity that mirrors the Victorian-era ideals of white womanhood. Using post-colonial theory the thesis argues that this representation, combined with the erasure of all other alternatives is indicative of a identity crisis within the collective United Sates conscious.
Introduction

In December of 2008, the editors of Salon.com ran a list of their favorite stories they had published that year. Number 3 on that list was an article by Tracy Clark-Flory titled “In Defense of Casual Sex.” In the article, Clark-Flory makes an argument, based on her personal experiences, for why the much-maligned “hook-up culture” among young people is not the “radical extreme it is so frequently mischaracterized as in the media” (2008: 5). The backdrop that Clark-Flory sets up to justify her need to write a “defense” is that there is a “false binary” (2008: 4) inundating our culture in which “young women are being told they’re either respecting or exploiting themselves; they’re either with the ‘Girls Gone Wild’ sex blogger set or with the iron-belted and chaste” (2008: 4). For proof of this contention, Clark-Flory cites a handful of books and a few New York Times articles.

The following content analysis explores the presentation of young women’s sexuality as presented in three weekly news magazines, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*, to see whether or not this binary is actually being created, and, if so, what purpose that narrative serves for the public at large. This analysis shows that this proposed binary between “Girls Gone Wild” and their “virginity pledging” sisters is not the dominant paradigm presented, for within these arenas the option for choosing the side of the “Girls Gone Wild” is erased. Instead, through the three dominant discourses of purity, passive prey and piety, the young women presented in these articles are shown as uniformly in need of guidance and protection, as beings without sexual agency whose
only opportunity for empowerment is found in chastity. The narrative in these magazines is a story focusing solely on young white, heterosexual, middle and upper class women, which serves to uphold and reify Victorian-era moral codes of both whiteness and womanhood. Post-colonial theorists have demonstrated that these codes were born of countries in crises of identity, colonial countries that required boundaries to separate the “us” from the “them.” While the authors that Clark-Flory cites in her article speak of a crisis in feminism brought about by widely divergent judgments being made about the sexual actions of young women, the representation presented in the media studied here instead expose a crisis in the national identity of the United States, the resolution of which is being found in the represented bodies of young women.

Media

*The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society forms a determinate system with a life of its own. It can be termed the collective or common consciousness.*

- *Emile Durkheim*

In less than a century the impact of mass media has grown from something entirely unknown in human societies, to a force so omni-present in American life that it has become almost impossible to conceptualize our lives without it. Along with this increasing presence of mass media has come an ever-growing body of work that seeks to study its effects. While there are many differing arguments on the subject, with many different authors adhering to each, they all share a common struggle in determining how much power the media carries in itself, and how much power each individual consumer
has to resist. Yet, in exploring their arguments, the more interesting contest that emerges is not between the individual and the media, but instead the between the media and a nebulous conception of a collective conscious of a society which dictates what can and will be produced and how it will be received.

When Marshal McLuhan wrote *Understanding Media* in 1964 his focus was not so much on the actual content of media, but in a presciently post-modern paradigm of “hot” versus “cold” mediums, to decipher the effects of the actual technology through which media is conveyed. McLuhan’s premise was that “content follows form, and the insurgent technologies give rise to new structures of feeling and thought” (Lapham 1994: xii). While media consolidation has muted many of McLuhan’s original points (I can after all, now watch movies or television on my computer screen – blurring the boundaries between his hot and cold dichotomy), his understanding that “all media as extensions of ourselves serve to provide new transforming vision and awareness,” (McLuhan 1994: 60) was certainly prophetic. McLuhan saw mass media as serving to shrink the world, allowing us to bring previously unknown people, stories and images into our existences. He states, “it is this implosive factor that alters the position of the Negro, the teen-ager, and some other groups. They can no longer be contained, in the political sense of limited association. They are now involved in our lives, as we in theirs, thanks to the electronic media” (1994: 5). While showing clearly who McLuhan imagined the “ourselves” of his audience to be, this quote also points to a poignant truth of mass media: through it we are able to learn of worlds and the people who inhabit them, otherwise inaccessible to us. Without these presentations, many of us, for want of ability
or desire, will never know of these “others” through personal experience. This allows the media to tell us stories we will likely never verify.

McLuhan understood this to be an inherent power that the media possesses. He understood that the media serve to tell us who we are, who we should be, and, importantly, who we are not. Speaking of Nationalism within media, McLuhan states, “the tribe, an extended form of a family of blood relatives, is exploded by print, and is replaced by an association of men homogeneously trained to be individuals” (1994: 177). And yet, while this would seem to say that the media holds the power to train people into becoming what it dictates they should be, he also acknowledges that for media to be consumed, it must be desired by its individual consumers, and that “acceptable entertainment has to flatter and exploit the cultural and political assumptions of the land of its origin” (1994: 311). Not only does he realize that for media to succeed individuals must agree with certain of its tenets, he moreover perceives the consumption of media as being a reciprocal experience. Discussing advertising he states that, “any acceptable ad is a vigorous dramatization of communal experience” (1994: 228), while “the press is a group confessional form that provides communal participation” (1994: 204), showing that he understands there to be a give and take between producers and their audience.

Although, in an introduction to McLuhan’s text, Lewis H. Lapham writes, “the individual voice and singular point of view disappears into the chorus of corporate and collective consciousness” (1994: xxi), there is more complexity than simply conformity between the “corporate” and “collective” conscious’ of which he speaks. And, it seems that McLuhan
leaned toward the collective, more than the corporate in determining what media would be found acceptable and enjoyable and therefore consumed.

Theodor Adorno would take the opposite side of the argument. In *The Culture Industry* Adorno argues that all forms of culture have been forced to serve the capitalist marketplace. While Adorno, like McLuhan, understands media to serve as entrée into worlds individuals might not have access to otherwise. His argument eliminates not only the individual (whom, like McLuhan, he feels is erased by the Culture Industry) but also the collective conscience referred to by Lapham above, and instead sees only the corporate. According to Adorno, “the commercial character of culture causes the difference between culture and practical life to disappear…On all sides the borderline between culture and empirical reality becomes more and more indistinct” (Adorno 2001: 61). Adorno’s contention rests on the idea that this is not done to make the world smaller as McLuhan would argue, but is instead focused on assuring individuals of the rightness of the status quo. As Adorno understands it, the culture industry is created by capitalists who want to insure that their interests continue to be met, and to do this they must consistently produce works that uphold the status quo; “for if the status quo is taken for granted and petrified, a much greater effort is needed to see through it than to adjust to it” (Adorno 2001: 150). Adorno not only sees the media as having interests separate from the populace at large, but he gives media enormous credit stating that “the system’s concerted effort results in what might be called the prevailing ideology of our time” (2001: 160). There is very little space for individual agency here.
However, even Adorno, who, along with his Frankfurt school compatriots, has been highly criticized for lacking an awareness of individual resistance, did create space for the existence of humanity. He says, “mass media are not simply the sum total of the actions they portray or of the messages that radiate from these actions. Mass media also consist of various layers of meanings superimposed on one another, all of which contribute to the effect” (2001: 164); while Adorno saw these meanings as all being clearly and accurately predicted and proscribed by the culture industry, it is in this area of “meanings” where Stuart Hall would pick up this work, to show that the messages of media are not so uncontested.

In *Representation*, Hall uses the notion of “meaning” to get back to McLuhan’s collective consciousness. Hall states that, “culture is about shared meaning” (1997a: 1), and that it is “primarily…concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings” (1997a: 2). Hall understands that how we understand things, what we see them to “mean” is about who we are and where we come from, “subjects may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the episteme, the discursive formation, the regime of truth, of a particular period and culture” (Hall 1997b: 55). Although, in Hall’s work the individual, as such, is still erased in service to the collective, he has a far more varied and complex understanding of this collective. He understands, that regardless of the desires of Adorno’s culture industry, the status quo is not stagnant, that “meaning is not straightforward or transparent, and does not survive intact the process through representation. It is a slippery customer, changing and shifting with context, usage and historical circumstances” (1997a: 9).
Hall understands that we receive meanings about our lives through mass media representations, but he is also aware that mass media is made by individuals, and that even those of us outside the media are meaning-makers on our own. “In part, we give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them” (Hall 1997a: 3). If we use this notion of Hall’s to return to McLuhan’s assertion that media must be found “acceptable” to its consumers, then media is about the struggle over these values, classifications and conceptions. While Adorno was certainly right to state that those who are producers of the culture industry have greater power over media representations, his argument is tempered by the other two authors who, while not directly contradicting him, show that there is a limit on their power by what the collective conscious will recognize. If this is the case, then the media are not simply something that is inflicted upon individuals by corporate overlords, but are, in an important addition, also a mirror of our collective acceptances, our shared but oft-unspoken meanings, both as authors and audiences.

Using the framework of seeing media as a reflection of culturally accepted values problematizes much work that has been done in exploring the representation of women in media. In her 1999 text, Can’t Buy My Love, Jean Kilbourne studies advertisements looking for common themes and attempting to extrapolate the effects on consumers at large. She talks about how advertising has co-opted the slogans of revolutions and the symbols of religion, how it has made a media landscape of pornographic, objectified
sexual bodies wherein everything becomes devoid of humanity, intimacy or meaning saying, “advertising co-opts our sacred symbols and sacred language in order to evoke an immediate emotional response…[this] leaves us deprived of our most meaningful images” (1999: 68). And yet, we know that advertising does not erase the meaning of our sacred images; it uses them. If the symbols were not imbued with those meanings and emotions advertisers would have no interest in them in the first place. Advertisers may transform the meaning, but they cannot eliminate it creating the desolate wasteland that Kilbourne implies.

As she is looking solely at the medium of advertisements it is not surprising that Kilbourne’s argument falls much along the lines of Adorno, claiming that all of the destruction she sees is done in the name of profit, and that it is those companies profiting that we, as consumers, must resist. She does have a point; advertisers do want to sell people things, and are extraordinarily savvy in creating and managing our desires, but they do so within prescribed limits. Kilbourne states, “advertising often sells a great deal more than products. It sells values, images, and concepts of love and sexuality, romance, success, and perhaps most important, normalcy” (1999: 74). But what she does not say is that it does so within a restricted arena. When discussing the harmful images of young women present in advertising she notes that, “they must be overtly sexy and attractive but essentially passive and virginal” (1999: 130), and that “girls are not supposed to have sexual agency” (1999: 148); these conceptions of “normalcy,” of appropriate womanhood are not creations of corporations, they were true, at least of Western white women, before
mass media even existed. Advertisers may exploit these images for profit, and in doing so re-inscribe them, but they do not create them; we do.

Similarly, in Juliet Schor’s 2004 *Born to Buy*, a book exploring the harmful effects of consumer society on young people, she notes that as far as the media are concerned, “girls are still thought of in traditional ways and remained tethered to traditional ideals of glamour and femininity even when they’re powerful” (2004: 45). Or, M. Gigi Durham, in her 2008 book *The Lolita Effect*, which investigates the media’s sexualization of young girls, states that “desirability is still very much a matter of appealing to a traditionally defined male gaze” (2008: 34), and that “female sexuality in our world is often exploitive, abusive and harmful” (2008: 22). Durham’s explanation for this presentation of young women is that “the media, which are driven by profit and ratings, aren’t in the business of respecting or advocating for girls” (2008: 13), which is true. However if McLuhan was right that media must be deemed “acceptable” to its consumers for it to succeed, then apparently, neither, as a culture, are we. While Durham’s facts are certainly troubling, the media and its profit-motives cannot be held solely responsible.

Both Durham and Schor also note the marketing trend called K.G.O.Y., Kids Getting Older Younger, and both authors place responsibility for this phenomenon on marketers who want to be able to sell products to younger and younger children. And yet, if it were simply about selling products, it could be K.G.R.Y., or Kids Getting Richer Younger, allowing young people to buy more “childlike” products, instead of turning them into consumers of adult products sooner. Instead, according to Durham, “very
young girls are becoming involved in a sphere of fashion, images, and activities that encourage them to flirt with a decidedly grown-up eroticism and sexuality – and the girls playing with these ideas are getting younger and younger every year” (2008: 21). The answer that the impetus for this comes solely from profit-motives is not enough.

Durham, Kilbourne and Schor all state explicitly that the goal of their work is to study the ways that profit-driven media and marketing culture effects consumers; and they all, in differing ways, make convincing arguments that excessive immersion in consumer culture is harmful to individuals. I do not doubt the veracity of this claim. However, their work is problematic not because the content of the work is wrong, but because it begins with media representations and looks outward to perceived effects, instead of reversing the gaze to understand the cultural narratives that allow these representations to be accepted and the cultural needs that are met by replaying these stories. In his essay “The Spectacle of the Other” Stuart Hall states that, “we may describe the whole repertoire of images and visual affects through which ‘difference’ is represented at any one historical moment as a regime of representation” (1997c: 232). If, in this situation, the “difference” is one of gender, then it must be asked not what products are being sold to women, for marketers will sell whichever products are profitable. Instead, it must be asked what “regime of representation” around womanhood, and specifically young women, currently exists in our society that makes these the products that are considered acceptable?
Discourses of Sexuality

*The currency of anxiety in America is frequently the sexual.*
  - Judith Levine

In exploring the “regime of representation” that surrounds young women in today’s mass media, it is undeniable that the conversation will be one around sexuality. Kilbourne, Schor and Durham’s discussions of the presentation of young women all revolve around their manifestations – or their lack - of sexual subjectivity and/or agency. To understand why the discussion is so dominated by talk of sexuality the American obsession with sex in general must first be addressed.

In *The History of Sexuality*, originally published in 1976, Michel Foucault explores this tendency of the West. In this work Foucault questions what he terms the “repressive hypothesis” which states that sex in the West has been repressed and silenced since the Victorian era, while simultaneously “we talk about sex more than anything else; we set our minds to the task; we convince ourselves that we have never said enough on the subject” (1990: 33). In attempting to unravel this contradiction, the aim of the book “is to examine the case of a society which has been loudly castigating itself for its hypocrisy for more than a century, which speaks verbosely of its own silence, takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say, denounces the powers it exercises, and promises to liberate itself from the very law’s that have made it function” (1990: 8). Foucault posits that we talk extensively around and about sex not because our natural impulses have been repressed, but alternately, because the West was working on
“transforming sex into discourse” (1990: 20) in which we speak ad nauseam about what we should not say. In opposition to the theory that sexuality has been repressed Foucault states that, “since the end of the sixteenth century, the ‘putting into discourse of sex,’ far from undergoing a process of restriction, on the contrary has been subjected to a mechanism of increasing incitement” (1990: 12). In fact, for sex to transform into a “discourse” it must be spoken about, “this is the essential thing: that Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex” (1990: 23).

Foucault does not deny that there has been censoring within this discourse, in fact this was required, for part of the purpose of the discourse was “a policing of sex: that is, not the rigor of a taboo, but the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourse” (1990: 25). As sex was transformed into a public discourse, it became a site of public negotiations over bodies and the powers and knowledges that regulated them. Because of this, Foucault understands sexuality to be a historical construct, through which pleasure and actions are defined, created, and ruled by this discourse that states that it is through our sexuality that we are defined and made to be good or bad. According to Foucault:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances are linked to one another in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power (1990: 105-106).
Foucault contends that sexuality had to be regulated because reproduction had to be regulated, particularly among the reigning classes whose progeny had to be fit to uphold their responsibilities; “the primary concern was not repression of the sex of the classes to be exploited, but rather the body, vigor, longevity, progenitor, and descent of the classes that “ruled” (1990: 123). To effectively enact this regulation he states, “there were two great systems conceived by the west for ordering sex: the laws of marriage and the order of desires” (1990: 39-40), and while the church and/or state controlled the former, the turning of sex into a discourse allowed an arena for control of the latter. Yet, creating this discourse also turned sexuality into a far more powerful and symbolic milieu. Stuart Hall states that, “the concept of discourse is not about whether things exist but about where meaning comes from” (1990: 45), and in the transformation of sexuality into a discourse Foucault shows us that it became a far more symbolically meaningful site:

Thus sex gradually became an object of great suspicion; the general and disquieting meaning that pervades our conduct and our existence, in spite of ourselves; the point of weakness where evil portents reach through to us; the fragmentation of darkness that we each carry within us” a general signification, a universal secret, an omnipresent cause, a fear that never ends (1990: 69).

Through this transformation into discourse, sexuality became a powerful location of determining each individual’s goodness, morality and worth. While sexuality is seen as an important site of control and meaning in many cultures at many times, the importance of Foucault’s work is to show that in the West during the Victorian-era it did so specifically by becoming a oft-spoken of, yet simultaneously taboo discourse. As such,
Foucault’s perceives that it is no surprise that sex has become “the noisiest of our preoccupations” (1990: 158).

Accepting Foucault’s position means that we should find it unsurprising that the discussion around young women in the media is largely a conversation around their sexuality; instead it demands that we explore not the “why” of it, but the “what” of it. If how we speak of sexuality in the West has become a crucial symbolic site for meaning making, then the task becomes one of determining what is being symbolically communicated in these discussions. To begin to unravel the symbolism contained in images of young women’s sexuality there are two arenas that must first be explored: the symbolism of women’s sexuality, and the symbolism of adolescent/children’s sexuality.

**Discourses of Women’s Sexuality**

Hanne Blank’s book, *Virgin: The Untouched History*, is a journey through the varying definitions, meanings and uses of virginity in Western cultures. Although the book ends in the present day the vast majority of the text focuses on historical conceptions of virginity. While Foucault posits that sexuality transformed into discourse during the Victorian era, Blank’s work shows that while certain aspects of the discourse may have been created then, the idea of women’s bodies and sexualities as sites of symbolic meaning were certainly in existence previously. At least as far as virginity is concerned, “we can follow it back as far as we have written references: to the world of antiquity and its Judeans, Romans, Greeks and Egyptians” (2007: 119). Importantly,
whatever the date of the virginity narrative that Blank is exploring, the point that she
returns to throughout her text is that, “we have fixed [virginity] as an integral part of how
we experience our own bodies and selves. And we have done all this without being able
to define it consistently, identify it accurately, or explain how or why it works” (2007: 3).
Historically, virginity is not only rarely defined, but actually un-definable, “for as long as
we have had a notion of virginity at all, its parameters have been controversial and, as
often as not, vague” (2007: 4). There are only two things thing that all the virgin
narratives that Blank explores have in common, one is that virginity is always female,
“the male body has never been commonly labeled as being virginal even when it is; but
rather as “continent” or “celibate” (2007: 10). The other is that in “all of these beliefs
about virginity… is the idea that there is a deep core portion of the self that cannot be
altered consciously, yet is completely reshaped in an instant by a single sexual
experience” (2007: 111). This existence of a historically omni-present, abstract construct
that solely affects women’s sexuality to which is ascribed life-altering powers proves the
symbolism in discussions around sexuality.

Furthermore, in support of Hall, Blank also shows that historically what those
symbols have meant has not been constant. While Blank’s work shows that this
symbolism existed prior to the date where Foucault posits sex transformed into discourse,
Blank does document a shift that occurs during the Victorian era, a shift that occurs as the
colonial period begins. While virginity has always gone “hand in hand with desirable
attributes like purity, self-control, and respectability” (2007: 72) after colonialism began,
“virginity ha[d] not only a sexual orientation and a gender, it ha[d] a color…Europeans
frequently derived the belief that virginity was an attribute of being civilized, which was to say Christian, European, and white” (2007: 11). Putting together the work of Foucault and Blank, the Victorian era did not create anything new by attributing a symbolic power to sexuality; rather, as the world began to shrink, the old symbolic categories had to be elaborated on, an entire discourse created, for with the onset of colonialism and industrialization new classes and races were intermingling in ways unheard of before, requiring far more complex regulations of the bodies they brought with them.

In her collection of essays exploring colonialism in Indonesia, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, Ann Stoler upholds the idea that sexual regulation became increasingly important as daily life began to involve the intermingling of more widely diverse groups of people. Exploring the structure of colonial life in Indonesia, Stoler notes that “racial vigilance and virility were domestic and household affairs, and vulnerabilities of body and mind were tightly bound to the conjugal and sexual arrangements in which Europeans lived” (2002: 1). As more women came to live in the colonies stricter categorical boundaries had to be created and maintained to insure both the tangible “purity” of the race by avoiding mixed-race children, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to insure the psychological and emotional distancing that allowed colonists to maintain their sense of superiority. Because colonists lived in intimate proximity with the native people, using them as maids and nannies, this boundary line was always tenuous, yet essential to sustaining the colonial program. To uphold this system “the colonial measure of what it took to be classified as “European” was based not on skin color alone but on tenuously balanced assessments of who was judged to act
with reason, affective appropriateness, and a sense of morality” (2002: 2, 6). This malleability of classification determined that men and women from Europe who transgressed their appropriate roles, had to be stricken from the ranks of “European,” and lose access to the accompanying privileges, regardless of their heritage. As a result, strict categories of behavior and demeanor were created to determine who was worthy of the title “European.” Hence, “racism was not a colonial reflex, fashioned to deal with the distant Other, but part of the very making of Europeans themselves” (2002: 144).

Thus the creation of womanhood within this system was consequently highly racialized and largely built around ideations of womanhood that supported the evolving ideas of European manhood. According to Stoler, while Asian women were “the centerfolds for the imperial voyeur…[white women] whether portrayed as the paragons of morality or as parasitic and passive actors on the imperial stage, [were] rarely the object of European male desire” (2002: 44). While native women were painted as exotic and sexually appealing, European women, placed on the thrones of morality did not elicit the same amount of intrigue. However, for the sense of power and privilege of European men to be maintained, “their” women had to remain the most desirable, and, due to this, vulnerable. “Although novels and memoirs position European women as categorically absent from the sexual fantasies of European men, these very men imagined their women to be desired and seductive figures in the eyes of others. Within this frame European women needed protection from the “primitive” sexual urges aroused by the sight of them” (2002: 58). By creating this version of European womanhood, European men increased their sense of ownership, control and power. Thus, Stoler tells us that,
“ultimately, inclusion or exclusion required regulating the sexual, conjugal, and domestic life of both European colonials and their subjects” (2002: 43) and through this regimen “key symbols of the colonial state were secured by the ways in which gender was regulated, sexuality was patrolled, and race was policed” (2002: 210).

Anne McClintock’s book *Imperial Leather*, similarly argues that “sexuality as a trope for other power relations was certainly an abiding aspect of imperial power” (1995: 14). Much like Stoler, McClintock understands women, their bodies, and the regulations around who did or did not have access to them, to be essential boundary-markers of colonization. She states, “women served as mediating and threshold figures by means of which men oriented themselves in space, as agents of power and agents of knowledge” (1995: 24). In addition to understanding these boundaries as markers for race and nationality, McClintock also discusses these boundaries as being essential to class. Just as Foucault notes that, “we must say that there is a bourgeois sexuality, and that there are class sexualities” (1990: 127), in looking at the creation of womanhood on European shores during the colonial period, McClintock sees that, “working-class women were figured as biologically driven to lechery and excess; upper-class women were naturally indifferent to the deliriums of the flesh” (1995: 86). Thus, the narrative of sexuality has additional overlap between class and race, placing Europeans of the upper class in one category with natives and poor Europeans in another. For McClintock this has especially powerful implications for womanhood during the industrial-era because this time period also saw the invention of the middle-class, a newly forming segment of society, the coalescence of which required a distinctive set of character traits. McClintock argues that
this class built itself around the Cult of True Womanhood, defined by Barbara Welter as women who possessed “four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (1966: 152). These women, like their counterparts on the colonized shores, were responsible for upholding the requirements of their new social place, as well as holding it together. According to McClintock:

The cult of domesticity was crucial in helping to fashion the identity of a large class of people (hitherto disunited) with clear affiliations, distinct boundaries and separate values – organized around the presiding domestic values of monogamy, thrift, order, accumulation, classification, quantification and regulation – the values of liberal rationality, through which the middling classes fashioned the appearance of a unified class identity (1995: 168).

Thus in addition to acting as boundaries of race and nation, McClintock’s work shows that women’s bodies could be used as signifiers of class. In a striking passage, exposing much of this class difference and the boundaries it created, McClintock states that while nannies were seen fit to bathe and dress children in Victorian households, their bodies were often shielded from their own mothers for the sake of propriety. In this way, she says, “the Victorian splitting of women into whores and Madonnas, nuns and prostitutes, has its origins then, not in universal archetype, but in the class structure of the household” (1995: 87). Combining Stoler and McClintock then, we see that the transforming of sex into discourse that Foucault speaks of is largely about using the body to regulate social positioning around nationhood, race and class during an intensely volatile and complicated period.

Blank, Stoler, and McClintock are all useful for seeing the outlines of the narrative of women’s sexuality that grew up around colonialism. By next turning to bell
hooks *Black Looks: Race and Representation* and Patricia Hill Collin’s *Black Sexual Politics* that narrative can be traced through to the present-day. The essays contained within hooks’ text explore present-day pop culture, looking at everything from the *Tweeds* clothing catalogue to the Clarence Thomas hearings, to investigate the way that race is represented. hooks’ contention is that “there is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of a white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media, of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people” (1992: 2). This places her in agreement with the understanding of symbolism in media argument laid out above, but hooks’ focus on race, gender and sexuality additionally bridges the gap and connects media work to the positions of Stoler and McClintock. Throughout the collection, hooks’ finds that the colonial narrative continues to be omni-present, with continuous representation of “the black female as wild sexual savage” (1992: 67) as required for the preservation of “the socially constructed image of innocent white womanhood [which] relies on the continued production of the racist/sexist sexual myth that black women are not innocent and never can be” (1992: 159-160).

Collins’ work also explores representations made in popular culture. Unlike hooks whose focal point is that of race, Collins uses the loci of sexuality from which to understand the positioning of other oppressions. She posits that, ‘sexuality can be viewed as an entity that is manipulated within each distinctive system of race, class and gender oppression…Sexuality can also be seen as a site of intersectionality, a specific
constellation of social practices that demonstrate how oppressions converge” (2005: 110). This allows Collins’ text to have a richer understanding of how narratives shift with social positioning; like McClintock, Collins sees, along with important differences, areas of overlap between narratives of race and class, showing, for example, how the tropes are different for middle-class black women than those who are working-class. Collins also agrees that sexuality is a historical construct, saying, “sexuality is not simply a biological function; rather it is a system of ideas and social practices that is deeply implicated in shaping American social inequalities” (2005: 6), and understands that investigating sexuality as a symbolic site provides rich data for understanding the underlying social structure. While she uses the term “repression” in a way I believe Foucault would disagree with, Collins does agree with the concept of sex as a discourse saying, “sexual regulation occurs through repression, both by eliminating sexual alternatives and by shaping the public debates that do exist” (2005: 36). Importantly, Collins also aligns herself with Hall, agreeing to the premise that the meaning assigned to certain symbols changes over time. Speaking about the changing meanings of the words “jungle,” “wild,” and “freak,” Collins notes, “sexual spectacles travel, and they matter. Historical context disappears, leaving seemingly free-floating images in its wake that become the new vocabulary that joins quite disparate entities” (2005: 42). It is this constant evolution of meanings that demands continuous investigation.

The importance of hook’s and Collins’ work in the examination of these meanings, is that their texts not only expose the colonial mindset around race and class that are depicted through representations of sexuality, but also that they restate what Toni
Morrison found in her book exploring American literature, *Playing in the Dark*, wherein she states that throughout the characters of the literature she analyses, “a real or fabricated African presence was essential to their sense of Americanness” (1993: 6). The understanding of social positioning in America is deeply interwoven with our concepts of race and therefore, no matter what symbols are being investigated, “even, and especially, when American texts are not “about” Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation” (1993: 47). Collins and hooks thus, in addition to exposing the history and shifts of the discourse around sexuality, also serve as reminders that in all symbolic interpretation, there must be awareness of this omni-present “shadow.”

**Discourses of Children/Adolescent’s Sexuality**

Possibly the most famous piece of Western literature regarding the sexuality of the young is Nabokov’s 1955 novel *Lolita*. As almost everyone is aware, Lolita was the nickname given to a 12-year-old girl, Dolores Haze, by a much older man, Humbert Humbert, who essentially kidnapped and repeatedly rapes her. While *Lolita* is certainly not a social theory text, it belongs in this conversation because the cultural symbolism around the character of Lolita has morphed to contain within it the same contradictions that exist within the social theory texts themselves. In Nabokov’s novel, while Lolita is not simply a two-dimensional victim, she does reside in an abusive and manipulative relationship that despite multiple escape attempts she remains trapped in for over two years. She is not
written as a character in control of her destiny. Importantly, while Lolita does eventually escape Humbert’s control by running away with another man, he has begun to lose interest far earlier as she began to enter adolescence. Of her skin her Humbert says that “her complexion was now that of any vulgar untidy high school girl…a course flush had now replaced the innocent fluorescence” (1997: 204), simultaneously he finds her growing legs abhorrent in their “musculature” (1997: 204) and is appalled by her “wenchy smell” (1997: 204). While Humbert remains with her until she leaves, he notes that it gets continuously more difficult for him to find the “nymphet” inside her, which was what he found so alluring in the beginning. And yet, while Humbert Humbert is written as a pedophile taking advantage of a child, type in the word Lolita to merriam-webster.com and the definition that comes back is: “a precociously seductive girl.” In our cultural symbolism, Lolita has become a symbol, not of an abused child, but of a young girl who holds blame for her ability to seduce.

In the writing on sexuality of the young the two themes that are repeated are an obsession with the pedophile and culturally blurry boundaries between childhood, adolescence and adulthood. In her book Harmful to Minors, Judith Levine, attempts to understand American public policy as it relates to child and adolescent sexuality. Levine’s premise is that the higher rates of sexually transmitted disease and pregnancy that occur in the United States, as compared with Western European countries, show a failing of these policies, and that it is the American fear of exposing children and adolescents to sexual material that has led to these policies. Levine notes that “the idea
that sex is a normative – and heaven forfend, positive – part of adolescent life is unutterable in America’s public forum” (2002: 93), and instead American adults have come to believe that “that exposing children to any sexual information can hurt them” (2002: 13). Levine understands this fear to be a product of our conception of the term “child.”

Childhood is, of course, a historical construct, and “adolescence,” a term that only came into use in the 1940’s, even more so. While factually it is true that humans have always been born as babies and eventually become adults, exactly what happens during the in-between time and how long that time lasts, has been historically variable, changing with place and time. James Kincaid, in his book *Erotic Innocence*, shows that during the period of colonialism when Foucault, Stoler and McClintock all show that a new discourse on sex manifested, so too did our current image of childhood. In tying the two together he notes that, “the development of the modern child and modern ideas on sexuality grew up over the last two centuries hand-in-hand, and they have remained close friends” (1998: 14). The new version of childhood created what Kincaid calls the “Romantic Child.” According to Kincaid, in defining this new child, “more prominent were the negatives, the things not there. The child was figured as free of adult corruptions; not yet burdened with the weight of responsibility, mortality and sexuality….” (italics original, 1998: 14-15). Specifically, the Romantic child was defined by its purity and its innocence, or alternatively, its utter lack of sexuality.

As for innocence, Juliet Schor states, “as cultural theorists have cogently argued, the concept of childhood innocence is less a description of reality than a way for adults to
project their own fantasies onto children” (2004: 15). Kincaid speaks of innocence saying, “at one point a theological trope, in the nineteenth century it became more and more firmly attached to this world and this world’s sexuality…We were trained to adore and covet it, to preserve and despoil it, to speak of it in hushed tones and bawdy songs” (1998: 15). Of course, he also notes, “innocence is a lot like the air in your tires: there’s not a lot you can do with it but lose it” (1998: 53). Innocence is not a tangible property, no action must be taken to lose it, simple life exposure is enough to ruin it and it cannot be regained. Therefore, if children are to be innocent, they must also be closely protected. While purity requires a bit more effort to tarnish, it too, like Blank’s description of virginity for which it often is a place marker, is impossible to clearly define when speaking of a living being. In Kincaid’s words, it serves as “another empty figure that allows the admirer to read just about anything into its vacancy” (1998: 16). Importantly, particularly since these discourses were coming into fruition simultaneously, children are not the only ones defined through their innocence and purity, white women were also. According to Kincaid, who detrimentally ignores race through much of his work, “the constructions of modern “woman” and modern “child” are very largely evacuations, the ruthless distribution of eviction notices” (1998: 16). While the above has made clear that these definitions only work for white upper or middle-class women, and accordingly white upper or middle-class children, the point still holds, and for Kincaid and Levine serves as the crux of this issue. Through these two overlapping discourses, in Kincaid’s words, “we make the child serve as the image both of what we desire and what is altogether outside desire” (1998: 167). Levine, in a discussion of Kincaid’s work,
expands on the consequence of this saying, “Anglo-American culture conjured childhood innocence, defining it as a desireless subjectivity, at the same time as it constructed a new ideal of the sexually desirable object. The two had identical attributes – softness, cuteness, docility, passivity – and this simultaneous cultural invention has presented us with a wicked psychosocial problem ever since” (2002: 27). For both Levine and Kincaid this explains our cultural obsession with the pedophile.

In both of their books, Levine and Kincaid explore child molestation cases and investigate the way those involved in them are portrayed by the media. For Kincaid, the point is to show the purpose that these stories serve for the adults reading about them, saying that, “the media are nothing if not sensitive recorders of public desire” (1998: 187), who continue to write these “scandal” stories because by constantly discussing children in sexual situations “it creates the sexualized child we pretend we are sanitizing” (1998: 21). Meanwhile, although Levine acknowledges the import these stories have for adults saying, “our culture fears the pedophile, say some social critics, not because he is a deviant, but because he is ordinary” (2002: 26), she explores the narratives to prove that they serve to create a vastly overwrought fear of children being molested by adults than the actual statistical occurrence rate would warrant. These theories fit nicely with Foucault’s contention that we speak incessantly of that which requires active regulation, that “these attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have been traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries to be crossed, but perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” (Foucault 1990: 45).
And yet, it is here that Kincaid, and to a lesser extent Levine, both create the same problem that our symbolic image of Lolita has: childhood and adolescence become compressed into one entity, when culturally there are immense differences. A very rare number of individuals in our society would ever admit even to their closest intimate circle having desires for young children, and most of us are actively appalled at the thought. Yet, across this country people of all ages agreed that a 17 year-old Britney Spears, in her Catholic high school uniform singing “hit me baby one more time” was the epitome of a sex symbol, even though she was also acknowledged to be “jail bait.” There is a difference between children and adolescents, but when it comes to theories about the sexuality of youth this difference is often erased.

While the social texts may not specifically speak of it often, it is exactly in this grey area of adolescence and young adulthood when the public debates around young people’s sexuality become the most blaring. Adolescent sexuality is an arena for incessant public conversations for two reasons: the first is that this is when young people begin to engage in sexual activity. According to the Guttmacher institute, 70% of all young people will have had sexual intercourse before turning nineteen (Guttmacher: 2006). The second is that since these individuals are not yet legally or socially considered adults, their actions are seen as being acceptable for public discussion on the grounds that their formation is a responsibility of the public at large. With the exception of politicians, present-day adults are wary of judging other adults on their private lives unless they stray far into deviant territory. There are few studies undertaken investigating the increase or decrease in the sexual activity of 40-year olds. However, there are multiple studies and
reports every year to keep Americans informed of the sexual activity of adolescents. While it is certainly true, as noted by Kincaid, that part of this is due to the titillation that we get by having such discussions, it is not merely that. Adults, generally speaking, are deemed to have certain rights to their privacy and their own morality. While people may disagree with other adults’ choices, they rarely have town hall meetings to discuss them. However, since adolescents fall under the broad sweep of “our children,” American adults feel it is their duty to be informed about and involved in their sex lives.

Intriguingly, when Janice Irvine and Kristen Luker attempted to study this discourse, both looking specifically at the debates around sex education in public schools, what they discovered was that although these conversations claim to be about adolescents – providing everyone with a legitimate reason to be involved – this is actually somewhat of a chimera, wherein the conversations they documented were far more about the overall sexuality of the nation. In her book *Talk About Sex*, Irvine’s work explores the discourses within the sex education battles from the 1960’s to the present. Irvine finds that Kincaid’s Romantic Child appears often, noting that, “riddled with contradictions and inflected with adult anxieties, the lingering image of the Romantic child is nonetheless a politicized and highly exploitable icon” (2004: 197). While the discourses are in some respect about childhood, what she finds to be more present is that “local disputes about sex education have always been inextricably linked to national politics” (2004: xiv). For while the debates are local, the cultural arguments are not, and it is these disagreements that caused Irvine to find that, “it was as if there were a national script for sex education debates, rendering every unhappy community unhappy in precisely the same way” (2004: xvii).
Thus she finds that conversations around teen bodies evolve as national politics do, and are actually coded ways to discuss national concerns around class, race and gender.

Luker, whose book *When Sex Goes to School*, looks specifically at sex education debates of the late 90’s, finds much the same thing. In what Luker deems to be potentially *the most important* finding of her work, she states, “Americans as a group, teenagers and adults alike, have a great deal of trouble dealing with sex. It’s not their age so much as their nationality that puts American teenagers at risk” (2006: 214). Luker presents this finding as so important because it shows that our conversations around adolescent sexuality are only a symbolic site where we battle for cultural meaning and value around sex in general. Significantly, while Irvine and Luker both look at these conversations as existing around “adolescents” generally, even if they acknowledge race and class implications, Michelle Fine’s work cautions us to be aware of gender distinctions as well. In her essay, “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire,” written in 1988 exploring sex education discourse in New York state, Fine identifies four discourse around young women’s bodies: sexuality as violence, sexuality as victimization, sexuality as individual morality and a discourse of desire (Fine 2003: 40-42). While she finds ample examples of and support for the first two, she has trouble finding any evidence that the second two exist, either in texts or discussion in classes, or even among her interviews with young women themselves. Although Fine’s study was multi-racial, her results follow the conception of white womanhood as defined by Stoler and McClintock, and they prove the need to understand that adolescence as a category does not exist in a vacuum and therefore is not immune to the other “axis of power” of
which Hill Collins speaks. While Irvine and Luker’s work both lack a specific, focused
gendered lens, that does not remove their import. If it is true, as Luker states, that “when
Americans talk about sex, we are simultaneously and covertly talking about all the things
going on in our world outside of the bedroom” (2006: 33), then to understand our current
presentations of young women’s sexuality, we must first understand their context.

Current Debates

_This new raunch culture didn’t mark the death of feminism, they told me; it was evidence
that the female project had already been achieved. We’d earned the right to look at
Playboy; we were empowered enough to get Brazilian bikini waxes._

- Ariel Levy

As many of the above authors have shown, when it comes to adolescent sexuality
the appropriateness of abstinence has a long history. However, in the present day United
States it took on a new power in 1996 when then-President Clinton signed into law the
welfare reform bill which included an amendment allowing public schools to receive
federal money for sex education if they agreed to teach an abstinence-only curriculum.
Since 1996 President Bush has enhanced this program, increasing the money allocated to
it and creating and supporting numerous programs focused on teenage virginity.
Simultaneously, between 1997 and 2002 three books were written by white middle-class
women exploring their memories of the experiences of promiscuous girls in high school,
or in some cases, girls who were simply labeled as such. Naomi Wolf’s *Promiscuities*
explains her own memories, along with that of her friends, while Leora Tanenbaum’s
_Slut_ and Emity White’s *Fast Girls* both tell the tales of strangers the authors found
through solicitations. All three authors acknowledge the race and class specificity of their works, with White stating “the slut story was not something that seemed to have an urban or multiracial backdrop” (2002: 9). However, none of the authors decided therefore set out to investigate a certain context, instead, they work to naturalize and generalize their experiences. Wolf notes that, “the impulse to equate women’s being sexual with their suffering a swift, sure punishment is reflexive” (1997: 64), while White says that these teenage girls “tell tales that populations have been telling for centuries, that divide world up the world into sinners and saints, the cursed and the blessed” (2002: 49-50). While sexuality has certainly been historically an important arena for power relations, in contradiction to the above quotes, its boundaries and definitions have changed drastically across time and place with shifting power relations.

In explaining her fascination with these tales, White mentions in the beginning of her book that in people’s high school memories, “the myth of the promiscuous female remained constant…it was a story with a specific cadence, identifiable themes, and a clear moral: Don’t end up here” (2002: 5). Ironically, the same could be said for this trio of books. All three of them tell tales that, in the stated interest of exploring these stereotypes, end up reinforcing their omnipresence. Tanenbaum, for example, notes that, “the slut label doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with sex. Very often the label is a stand-in for something else: the extent to which a girl fails to conform to the idea of “normal” in appearance and behavior. A girl’s sexual status is a metaphor for how well she fits into the American ideal of femininity” (1999: 11). She then proceeds to spend a hundred pages re-telling her interview subjects harrowing tales of high school ostracism,
and notes that “in today’s climate “slut” refers to any girl who appears open and carefree about her sexuality” (1999: 112). While she may have originally intended to investigate the “myth” of the “slut” what she does instead is create a cautionary tale of the consequences should any young woman not conform.

While these books, set against the backdrop of the abstinence-only measures would imply a cultural return to traditionalism in its thinking about women, the wider society was going through a different shift. White, the only one of the three authors to note it at all, although she immediately dismisses it, states at the end of her book that there was, “a wider trend in the nineties of repossessing the word “slut”: by 2001 a chain store called Claire’s Accessories was selling SLUT patches to high school girls, perfect for sewing on jeans or backpacks… [but] it doesn’t mean the words lose the currency of a curse among the masses of kids who enter high school every day…” (2002: 142). The cultural trends that White was alluding to would become known, through Ariel Levy’s 2005 book *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, as “Raunch Culture, defined by Levy as follows:

If you were to put the last five or so years in a time capsule, womanwise, it would look like a period of explosive sexual exhibitionism, opportunism, and role redefinition. These were the years of *Sex and the City*, Brazilian bikini waxes, Burlesque revival, thongs – the years when women learned to score, or at least the years when popular culture spotlighted that behavior as empowering and cool (2005: 118).

While “Raunch Culture” does exhibit new cultural manifestations, it is also part of a long-running battle within the feminist movement.

In 1986 Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs co-wrote *Re-Making Love*, a book that explored what the authors termed “the women’s sexual
revolution.” Through discussions of how women who were becoming sexual agents in their lives and engaging in far more casual and pre-marital sex, the authors posited that, “it is not that women simply had more sex than they had in the past, but they began to transform the notion of heterosexual sex itself” (1986: 5). While the authors felt that the cultural practices traditionally associated with the sexual revolution – wife-swapping, reading *Playboy* – were harmful to women saying, “if this was all there was to the sexual revolution then its critics have been right to see it as little more than a male fling and a setback for women” (1986: 1), they also felt that women had gained something from their own sexual revolution in their newly acknowledged right to demand their own pleasure. The paradox in this led them to believe, at least at the time they were writing that, “the benefits of this revolution are ambiguous” (1986: 192).

The unresolved contradictions Ehrenreich et. al. were discussing would become devastating to the second-wave of feminism, with women on both sides of the issue feeling that their views were at unsurpassable odds with women on the other. Levy, speaking of the relationship between those involved in the sexual revolution and those who were active feminists, says, “many of the same people were involved with both causes, and initially some of their key struggles were shared. But ultimately a schism would form between the two movements. And some of the same issues that drove them apart would likewise prove irreconcilably divisive within the women’s movement itself” (2005: 54). Deborah Seigel, whose book *Sisterhood Interrupted* chronicles the disagreements within feminism between those of the “second-wave” versus those of the “third-wave” agrees with Levy’s interpretation, saying that “second-wave veterans [from
one side of the debate] …would accuse third-wave sex-positive feminists as once again elevating the orgasm gap over the wage gap as the primary object of their concern” (2005: 86). And yet, while the feminist movement lost momentum and efficacy due to this public in-fighting, they had created a new cultural image that took off without them: “if most brands of feminism are framed as taboo or outré, the one form that the media loves to play up as popular and even ultra-hip – “bimbo feminism” – is, in many ways, an anachronistic throwback to an earlier time” (Siegel 2007: 10), or what Levy terms “a female chauvinist pig.”

Levy documents women taking pole-dancing classes at the gym, women attending CAKE parties (a group, as espoused by their founders, created to support women’s exploration of their sexuality) in tiny lingerie, and of course, performing for Girls Gone Wild, an immensely popular television/video franchise based on images of young white women flashing their breasts in front of a camera, the founder of which, “Joe Francis, has likened the flashing of girls he captures on his videos to seventies feminists burning their bras” (Levy 2005: 12). At the end of her travels through “Raunch Culture” Levy determines that “we skipped over the part where we just accept and respect that some women like to seem exhibitionistic and lickerish, and decided instead that everyone who is sexually liberated ought to be imitating strippers and porn stars” (2005: 27) and yet, she clearly places herself in opposition to all the women she has been documenting. Stating that “an Uncle Tom is a person who deliberately upholds the stereotypes assigned to his or her marginalized group in the interest of getting ahead with the dominant group” (2005: 105), she assigns these women the label of traitors.
While Levy makes a powerful argument saying that “instead of advancing the causes of the women’s liberation movement or the sexual revolution, the obdurate presence of raunch in the mainstream has diluted the effect of both sex radicals and feminists, who’ve seen their movement’s images popularized while their ideals are forgotten” (2005: 196), she does not present any clear alternatives, recreating the same schism that her second-wave mothers did. Additionally, while Levy says that in her work in college she and her peers were “trained to look at the supposedly all-powerful troika of race, class and gender…” (2005: 78), she does not do that in this book, and the “female chauvinist pigs” being described are overwhelmingly young, white, presumably middle or upper class, women. In *Pimps up, Ho’s Down*, her book regarding young black women and their relationship to hip-hop culture, T. Deenan Sharpley-Whiting notes that some of the women she documents see themselves experiencing a revolution similar to that described by Ehrenreich et. al. saying, “they are practitioners of a swaggering black female masculinity…They are the ‘new niggaz’” (2007: 144). She also notes that they face the same arguments that white feminists face, noting that, “a reliably feminist resistance to such sexist expectations by young women joins in tension with the practice of black female masculinity where mimicry (of the worst of male behavior) and conformity (to the stereotypes of female sexuality) masquerade as women’s liberation” (2007: 147). However, these similarities must not be used to erase race from the equation, after all, as bell hooks notes in her discussion of Madonna, stereotypes around black female sexuality and their assumed promiscuity make black women’s relationship to any form of sexual revolution different. Additionally, the women Sharpley-Whiting
interviews in her chapter on women who sleep with famous hip-hop artists explicitly distance themselves from the women in Levy’s book, saying “the sexual caprices of these women who ‘have fucked a famous person’ are integral to who they purport themselves to be – self-assured women who have desires and who are firmly in control of their sexuality. They are not ‘girls gone wild,’ but women who have game” (2007: 109). None of this discredits Levy’s work, however it does signify the fact that her work was only one step in a cultural discussion that continues to take place among women of all colors and classes. These cultural conversations, around abstinence and “female chauvinist pigs” should therefore inevitably be the backdrop for the articles studied here. The fact that this entire debate, which has now been highly influential to two waves of feminist struggle, is entirely erased from the articles studied here exposes the fact that these representations are divorced from the real lives of women, and are instead symbolic manifestations created to address some need within our collective conscious.

Methodology

The data presented here comes from a content analysis of the three largest weekly news magazines in the United States: Time, Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report. Because the goal was not to find the discourse as it exists on the margins, but instead to understand how it was being portrayed within the mainstream dominant narratives, these were the obvious choices. According to the 2004 Annual Report of Journalism.org, a project of the Pew Charitable Trust focused on studying media trends,
the readers for these three magazines tend to be male, are 28% wealthier than the general public, and, depending on the specific magazine, have an average age between 43 and 45 years. (journalism.org; 1994.) This places their readers as younger and poorer than those who read the New Yorker, or the Atlantic, but older and richer than those who read “entertainment” magazines.

Unlike opinion magazines, such as The National Review or The Nation, these three magazines each work to be perceived as agenda-free and inoffensive; they are perceived as reporting facts and claim to do so without bias. Of course, as bell hooks says, “politics of domination inform the way the vast majority of images we consume are constructed and marketed” (1992: 3), but by donning the biases of the dominant class and then speaking to them, these magazines manage to maintain a generally unmarred image, while still telling the dominant cultural narrative of their time. As Kincaid notes, “actual events are less important than the power of the cultural narrative, which … takes over and renders historical truth irrelevant in the face of the ‘truth’ mandated by the way our culture wants to see these things” (1998: 33). Like all “news” mediums, these magazines make choices about what to present and how, and it is through study of these choices that the narrative is exposed.

The articles for this content analysis were collected using a LexisNexis search of these magazines from January 2002 through December 2007\(^1\), which netted thousands of articles. From these thousands the following deletions were made:

\(^1\) The exact search term was: (adol! w/11 sex!) or (teen! w/11 sex!) or (college w/11 sex!) or (youth w/11 sex!) or (girl! w/11 sex!)
• Articles which focused on adults having sex with minors. From the priest sexual abuse scandals to Michael Jackson’s lawsuit, there were hundreds of articles that focused on pedophilia, just as the work of Levine and Kincaid would predict. However, since the goal of this study was to understand how young women’s sexuality was presented, including this “predator” narrative would skew the results.

• Articles that were written by adults discussing their own sexual history or that of another adult, as retrospective presentations place their actual adolescence in the wrong time frame.

• Reviews of movies, books and television shows that included no “real” adolescent responses. The study aimed to understand how these magazines presented young women, not how they present other media presenting them.

• Articles that were solely about men with no mention of women, or articles that did not contain any gender-specific references.

• Articles with an international focus, and articles that were solely published in editions of the magazines sold outside of the United States.

• Articles in which the young women were over the age of 25.

• Articles where the term “sex” was used solely to define gender, (i.e. Battle of the sexes) and included no information on sexuality.

This process elicited 63 articles on which this analysis is based.
Findings

Demographics

While the women involved ranged in age from 9 to 25, the articles collected for this content analysis portrayed a largely homogenous group. Class and race were often unspecified, however, when they were, or when they could be safely inferred, the group was almost entirely white and middle or upper class. Additionally, since “white” and “middle-class” work as normative operators, it can be assumed that when race and class are not specified, either or both of these categories is probably inferred. Of the 63 articles, 2 (3%) presented young women who were working class or poor and 5 (8%) presented women who were not white. Of these five, two were celebrities, one involved members from the cast of MTV’s The Real World, one was a article in Newsweek interviewing young people who had chosen virginity, and one was an article on abortion in which one of the handful of women presented was Mexican. Thus, the vast majority of the articles presented white middle or upper class women.

Newsweek, Time and U.S. News and World Report are reporters of “mainstream” news, with largely white middle/upper class readers. Thus it could be assumed that they always write about this demographic. However a quick comparison confirms that this is
not the case: in the one-year period from January to December of 1994, *Newsweek* printed 13 articles which would meet the standards of the methodology used here, of these 5 (38%) presented young women who were not white and 7 (54%) presented women who were not middle or upper class. While this study is not a historical comparison of narratives, this quick sample does indicate that overwhelmingly the social conversation reflected in these articles is one specifically regarding white middle/upper class women. Additionally, the group is overwhelmingly heterosexual; lesbianism or bisexuality only appears in 4 of the articles (6%), with one of the four references stating how rare it is in the high school population.

While the work of Clark-Flory and Levy would predict that the representations of women that would appear in these articles would fall into two categories: the virginity pledgers or the Girls Gone Wild, this is not what occurred. Though there were multiple representations of young women who have chosen chastity, there were few of Levy’s “Female Chauvinist Pigs.” Even as there were conversations that focused on the potential harms of pop culture, in which Britney Spears, Paris Hilton and similar celebrities were shown as Levy describes, the main point of these articles tended to be how teenagers were too media-savvy to be affected by them (Deveny et al: 2007; Streisand 2005). Outside of these conversations that focused on pop culture, there was only one article of the 63 that presented women as Levy would predict. In an article in *Time*, “The Strip is Back,” hailing the comeback of Las Vegas, there is one paragraph in which a female bar owner says of her young clients “we give women some empowerment. Let them dance on a table and feel like a star for a minute… We give them a safe, contained environment to
act out their fantasies” (Stein 2004: 28). That is the only instance in which this presentation appears. Instead, the representation of young women, their sexual choices and consequences, falls far more in line with the ideals of Victorian white womanhood, overwhelmingly showing young women as pure, as passive and prey, and finally as pious.

Discourse of Purity

The first discourse revolves notions of purity. This discourse, based loosely on Michelle Fine’s discourse of “Sexuality as Violence,” venerates the naiveté of young girls and posits that merely exposing them to information regarding sexuality is actually an act of violence, damaging their innocence and wholesomeness, and therefore “presumes that there is a causal relationship between official silence and a decrease in sexual activity” (Fine 2003: 40). This is the discourse that Judith Levine identifies when she writes of people who believe in the “performativity of sexual speech” (2002: 133), people who deem speaking of sexuality to be as harmful to young people as actually engaging in the act. Because of this, Levine explains, “initiatives to protect children from exposure to allegedly corrupting sex talk, whether from sex education programs or the media, are central to conservative cultural politics” (2002: 1). It is this need to “protect” young women from information and knowledge that defines this discourse.

When the collected articles were separated by category, the category that appeared most often was that of “health,” which covered 16, or 25%, of the articles. In
this category the discourse of purity prevails. The majority of these articles (11) were about the HPV vaccine Gardasil. The studies proving the potential for the vaccine were published in 2002, the vaccine was approved in 2006, and in early 2007 Texas became the first state to mandate girls between the ages of 11 and 12 receive the vaccine, a mandate that was overturned due to public controversy. Accordingly, 2 of the articles were from 2002 discussing the potential for the vaccine and the other 9 were written between 2006 and 2007 discussing the controversy. All the articles written prior to 2007 were positive in tone, with such comments as, “the potential for this is just fabulous,” (Brink 2002: 50) placing the magazines firmly in support of the vaccine; conversely the articles written in 2007 were split down the middle between positive and negative reactions. Of the articles that were written before 2007 half mentioned either real or potential controversy; all but one of the articles written in 2007 discussed it.

Gardasil vaccinates against four strains of HPV, two of which are the most likely causes of cervical cancer, and two of which commonly cause genital warts. As stated in a Time magazine report of 2006, “you’d think that if they invented a vaccine that protects you from cancer, everyone would want it” (Gorman 2006: 66). Yet, everyone did not want it given to their daughter. The controversy, as presented in the magazines, was largely about “the controversial goal of vaccinating young virgins against STDs” (Sayre 2007: 19). According to Time the government mandates and recommendations for vaccination “triggered cries of alarm from pro-abstinence groups that feared doing so would encourage promiscuity” (Bjerklie et al 2006: 94), or, as Newsweek says, “making an inoculation for an STD mandatory may encourage premarital sex and violates parental
rights” (Ramirez 2007: 10). Both of these statements firmly fall within the discourse of purity, for they both propose that by simply giving young girls a vaccination they will be more likely to engage in sexual activity. Similarly, in a *Time* article, the reader is told of a pediatrician who, although he supports giving the shot, is “willing to edit his discussion of HPV transmission for those who don’t want a child to hear it” (Wallis 2007: 67).

Levine states that “the Romantic child…serves as a powerful political icon in sex education conflicts” (2002: 14), and in the controversy over Gardasil, with its specific focus on virgins and sexuality, the Romantic Child is clearly the image in play; a young girl so innocent and pure that simply by hearing how a virus is transmitted will be injured, and potentially turned into a promiscuous woman. Additionally, as hooks’ and Collins, along with others, have repeatedly shown, the notion of purity and innocence is highly race-specific, making it unsurprising that there is not a single woman of color presented in these debates.

In the cultural arena of marketing, “retailers like Abercrombie & Fitch create thong underwear for ten-year-olds with seductive slogans like “Wink,Wink” and “Eye Candy”…[while] toy manufacturer Tesco sold a pink plastic “Peekaboo Pole Dancing” kit, complete with tiny garter and toy money for stuffing into it, on its “Toys and Games” Web site” (Durahm 2008: 23), but in these articles the young girls, who never speak for themselves, exist in a state of complete sexual ignorance. The power of the Romantic Child is stronger in the Gardasil debates than in other articles in this study at least in part because these are the articles talking about the youngest girls. For the vaccine to be most effective it must be given before adolescents become sexually active and the
recommended age of vaccination is young. The vaccine was tested for safety in girls as young as 9, although the CDC guidelines recommend it be given by age 12. Kincaid’s premise that there is appeal in the taboo of the sexualized child explains part of the outcry. Kincaid states that, “eroticizing exists in symbiotic relation with sanitizing, and the veiling and the exposing exist in an encircling doublespeak” (1998: 102). From this perspective, an opportunity to discuss the tenuous virginity of pre-teen girls is reason enough for a controversy.

In support of this contention is another policy that began in 2006; the CDC changed the HIV screening guidelines to recommend that everyone from 13 to 64 be screened annually. While this is mentioned twice in the articles, it is presented with no outcry or controversy. The girls are the same age, the disease spread through the same activities, so the only difference between the policies is that one is preventative. If girls at age 13 test positive for HIV, then clearly they are no longer virgins, hence no longer pure, and therefore they cannot be harmed by exposure to conversation of their disease; as they are already sullied, no violence can come to them from mere talk. This also explains one doctor’s strange answer to the Gardasil controversy: after explaining that “ideally” the vaccine should be given before sexual activity begins, she goes on in the article to suggest that instead of giving the vaccine to young girls, we should “persuade the ones who will most immediately benefit – young, sexually active women – to get the vaccine” (Healy 2007: 67). This seeming contradiction is explained through the understanding of Kincaid’s Romantic Child and the discourse of purity, for through them we understand that it is better for young girls to risk cancer than to lose their innocence.
Once they have crossed the line into sexual activity however, then we can speak freely about the health consequences they have already placed themselves at risk for.

The 2 articles about Plan B that came up in the study also support the idea that this controversy is about the age of the young women. In 2006 the FDA approved Plan B, also known as the morning-after pill as it prevents pregnancy when taken soon after engaging in sexual intercourse, for over the counter sales to women over the age of 18, women younger than that still require a doctor’s prescription. According to *U.S. News and World Report* the FDA’s rationale for this, was “a fancy way of saying access to contraceptives would drive young women to reckless sex” (Healy 2006: 58). This apparently is not a concern for the FDA if the woman involved is over the age of 18.

Foucault contends that the reason we continue to think of sex as repressed is that by doing so we achieve extra excitement when we speak of it; “if sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression” (1990: 6). Simultaneously, Blank tells us that, “in eroticizing virginity, youth, physical nubility, ignorance, inexperience, fragility and vulnerability are objectified” (2007: 196). In Kincaid we find these two ideas combined: we speak of threats to fragile and vulnerable virgins for it excites us, and in this speaking the virginity of the young becomes a fetish. According to Hall, “fetishism, then, is as strategy for having it both ways: for both representing and not representing the tabooed, dangerous or forbidden object of pleasure and desire…it allows a double focus to be maintained – looking and not looking – an ambivalent desire to be satisfied” (1997c: 268). Again, however, it is important to stress
that just as virginity is color-coded for white women, so too is the idea of purity. And so, looking at the articles in this study that concern the youngest of the girls, the discourse of purity reigns supreme. If the girls are young, and their innocence is perceived as intact, then they are deprived of agency by simply saying that they cannot know enough to make decisions because in the knowing they would be harmed. However, as they get older, the discourse must shift; in a sex-saturated culture we cease to believe that they lack any sexual exposure; not only does their age discredit their ignorance, but they begin to openly admit to having sexual relations, and so a new discourse must take hold.

Discourse of Passive Prey

Of all the articles in the health category, only one, “The Pill’s Price on Campus,” which discusses a law change that caused college health clinics to lose their discount prices on birth control pills, presented young women speaking to journalists on their own behalf. In only this one article are women presented as active agents, even organizing a campus group to help subsidize costs. This article is an anomaly in its presentation of young women as active agents, not merely within the health category, but in the entire collection of articles. Importantly, even this article does not show women as active sexual agents, only as active agents in procuring health services, but it still presents them as agentic beings. Far more common in the presentation of young women, was a compromised or nonexistent manifestation of agency, managed by explaining the women’s actions through the second discourse which presents women as passive prey.
This discourse is based on Fine’s second category, sexuality as victimization, which she defines as one wherein “female adolescent sexuality is represented as a moment of victimization in which the dangers of heterosexuality for adolescent women… are prominent” (2003: 41). However, the discourse of passive prey expands upon Fine’s category, as the defining features are not only that the women involved are in danger, but that additionally their agency is categorically denied, forcing them into a reactive victim role.

In all the articles in the health category there was only one that was not focused specifically on either STDs or contraception: titled “A Summer Assignment,” its focus was on the need for college students to receive preventative health care while home for summer break. The article mentions many “psycho-social behaviors” that put young people’s health at risk, and suggests finding a “practice that openly addresses sexually transmitted diseases, mental health, substance abuse, tobacco use and daredevil behavior” (Baldauf 2007: 68). It also talks about parents needing to be open to the idea that their children may be having sex. However, the lens through which this article understands college-age sexuality is presented clearly in one of its final paragraphs. The reader is told that:

Daughters need to know that when a Doctor asks if she could be pregnant it’s not out of nosiness, and it’s not a value judgment…For the future they might benefit from a discussion of how to get out of a situation in which they are being pressured to have sex. Sons need to know about STDs and how to read a woman’s signals that no means no. Everybody needs to hear about the dangers of binge drinking (Baldauf 2007: 69).
While date rape, assault and peer pressure certainly exist on college campuses and ought to be addressed, the presentation of women in this article is one in which the only direct mention of their sexual activity is attached to the idea that it is performed against their will, at the same time that young men are presented solely as potential perpetrators. This presentation is the epitome of the discourse of passive prey.

If this discourse only appeared in this one article, or appeared in conjunction with other presentations of women’s agency, that would allow the reader to understand that while these are threats that need to be acknowledged and acted upon, they are only pieces of a larger picture. Instead, this single discourse appears in 16 of the articles, or 25% of the time, and this is after the methodology used removed all articles whose theme was adults who victimized young people, the addition of which would have significantly increased this percentage.

On some occasions, the discourse appears less blatantly as in “Risky Business,” an article in *U.S. News and World Report* that explores the policies around abstinence-only sex education and its intersections with teen sex lives. Here the reader meets Kate, Laura and Lynn, three 15-year-old girls, who have the following conversation over pizza:

“Now that we’ve had sex, my boyfriend says I am being a tease if I’m too tired and just want to kiss,” says Kate a pert blond in a hooded Abercrombie and Fitch sweatshirt.

“Yes,” they all chime in. “I was just having that exact conversation with my boyfriend. Once you have sex, every time you hook up you have to have sex.” adds Laura, who also wonders whether “it’s normal, the way he talks to me. He does have a temper and stuff” (Mulrane 2002: 42).
While this conversation is not explicitly about women being forced to have sex against their will, it is a conversation in which women are being pressured to, and it is additionally tinged with hints of domestic violence. Other times, the discourse of passive prey is absolutely clear, as in *U.S. News and World Report* article, “Not Good at Saying (or Hearing) ‘No,’” which is simply a compilation of rape and assault statistics from a study of young women.

Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Sexual Politics*, discussing the rape of black women notes, “rape joins sexuality and violence as a very effective tool to routinize and normalize oppression” (2005: 232), exposing rape and sexual assault as tools which are used to perpetuate domination. However, there is a strong indication that this is not exactly what is occurring in these articles. When assault is not hinted at, or rape directly declared, there is a third, and more troubling, way that the discourse of passive prey manifests itself: by insertion into women’s active sexual decision-making as an explanation. This can be seen in the “Summer Assignment” example above, where directly after speaking of a young women’s possibility of pregnancy assault is discussed, as opposed to contraception; the young women is assumed to need negotiating skills to avoid having sex, instead of information and negotiating skills for how have to have it safely. Even more clearly, in a *Time* article “Women on a Binge” a statistic is quoted which says that, “there was a 150% increase in “unplanned” sexual activities, date rape and sexual assault” (Morse 2002: 58). This sentence, by measuring all three of these activities in one number, implies that they are all highly correlated, if not essentially the same. By connecting young women’s sexual activities to force and coercion two results
occur: the young women are denied all sexual agency, and the discourse becomes a public affair. If young women are having consensual sex then there is a different sense of public responsibility and involvement than if young women are being forced, coerced, or pressured into sex that is against their will. Rape is a crime. By presenting young women as actual or potential victims of criminal activity then the public has a responsibility to be informed and involved. The presentations of these victims without agency are a mirror image of colonial representations. Collins talks of ideas of “White womanhood as beautiful, the most desirable and irresistible women, lacking agency in sexual matters, and in need of White male protection” (2005: 64). Vital to understanding this image of womanhood, is perceiving that it is not only about the women themselves, as McClintock and Stoler both show this creation of white womanhood was also essential for colonial understandings of manhood and of the nation-state itself. As Stoler notes, “a defense of community, morality, and white male power was achieved by increasing control over and consensus among Europeans, by reaffirming the vulnerability of white women and the sexual threat posed by native men, and by creating new sanctions to limit the liberties of both” (2002: 60). In the twenty-first century it has become taboo to describe the rapists as “native men,” “black,” or in any term “other,” so they simply cease to be described, but the presence of undefined predators remains, keeping women vulnerable and ensuring that the power of their protectors remains a necessity. Additionally the “liberties” of which Stoler speaks, continue to be limited by these morality tales. Of all the articles that discussed rape and assault, only one presented a woman freeing herself from the situation, Latoya Huggins one of the young women interviewed in the Newsweek article,
“Choosing Virginity” and one of the only black women in any of the articles. Although a man broke into her house and attempted to rape her, she was saved by a ringing phone. According to Blank, “across cultures and eras, virgins have been perceived as having a particular potent purity that acts as a shield and keeps the virgin from harm” (2007: 62), and according to these articles this is still the case; the only women who are safe are those who are entirely chaste. Conversely, in exploring Western treatment of black women, Collins notes, that “Jezebels couldn’t be raped” (2005: 66), their inherent “wantonness” made rape a non-applicable crime. This historical treatment of black “Jezebels” illuminates the underlying pattern of the discourse of passive prey: while Black women were not viewed as capable of being raped, these magazine presentations tell us that regardless of their own desires these white women are not capable of choosing to have sex.

The discourse of passive prey also expands to be a defining lens beyond women’s choices around sexuality. 8 of the 16 articles, or half, that presented this discourse also discussed alcohol or drug use. The effect of adding drugs into the presentation does not change the outcome; the women are only shown as having less agency with even higher likelihoods of becoming victims. Whether in “The Perfect Crime” an article about women drugged with GHB and then raped, or “A Threat to Teen Brains” in which the reader is told that drinking leads young people to “engage in unprotected or unwanted sex” (Schwartz 2007: 50) where again the difference between the two is erased, as young women engage in activities further outside the “appropriate boundaries” instead of being presented as “worse” or “bad” they are simply shown to have even less agency.
Kilbourne notes that, “heavy drinking is something that is seen by the culture as something that makes both men and women more masculine” (1999: 175), but in these articles every action that these young women take that places them further outside of female norms, instead of being seen as rebellious choices, are presented as making them more vulnerable. McClinotck states that “because, for male nationalists, women serve as the visible markers of national homogeneity, they become subjected to especially vigilant and violent discipline” (1995: 365), in these magazine articles it is shown that young women who drink, engage in drug use, or even just decide to date in high school without pledging their virginity, are threatened with sexual assault as the discipline for their unsuitable behavior.

Women as Passive Prey - Complications

There are articles that complicate this discourse of passive prey: those that involve celebrities, those that discuss statutory rape cases, one about female prostitution and three which focus on studies of teen sexual activities. While rarely actually contradicting the discourse of passive prey, exploring these articles does expose some of the difficulties of maintaining it.

Including the cast of The Real World and Jenna Bush in the category, “Celebrity Profiles” accounted for 8 (12%) of the articles collected. In these articles, when the celebrities portrayed are acting as celebrities, i.e. shown in their public personas, or on “reality” camera, then they do not uphold the discourse of women as passive prey. In
contrast, they often represent Levy’s image of female chauvinist pigs. According to a *Newsweek* article, “Girls Gone Bad?” Paris Hilton, Britney Spears and Lindsey Lohan can be summed up as, “oversexed, underdressed celebrities who can’t seem to step out of a car without displaying their well-waxed private parts to photographers” (Deveny et. al. 2007: 41). Or, in a *Time* article, “Cut the Tequila” about *The Real Cancun*, the movie version of MTV’s hit reality-show *The Real World*, the reader is told that “while there are montages of such wholesome teen activities as swimming with dolphins and bungee jumping… mostly it’s just drunken sex” (Stein 2003: 68). While the women in these articles may uphold Levy’s unflattering stereotype, they also stand in contrast to those portrayed in either the discourse of purity or the discourse of passive prey. These women are agentic beings in their worlds, making sexual choices, using alcohol and drugs, and making a career out of it. In the case of Tila Tequila, profiled in *Time* as the “Madonna of Myspace” an empire has been built on just that, as she says in her profile, “there’s a million hot naked chicks on the Internet…there’s a difference between those girls and me. Those chicks don’t talk back to you” (Grossman 2006a: 55).

At first glance, while this is clearly not a feminist utopia of representational choices, it does seem to at least provide another option. Unfortunately, on closer examination it fails to actually follow through. When these same celebrities are interviewed in person, outside of their public personas, the story that is presented is again one of young women being victimized. In her interview with *Time* Britney Spears relates, “I’ve only slept with one person my whole life…I thought he was the one…I didn’t think he was going to go on Barbara Walters and sell me out” (Grossman 2003: 79). Avril
Livigne, in her interview with *Time*, discusses her pro-abstinence song “Don’t’ Tell Me,” saying she wrote it during “the phase in high school where every guy has ulterior motives” and claiming it “was a good message for girls to be strong” (Winters 2004: 87). However, with lyrics including “Don't think that your charm and the fact that your arm is now around my neck will get you in my pants, I'll have to kick your ass and make you never forget. I'm gonna ask you to stop, thought I liked you a lot, but I'm really upset. Get out of my head. Get off of my bed” the strength Levigne seems to be referring to is the strength to avoid sexual assault. Even Beyonce Knowles who, the reader is told, “is too cool not to talk about sex, but…also too serious to wink about it” (Tyrangiel 2003: 57), says that her *Dangerously in Love* album “talks about all different types of relationships, from the first time you meet him and are attracted to him, to the first time you tell him no” (Tyrangiel 2003: 57). Or, when asked about her daughter Paris’ infamous sex tape, Kathy Hilton replies that it “was very painful. Very Painful. Very Painful…But it taught me that I really can’t trust everybody” (Peyser 2005: 58). Somehow, all of these women end up being presented as either real or potential victims of their sexuality.

Similarly, in “This Could Be Your Kid,” a *Newsweek* article on juvenile prostitution there is again a glimpse of another discourse that is quickly eclipsed. This is the only article out of the 63 that presents a young woman speaking of her sexual activities as a choice. Here the reader meets 17 year-old “Stacey.” After meeting a man at the Mall of America who offers to buy her clothing in exchange for watching her try them on, Stacey decides to become a prostitute. Stacey says she decided that, “potentially good sex is a small price to pay for the freedom to spend money on what I want”
(Smalley et al. 2003: 44). In this quote Stacey opens up the possibility of a young 
woman actually liking sex (“potentially good sex”) and doing it on her own terms, even if 
those terms are morally questionable. However, while the article begins with the threat of 
prostitution entering middle-class homes, it quickly moves to stories of pimps luring girls 
into their business with deceitful tricks and eventually kidnapping them, even though this 
was not Stacey’s story. While Stacey’s appearance seemed initially to provide an 
alternative representation, she is immediately erased by law enforcement officials talking 
about “pimps [who] are increasingly targeting girls at the local mall” (Smalley et al. 
2003: 46), and the discourse of passive prey is restored.

Alternatively, in the three articles that discussed the two headline-making 
statutory rape cases that occurred during the period included in the study, the two women 
concerned were both said simply to have been involved consensually (Stein L. 2004; 
Schwab and Wilson 2007; Gibbs 2007b). Both of these cases involved black men, with 
one of the women being white and one being black, yet none of the articles mention race. 
In one case a young man is videotaped having sex with one girl and then continues to be 
videotaped having oral sex with another who would later claim to have been intoxicated, 
but there is no mention of this. In the other case, the young woman actually filed a rape 
suit, which was later dropped to statutory rape, but no article mentions this either. In fact, 
the main point made by all three articles is that the men involved were treated unfairly by 
the law. In these articles where the women are not named (for victim confidentiality 
purposes) but the men are, the men become the victims. This follows with the content of 
the *Time* article “The Secret Love lives of Teenage Boys” which discusses the result of a
study of teenagers that concluded, “both boys and girls agreed that girls have the power in heterosexual relationships, including when it comes to sex” (Grossman 2006b: 41). Additionally, in this article we meet an anonymous 18 year-old male who says of his first sexual experience “I was too young, I was scared, I didn’t know what I was doing. I wasn’t ready for it…[but] she was my girlfriend and that’s what she wanted” (Grossman 2006b: 41). Looking at these four articles together it seems that there is potentially a discourse that exists for men which involves being victimized through sexual actions as well, although certainly one would assume it would have important differences. The methodology of this study focused on retrieving articles about young women, and so the data cannot support any conclusions on this point, other than to say, that of the articles collected here, when the focus is male, and the female involved exists solely in the background, the link between sexual activity and danger is still presented, only in reverse.

Finally, there are two articles, both published in *Time*, which present results of “scientific studies,” that directly contradict this discourse of passive prey. One, “A Teen Twist on Sex,” relates the new statistics provided by the National Center for Health Statistics about teen sexual behavior. The vast majority of the article focuses on the fact that “more than half the adolescents surveyed…said they had engaged in oral sex” (Lemonick 2005: 64), and, importantly that, “although you may assume that girls mostly perform and boys mostly receive, the numbers show the give and take…is about equal” (Lemonick 2005: 64). Disregarding the question of why the articles believes the reader will assume a gender imbalance, the presentation of girls receiving oral sex certainly contradicts the representations which show them solely as victims. Similarly, “A
“Snapshot of Teen Sex” presents the results of a study done that mapped the “elaborate sexual liaisons” (Wallis 2005: 58), of teenagers in one town over an 18-month period. The study determined that “there are few behavioral differences between the sexes. There are promiscuous boys who prey on less experienced girls, says Berman [a co-author of the study] ‘and girls who are predators of boys’” (Wallis 2005: 58). In these two articles, in which the focus is neither individual men nor women, and in which no actual teenagers speak, a different discourse appears. Here, gender differences around sexual activities are nominal, pleasure and agency exist, and being a potential victim is only one of many options. Since these two articles (3% of the total) are both based on statistical analysis it seems possible that they actually represent an accurate picture of what teen sexual activity looks like, which reinforces the idea that the far more prevalent discourse of passive prey is more about societal morality tales than the reporting of fact.

Discourse of Piety

The final discourse surrounding young women’s sexual choices is a discourse of piety, defining piety as not only inclusive of religious devotion, but also to include a general sense of dutiful goodness. Fine defines her third category, that of sexuality as individual morality, as one that “introduces explicit notions of sexual subjectivity for women” and that “values women’s sexual decision making as long as the decisions made are for premarital abstinence” (2003: 42). However, that was far too inclusive a definition to use in this study, because within all of the 63 total articles there was an
implicit, if not directly stated, understanding that sexual activities undertaken by young women were bad. As Judith Levine noted in her study of sex education controversies, “everyone agreed that young people were either the potential or actual victims of sex” (emphasis added 2002: 108). Instead, the discourse of piety includes articles that specifically address the abstinence-only movement, and articles that involve women who either expressly identify themselves as part of this movement, or who acknowledge that they are “waiting.” This elicited 16 articles (25%). However, many articles that explore the controversies around the abstinence-only movement involve young people from both sides of the debate, therefore in one article, like “Risky Business”, there are young sexually active women like Kate, Laura, and Lynn who are quoted above in the discourse of passive prey, and there are young women who have pledged their virginity. This means there is overlap between these 16 articles with articles counted above. Although not all supporters of the abstinence-only movement or young people who pledge their virginity are explicitly religious, there is certainly a strong religious undertone in this conversation; a full 75% (12) of these articles specifically referenced Catholicism, which is the only religion ever mentioned in any of the 63 articles, and as the Christian Right has been a strong proponent of the abstinence movement, there were strong latent links to religion in all of the articles.

Within these 16 articles there are two strains of the discourse of piety at work. The first strain, which is present in 7 of the articles, addresses the political controversy over the abstinence–only movement. If the methodology of this study did not require that only articles with specific references to women be included, there would have been more
articles in this category, as it is not a single-sex movement. These articles tell readers of the movement in general, relating information about Pure Love Clubs, Purity Rings, and “WaitWear undies” which are adorned with slogans like “Virginity Lane. Exit when married” (Kelley 2005: 47). But they are not always solely positive; they also work to expose some of the contradictions in the abstinence only movement. For instance, on the trouble with determining how long young people should wait to have sex, one article discussing parent’s complicated views says that while one mother “believes premarital sex is a sin…Others simply pray their kids will graduate from high school with their virginity in tact. And then what?” (Silver 2002: 46). Three of the articles address a conundrum that Blank discusses, “young people are deeply divided over whether oral or anal intercourse constitute “having sex,” calling into question just who might be qualified to call himself or herself a virgin” (2007: 5). The articles note that young people are engaging in sexual activities like oral and anal sex “in order to maintain their technical virginity” (Mulrane 2002: 45), and that they are doing so without any information about the risks involved because many schools no longer allow discussions of condoms. Similarly, four of the articles note that young people who take virginity pledges while waiting longer than their peers to become sexually active, are less likely to use any form of protection when they do. Intriguingly, three of the articles also discuss “secondary virginity” in which young people who have had sex decide to stop and become “revirginized.” While Ehrenreich et. al. would prophesy in 1986 that “the symbolic importance of female chastity is rapidly disappearing” (1986: 2), the ability for people to now “revirginize” shows that that opposite is happening. Not only does virginity still
matter, it is even more of a symbol than a reality if one can now “pledge” virginity after having had sexual intercourse. This conversation is largely one between parents, educators, and youth advocates. As Levine notes, “abstinence connects powerfully to that deep parental wish: to protect and “keep” their children by guarding their childhood” (emphasis original 2002: 109) and these articles are an arena where conversations of age, maturity, and competency of young people are the main focus. These articles remain within the discourse of piety because while abstinence as a federally–funded movement here is contested, the space allows ample room for abstinence advocates to have center stage, and the their main goal is to have all young people unequivocally saying no to sexual activity.

The second strain that appears in the remaining 9 articles is not about abstinence as a political battleground, but instead focuses on “cultural shifts toward sexual restraint among young women” (Sullvan 2005: 90). These articles have very few adults speaking of what is best for young women, or advocates of any stance, instead these 9 articles are filled with young people themselves, mostly women, who through their representation are living examples of the discourse of piety. One of these young women is Jennifer Teschler, a 15 year-old introduced to readers in the Newsweek article “Meet the Gamma Girls.” Jennifer is presented as being “comfortable in her skin” (Meadows and Carmichael 2002: 44), and her existence “is evidence that a teenage girl in 2002 can be emotionally healthy, socially secure, independent-minded, and just plain nice.” The article presents Jennifer as being close to her father, strong with her faith and a leader at school. When it comes to her decision not have sex, readers are told that “she was
shocked when her dad recently told her that while he thought waiting was best, it was her own choice” and that “her friends tell her she’s never going to make it to marriage” (Meadows and Carmichael 2002: 49), Jennifer’s response is, “that just makes me more determined” (Meadows and Carmichael 2002: 49).

Similar to Jennifer, is Shelby Knox, a 23 year-old virgin profiled in a U.S. News and World Reports article “School of Hard Knox” before PBS aired a special on her political work. When she was younger Shelby did pledge her virginity and wear a promise ring, however, starting when she was 15, she worked to have her local school replace their abstinence-only curricula with a comprehensive sex education program. While Shelby no longer wears her promise ring, she has not yet had sex because, she says, “I have not found the person I want to have sex with yet” (Hsu 2005: 18). Both Jennifer and Shelby, like their peers in the additional articles, are shown as being happy and powerful in their lives. By choosing to give up their sexuality, the articles allow these women to have back their agency. According to Hill Collins, “women need not have submissive personalities; they only need to recognize the boundaries of White male authority” (2005: 196). Categorically, the women in these articles, all of whom have renounced sexual activity before marriage on their own terms, have more agency than women in any of the other discourses. In a Newsweek article “Choosing Virginity,” one of the reasons young women decide to remain virgins is to “gain some semblance of control over their own destinies” (Ali et al. 2002: 61), in contrast to the young women who do chose to have sex, who by inference, must give up control of their destinies, or, as shown in the discourses above, become victims lacking in agency. It is through these
agentic women that the power of the discourse of piety becomes clear, for these women, who had a choice to have sex and refused, are the women the articles present as having the most authority over the own lives and thus the most potential for what they will make out of them.

**Discourse of Piety - Extended**

In Fine’s study, there was a fourth and final discourse that she identified: the Discourse of Desire, which she defined as “the naming of desire, pleasure, or sexual entitlement” (Fine 2003: 43); she noted that in her study it appeared merely as “a whisper” (Fine 2003: 43). In this study of articles, the discourse of desire was nonexistent. Of all 63 articles there was only one mention of potential female pleasure, and that was made by Stacey, the prostitute discussed above. Alternatively, there was a different discourse around pleasure that ran through the articles, and it specifically allied itself with feminism. Including the article “The Strip is Back,” mentioned at the beginning of the data section, there were 8 articles that specifically mentioned feminism. However, as noted previously, “The Strip is Back” was the only one that aligned feminism with Levy’s image of the “female chauvinist pig.” Instead, the portrayal of these young feminists is summed up by a *Newsweek* article, “Girls Going Mild(er)” as young women who “cover up, insist on enforced curfews on college campuses, bring their moms on their dates and pledge to stay virgins until marriage” (Yabroff 2007: 50), firmly aligning themselves with the discourse of piety. This description of a young feminist, is very similar to Jennifer Teschler of “Meet The Gamma Girls” discussed
above, according to that author, “these girls don’t long to be invited to parties – they’re too busy writing an opinion column in the school paper or surfing and horseback riding… it’s a terrific time to be a young woman” (Meadows and Carmichael 2002: 47). And, in an almost identical quote, readers are told in “Girls Gone Bad,” that, “it’s a great time to be a girl: women are excelling in sports, academics and the job market” (Deveny et. al. 2007: 42).

While Levy states that women are “getting implants and wearing bunny logos as supposed symbols of our liberation” (2005: 3), those women do not appear in these articles. Instead, in line with the representation of virgins above, pleasure is found for young women who “are rejecting promiscuous ‘bad girl’ roles” (Yabroff 2007: 50). Or, as phrased by Alice Kunce in the article “Choosing Virginity,” “one of the empowering things about the feminist movement… is that we’re able to assert ourselves, to say no to sex and not feel pressured about it” (Ali et al. 2002: 62). According to “Women on a Binge,” an article which notes a troubling increase of women’s drinking on college campuses as each woman tries to “drink like a guy” (Morse 2002:57), “drinking has always had an uneasy relationship to women’s freedoms” (Morse 2002: 59). The woman who has slowed down her drinking and is presented as an image of “girl power indeed” tells the reader that “in the wave of feminism we’re in right now, women shouldn’t be emphasizing sameness with men” (Morse 2002: 61). At its pinnacle are the young women in a *Time* article, who “find a sense of wholeness” and experience” a “real falling in love” (Schmidt and Cullen 2006: 56) when they enter a convent. As the reader is told in “Today’s Nun Has a Veil – and a Blog,” Pope John Paul II interprets “modern
feminism as a way for women to express Christian values” (Schmidt and Cullen 2006; 53). However, while this article tells of a website “Vocationnetwork.org [that] frames the choice much like a dating service, with Christ as the ultimate match” (Schmidt and Cullen 2006: 54) this is as close to Fine’s discourse of desire that any of the young women presented in these articles can get.

Discussion

_A cultural analysis is not meant as an evasion of responsibility...but as a means of getting closer to knowing the ways our heritage may be driving us into corners – simply by giving us so few stories to tell..._

- James Kincaid

The presentation of women’s sexuality that Levy, Durham, and others, are in differing forms concerned about, does exist in mainstream popular culture: “Girls Gone Wild” continues to make millions of dollars, Paris Hilton, Britney Spears and Lindsey Lohan, a trio once called “The Bad Girls of the Apocalypse” continue to fill magazine covers with their sexploits, and MTV’s “Spring Break,” a show described by Juliet Schor as a program that “glorifies heavy partying, what it calls ‘bootylicious girls,’ erotic dancing, wet t-shirt contests, and binge drinking” (2004: 55), continues to air twelve years after its inception. It is undeniable that reacting to this is at least part of the reason that these news magazines spent the five years from 2002 to 2007 focused specifically on the sexuality of young wealthy white women, erasing all other young women from the story. Stuart Hall states that, “stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed
place. Symbolic boundaries keep the categories ‘pure,’ giving cultures their unique meaning and identity. What unsettles culture is ‘matter out of place’ – the breaking of our unwritten rules and codes” (1997c: 236), and the sexuality presented by the Girls Gone Wild is certainly “matter out of place.” However, the response of the news magazines in this study to this “breaking of unwritten codes” is not the same as the troubled responses of some feminists. Both Durham and Levy fear that the presentation of women’s sexuality in popular culture is harmful to women because it asks them to accept the male gaze and male pleasure as the goal, both are angered that “the very conservative version of sex celebrated in these arenas is strongly linked with sexual emancipation and even feminism” (Durham 2008: 33). Yet, the sexuality that is linked to feminism in the news magazines is even more conservative than that which Durham and Levy fear, it is the sexuality of the chaste.

Instead of Girls Gone Wild, through the three discourses of purity, passive prey and piety the articles studied here present women who are either too pure to contemplate sex, victims of decisions they were pressured into, or actively celibate. While the women who chose abstinence are presented as having ownership of their lives and destinies, the most remarkable thing about these narratives, is that all the women presented who have decided to be sexually active are stripped of their agency, and shown solely as wounded and suffering from their decision. In the end of the U.S. News and World Report article “Risky Business” the reader is taken back to the pizza parlor and to Kate, Laura and Lynn’s conversation there:

Lynn turns to Kate.
“Are you sorry you had sex?”
“So young you mean?” Kate asks. She sighs heavily, looks up for a moment and begins.
“Well, it wasn’t the biggest mistake of my life or anything,” she says. “I mean, yeah, I regret it, but maybe I would’ve regretted it until I was 18. Maybe you always think you should have waited longer” (Mulrane 2002: 49).

Kate’s sexuality serves as a cautionary tale, while engaging in sexual activity “wasn’t the biggest mistake” of her life, she clearly does not advocate it. By positing that “maybe you always think you should have waited longer,” implying that sexual activity will never be worth the cost, Kate is actually advocating for abstinence. While some of the young women are represented as being forced or coerced into sex, the consequence for those, like Kate above, who engage voluntarily in sexual activity is “regretted sex” (Morse 2002: 58) which causes them to be “plagued by guilt” (Ali et el. 2002: 66), leading one young man to ask "how will they feel when they wake up in the morning?” (Chu 2005: 48). These are not women acting as sexual agents. While Levy states that our culture has “determined that all empowered women must be overtly and publicly sexual, and because the only sign of sexuality we seem to be able to recognize is a direct allusion to red light entertainment, we have laced the sleazy energy and aesthetic of a topless club or a Penthouse shoot throughout our entire culture” (2005: 26), this “sleazy aesthetic” rarely manifests in these articles outside of references to pop culture. Stunningly, there are no wantonly promiscuous women presented to reflect the goodness of the virgins. Instead, by presenting the actions of all sexually active women as acts of predation upon them, they are not made into “jezebels,” instead they are all women in need of protection,
guidance and rescue. Conversely, through the lauding of virgins, “gamma girls,” and nuns, empowerment in these articles is presented as a thorough denial of all that is sexual.

*Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News and World Report* are the province of dominant cultural narratives in this country. While each of these magazines works not to offend, and therefore follows cultural progressions in the treatment of non-dominant groups, they have no avowed political agenda, and certainly would not be termed “feminist.” Instead, they act as cultural mirrors of our collective conscience, producing the morality tales that uphold the narratives in which society believes. In this arena, the narrative of young white women pursuing sexual agency has no voice; there is no debate over “Raunch Culture,” because here it does not exist. Instead, all young white women, morphed into a single symbolic category, are injured by both information regarding and activities involving sexuality. The response to “Raunch Culture” by these magazines is an unambiguous “no,” with the women whose actions step over the line being punished, but always reminded through “revirginization” that it is never too late to return.

Vitally, the discourses that define the women presented, purity, passive prey and piety, are all historical narratives of white womanhood. It is no coincidence that the overwhelming majority of young women presented in these articles are middle or upper class, heterosexual, white women, because at its core this presentation is a discourse sustaining the identity of whiteness.

Considering what is not depicted in these articles additionally supports this reading. Although these women may be harmed through their sexual activities, infected with disease, assaulted, raped, or out of control of their destinies, what they are never
shown as pregnant. Not once in the 63 articles collected for this study does the reader meet a teen mother. Compare this to the one-year total of 13 articles from *Newsweek* in 1994 in which 7 (54%) specifically addressed teen pregnancy. As shown above, the articles from 1994 also involved far more young women of color and Irvine has noted that, as with most media representations, “the pregnant teen as a type was never simply a product of straightforward measurement. She was, rather, a construct that reflected social anxieties about sexuality and race” (2004: 109). In 1994, with the battles over welfare reform raging in the nation, teen mothers were certainly associated with Welfare Queens, both of whom were seen in the public imagination as black. There have, numerically though not proportionally, always been more white teen mothers than black teen mothers, but the stereotype persists because teen motherhood has become a symbol of depravity. Not only does a pregnant women’s body serve as proof of her sexuality, by having a child too young and out-of-wedlock teen mothers are perceived as harmful to the system and designated as social pariahs. As black women are seen to be inherently licentious with no restraint regarding their sexuality, their procreation has been historically seen as a social problem. White women on the other hand, are offered motherhood as the pinnacle duty and experience of their existence (Roberts: 1997). Importantly teen motherhood also designates a permanent shameless place of “soiled femininity,” (Tannenbaum 1999: 12) from which there is no return. The young women presented in these articles however, are presented as women who can, and ought to be, saved. These women, unlike the black teen mothers of 1994, were not presented as morally corrupt, only lost. If we understand that this presentation is actually serving to buttress notions of white womanhood, then we
can understand why these women must be presented as having no sexual agency. If the
women were actively choosing, on their own terms and for their own pleasure, to engage
is sexual activity then trying to save them would be unjustifiable. By turning these
women, should they chose to have sex, into inevitable victims, the narrative allows room
for both the abstinent and the sexually active to exist in the magazine pages. While the
former needs to be saved and latter already has been, they are both presented as “worthy”
of it for they are simply mirror images; symbolically they are the same woman. The
women presented here are not shown to be morally bereft “lost” women, these young
women can still change their minds, become revirginized, and preserve the place of white
womanhood in our society.

The works of Stoler and McClintock argue that the symbolic categories of
whiteness, and white womanhood in specific, created during colonialism and re-presented
here, were formed to answer the identity crises of the colonizers, to differentiate the “us”
from the “them.” They are categories birthed in a calamitous predicament of justifying
colonial actions, where a failure to acceptably explain them would have disastrous
consequences both for individuals and the culture at large. Accordingly, white women’s
sexual activities are intrinsic arenas of national identity formation, their bodies serving as
the boundary lines of the dominant class. As Judith Levine says, “citizenship is a matter
of intimate life” (2002: xxii). The resurgence at this moment of these categories of white
womanhood amidst the absolute erasure of all other options, especially in light of the
alternative discourse of “Girls Gone Wild” making waves throughout popular culture
and entirely ignored here, would therefore indicate that a new identity crisis has emerged.
Importantly, the cause is not founded in real life changes of adolescents. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted by the Center for Disease Control, the number of adolescents in the United States engaging in sexual intercourse has changed by only 6 percentage points in the last 16 years (Trends in the Prevalence of Sexual Behaviors: 2007). Statistically this is an almost irrelevant change. Instead, some external cause must exist that demands such a thorough return to ideals so incongruent from women’s real daily lives, and even from other cultural presentations of women.

While the data compiled for this study does not give a definite answer as to the source of this crisis, it does give some direction as to where to look. The fact that the narrative of whiteness presented in these articles is so consistent, where it was not ten years ago is an important indicator. In 1994 these same magazines were discussing young women of color, young teen mothers, and women from lower economic classes. These women have not left the country, nor have these issues been resolved, yet, they have been omitted from the current story. Considering the unified front of the representation of “our women” shown in these articles, it would appear that we have ceased to worry about the “enemy” inside our borders, and are instead concerned with shoring up “ourselves” to confront an “other” that is outside.

Following Stoler and McClintok, this need to provide a unified sense of “ourselves” is an indication of a sense of collective insecurity. Searching the content of these same magazines during this same time period by keyword, exploring a multitude of possible causes for this insecurity ranging from the economy (631 articles) to globalization (52 articles) the single keyword which was written about most often, more
than *five times* more than any other subject, was Iraq. While this is not a conclusive finding, and while it is likely the insecurity of the nation’s collective conscious is a response to many differing factors cumulatively involved in the decline of the United States hegemony in the world, it still presents a powerful lens through which to view these representations.

In her book *The Terror Dream* Susan Faludi has premised that the attacks of September 11th 2001 forced long held mythologies within the United States to surface, as our collective conscience came to terms with our vulnerability. Faludi sees the place of women as essential cornerstones to these mythologies, saying that according to the media script, “the threat…wasn’t to our commercial and governmental hubs but to our domestic hearth” (2007: 5). While the World Trade Center attacks were certainly a pivotal moment in American history, focusing solely on those events seems too narrow a frame. After being attacked, the United States proceeded to enter a war without international support. A war with a country long defined as the “Oriental Other” whose involvement in the attacks, tenuous in the beginning, would come under harsh scrutiny and be eventually determined as nonexistent. Years would pass, billions would be spent and thousands would die, but long after the President declared “Mission Accomplished” the United States would remain as essentially an occupying force. This situation does not look so different from the predicament of colonizers who felt the need to justify themselves and their actions through the creation of their venerable, vulnerable, Christian white women, and perhaps explains, at least in part, why this is the story again being sold.
Levy tells us that “many of the conflicts between the women’s liberation movement and the sexual revolution and within the women’s movement itself were left unresolved thirty years ago. What we are seeing today is the residue of that confusion… putting various conflicting ideologies together to form one brand of raunch feminism” (2005: 74). Yet looking at the realm of sexuality in this collection of articles, there is hardly any residue of either movement apparent. Instead these women are being resolutely told to get back into their Victorian-era place. While not a conclusive finding, knowing that all of the magazines studied here were simultaneously intensely focused on Iraq does help expose why the presentation of young women’s sexuality found here was so oblivious to the trends that Levy, Durham and others spoke about. These magazines, in reflecting and serving the needs of our cultural collective conscience, were reconstructing ideals of colonial-era white womanhood, to uphold the character of a nation facing an identity crisis. By presenting “our” young women as pure, in need of protection, and as empowered through their piety and faith, these magazines served to remind “us” both who we were, and what we were fighting for.

Conclusion

T. Deenan Sharpley-Whiting, says that “when Snoop Dogg gave up hosting the Euro-focused Girls Gone Wild videos to launch a 1-900 number and Snoop’s Doggystyle – winner of an Adult Entertainment Award – he explained his reason in that ‘keep it real’ logic that has come to define this new black gender politics: ‘No black girls, no Spanish
girls – all white girls. And that ain’t cool, because they ain’t the only ho’s that get wild’ (2007: 13). But *Snoop Dog’s Doggystyle*, the first pornographic hip-hop video, which achieved great commercial success, won awards, and through numerous imitations created a new genre, was only one video. Even with all these achievements, it did not create an empire the way *Girls Gone Wild*, which is far less sexually explicit, did. The reason is one of race; the transgressing of boundaries and the sense of the taboo that made *Girls Gone Wild* so alluring is lost when translated onto the bodies of women of color in a culture that has already historically labeled them as “wild.” While white women are obviously not the only women who act in sexually explicit ways, our cultural narrative reacts differently to their actions because goes against the grain of historical discourse and expectations. White women are not supposed to have sexual desires or sexual agency, while women of color have historically been defined by theirs.

The response, or more aptly refusal of engagement, of the three largest newsweeklies to the “Girls Gone Wild”/”Female Chauvinist Pigs” debate, is not only impacted by race, but the discourse of young white women’s sexuality found within them is actually determined by it. This study shows that the narrative presented in these magazines from 2002 to 2007 is one which focuses on the cultural need for the preservation of white womanhood in its Victorian-era ideal. Through the discourse of purity white women are presented as potentially harmed simply by hearing information regarding sex. Through the discourse of passive prey white women are punished by assault and even rape if they cross the lines of appropriate behavior. And through the discourse of piety white women are praised for remaining chaste and find joy, meaning,
and even pleasure in rejecting all that is sexual, often under the guise of “feminist empowerment.” When combined, these discourses present an image of white womanhood that is an exact replica of those from colonialist times. While Levy, in her critique of “raunch” culture, posits that, “‘raunchy’ and ‘liberated’ are not synonyms. It is worth asking ourselves if this bawdy world of boobs and gams we have resurrected reflects how far we’ve come, or how far we have left to go” (2005: 5), the question that presents itself here, is why the mainstream media refuses to acknowledge that this “bawdy world,” and the women who inhabit it, even exist.

Instead, in these magazines that in the time period studied, focused more on Iraq than on any other singular topic, the women presented are overwhelmingly white and are all, in varying ways, embodiments of a Victorian ideal. An ideal created to defend and explain colonialist actions. To confirm this finding, more research needs to be done on the presentation of women in national magazines during a variety of national climates, both political and economic. It raises the question of whether white women are ever presented outside of this Victorian-era narrative, or if in more secure times, alternate stories are presented, but only on the bodies of other women. Additionally, these findings suggest that more research should be done on how women are presented in times of war, both women on domestic soil, and those who live in “enemy territory.” But it also reveals that while women, both avowed feminists and not, can battle within themselves over what makes a “feminist sexuality,” their battles will be subsumed as long as there is a national identity to be strengthened and supported, for the justifications of it will be found written upon their bodies.
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