

GIRLS, SEXUALITY AND THE STRANGE CARNALITIES OF ADVERTISEMENTS

Deconstructing the Discourse of Corporate Paedophilia

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Introduction

In 'Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of Children in Australia', Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze warn parents and policy makers of the threat to the physical, emotional and cognitive development of children wrought by the sexualising images found in corporate advertising and popular media directed at tween-aged children between the ages of six and eleven (Rush and La Nauze 2006a). Sexual images are seen as hazardous to young children in two ways: first, they promote undue concern with activities such as 'shopping, makeovers and imitating [sexy] pop stars', and in so doing distract children from other developmentally appropriate activities (Rush 2006). Second, such imagery perpetuates the 'grooming' of 'children for paedophiles', sending the message that 'children are sexually available (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, 3). Given the potential consequences of such outcomes, it should come as no surprise that 'Corporate Paedophilia' created a frenzy, albeit a short-lived one, in the Australian national media and caused heated debate on several blogs across the country.

As two feminist scholars studying the discursive production of childhood sexuality in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Egan and Hawkes 2007; Hawkes and Egan 2009), we are particularly drawn to Rush and La Nauze's findings and the provocation they produced in public discourse. After reading the reports, we are struck by the connections we see between the epistemological assumptions guiding contemporary discussions of the sexuality and sexualisation of girls and their resonance with debates on children and their sexuality over 150 years earlier. Although the materials creating risk may differ, we contend that the conceptualisation of the problem, the outcome and its dangers are strikingly similar.

Rush and La Nauze wrote 'Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of Children in Australia' and 'Letting Children be Children' (2006b) for the Australia Institute, a policy think tank that explores 'the impact on Australian society of the priority given to a narrow definition of economic efficiency over community, environmental and ethical considerations in public and private decision making' (Australia Institute 2006). Writing and research on childhood has not been the Institute's substantive focus in the past; rather, its exploration into childhood is situated within larger debates on the effects of the overvaluation of capitalism within the recently defeated Howard government.

The philosophy guiding the Australia Institute is both important and necessary, particularly given the erosion of workers' rights within the Australian context. We too are

concerned about the ever-present quality of the marketplace and the effects of overconsumption on both adults and children. Our apprehension with the work of Rush and La Nauze lies in the epistemological foundations of their arguments which fail to deconstruct hegemonic beliefs surrounding gender, sexuality and childhood. It is our contention that the conceptualisation of the problem and their policy recommendations rely on the same epistemological assumptions which guided the sexual reform movements at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Egan and Hawkes 2007; Mort 2000; Porter and Hall 1995).¹ As two scholars who have studied these movements and their implications, we are wary of the potential duplication of what sociologist Kristin Luker terms the 'double-edged sword' of reform agendas which can unwittingly create double standards and inequality in the name of protecting women and children from social evil (Luker 1998, 629).

We are interested in exploring the persistent quality of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ideologies on the sexuality of the child and the complex and contradictory ways in which they are deployed in the contemporary debate on corporate paedophilia and the sexualisation of girls. There are a number of questions guiding our exploration. How is the sexuality of girls constructed within the discourse on corporate paedophilia? What are the implications of such constructions? To what extent does the identification of girls' sexuality as problematic reproduce past constructions of the pathological nature of women's sexuality? How does a report that seems to place the welfare of girls at the centre often render their voices and their sexual decision making impossible and even pathological? Finally, how might we propose an alternative paradigm that encourages new questions and a new understanding of the lives of young girls and boys in our contemporary culture?²

Reading 'Corporate Paedophilia'

The term corporate paedophilia has its roots in Australian commentator Philip Adams' long-standing criticism of the place of marketing within the life of the child (Adams 2003). Adams defines corporate paedophilia as 'the abuse of children—involving sexual abuse, violent abuse and economic exploitation—by some of the mightiest corporations' (Adams 2003, 15). His contention that corporations 'brutalize' and 'sexualize' children in their marketing schemes and in doing so promote corporate 'molestation on a massive scale' resonates strongly with the alarm raised by Rush and La Nauze (Adams 2003, 15). For them, corporate paedophilia 'encapsulates the idea that such advertising and marketing is an abuse both of children and of public morality' (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, vii).

Within the pages of 'Corporate Paedophilia', Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze highlight the potential consequences, both personal and social, of the sexualisation of children. Drawing on social psychology, social learning theory, and feminist criticism, the authors explore demographic data on tween consumers and conduct content analysis on sexualising materials (magazines, music videos and print advertisements) to detail the extent and potential impact of sexualisation. For Rush and La Nauze, these advertisements both 'legitimate precocious sexual activity in children' and promote 'paedophilic connotations' (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, 11). Although they warn that the media create 'sexualising pressure' which 'has the potential to harm children in a variety of ways', their main emphasis is on the risks associated with premature or direct sexualisation (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, 35).

Premature sexualisation can vary from the pressure to look a certain way, thus encouraging anorexic tendencies and body image issues in young children, to the promotion of a range of sexually expressive behaviours such as flirting, dancing provocatively and premature sexual activity (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, 4). Sexualisation also hampers the ability to form positive and caring sexual relationships long into the future. Rush and La Nauze state that governmental intervention is needed to regulate the production of media directed to children under the age of 12. Intercession and governmental involvement will help protect children and offer support to 'parents in their caring role' (Rush and La Nauze 2006b, iii).

Children's sexuality, in both reports, is conceptualised in a paradoxical, and we believe, ultimately problematic manner. Rush and La Nauze presume that childhood sexuality is already culturally intelligible, making explication unnecessary. The authors state that 'childhood development includes a distinct sexual dimension prior to puberty, so the acknowledgement that children have a sexual dimension is not in itself of concern' (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, 1). Yet their lack of 'concern' is belied by their supposition that children's sexuality is precociously catalysed and damaged by the marketplace, a claim that occupies a central place in both reports. Rush and La Nauze presume that the expression of sexuality in children confirms that sexualisation has already occurred. Within both texts, childhood sexuality remains an unoperationalised variable occupying a taken-for-granted quality. How one operationalises a key variable, making it into a concept measurable within definitive methodological standards, is a central tenet of social science methodology and thus it is a striking omission. Moreover, although their title suggests that the report is analysing the effects of sexualisation on all children, the findings focus most specifically on girls.

Although boys are mentioned briefly in their initial report, they seem to escape the consequences of sexualisation by being an active agent in print advertisements ('checking out a girl' or striking 'active poses'), by being the objects of desire for whom girls have crushes, or by occupying positions of dominance in visual media (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, 7, 9, 37). Given the cursory position of boys within their analysis, the lack of specificity in their title is curious. This oversight is further compounded in their undeveloped statement that sexualising pressures 'might be more felt among girls' (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, vii). One is left to wonder: does sexualisation only pierce the consciousness of girl children? Is sexual expression or curiosity problematic only when it is found in girls? Does such a lack of elaboration unwittingly grant boy children the patriarchal assumption that male desire is natural, inevitable and thereby acceptable? In contrast, are girls passive, endangered and overly susceptible to the influence of corrupt images and desires (Walkerdine 1997; Evans 1993; Jackson 1982)?

We contend that the assertions offered by Rush and La Nauze rest upon three foundational assumptions. First, that the sexuality of girls is a seemingly paradoxical phenomenon understood as simultaneously present (and once catalysed, quite dangerous) and absent (that normal sexuality is something that will come much later). Second, that childhood sexuality requires the catalysing influence of an external force that must ignite sexual instinct, thereby eschewing the possibility of volitional sexual expression. Third, that girls are assumed to be incompetent and incapable of making sense of their own experience and therefore in need of parental and state intervention; to this end, a girl's best interest is rendered intelligible solely through a prism of adult decision-making practices. Their suppositions illustrate the continuity between the contemporary debate

on sexualisation with the epistemological frameworks of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses that created cultural 'truths' about the modern child and its sexuality.

Presence and Absence: Conceptualising Childhood Sexuality

Michel Foucault illuminates the centrality of childhood sexuality in the discursive production of sexuality in nineteenth-century Europe in his first volume on the *History of Sexuality* (1990). Childhood sexuality was conceived of in a doubled fashion; it was understood as simultaneously present and absent, there and not there. Seen as a menace and corrupting force, the precocious child was capable of contaminating not only the future life of the adult but also the sanctity of the race and nation. Dangerous and deeply problematic, the desiring or autoerotic child was subject to surveillance, classification and often medical intervention. Autoerotic activity in childhood was thought to be both an inevitable outcome as well as a site of deviance in need of control, simultaneously natural and a result of pathology (Foucault 1990).

Given this paradoxical conception, most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses produced an understanding of childhood sexuality as 'actual in its manifestation but hidden its eventual effects, whose pathological seriousness would only become apparent later' (Foucault 1990, 153). Purity activist Elizabeth Blackwell, for example, cautioned parents on the dangers of sexuality in children in her 1884 *Counsel to Parents on the Moral Education of their Children in Relation to Sex*. Blackwell emphasised the importance of childhood innocence, but also insisted that a child's sexual instinct, if not controlled, could gain 'undue prominence within the life of the child' (Blackwell 1884, 15). Pedagogical training was essential because 'more care [was] needed to secure healthy, strengthening influences, for the early life of sex' (Blackwell 1884, 18). Rush and La Nauze's understanding of the aetiology of sexualisation certainly differs from Blackwell's, who attributes the danger to more experienced companions. We argue, however, that Blackwell's fears concerning the consequences of sexualisation—the emergence of premature sexual expression and the potential for sexual precocity—resonate deeply within Rush and La Nauze's work.

The nineteenth-century conception of childhood sexuality functions as a key epistemological assumption in the reports produced by Rush and La Nauze. Although the authors evade a discussion of physiological maturation, the direction of their research and the concerns voiced therein suggest that they are not worried about the onset of puberty. The danger of sexualisation is realised in premature sexual curiosity and desire in girls. As Rush and La Nauze assert, popular magazines:

teach their young readers to dance in sexually provocative ways, to idolise highly sexualised young women such as Paris Hilton, Jessica Simpson and Lindsay Lohan, and to have crushes on adult male celebrities—all while they are still in primary school. (Rush and La Nauze 2006b, 2)

The risk of the sexualisation is that it fosters sexual expression in bodies that are supposedly free of sexual desire. Sexualising content may pose an even greater threat because a girl's desire, once initiated, can move beyond the celebrities she sees on the pages of a magazine or on the television screen, to men she actually knows. As Rush and La Nauze caution, sexualisation 'encourage[s] girls to view *all males in their lives* as crushes or potential crushes' (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, 23; emphasis added). Dancing 'in sexually

provocative ways' and 'getting crushes' signals a subjective, as opposed to simply physiological, response to sex (Rush and La Nauze 2006b, 2). The gendered aspects of this discourse on sexual danger and its promiscuous outcome have a long history. The construction of girls in the discourse of sexualisation mirrors earlier patriarchal discourses on the pathological nature of women's sexuality, its susceptibility to corruption and its resistance to autonomous control (Hawkes 2004).

The continued cultural relevance of these assumptions was illustrated by Clive Hamilton, the Director of the Australia Institute, in his 17 April 2007 appearance as an expert guest on the SBS television show *Insight*. The topic of the show was the sexualisation of girls. When host Jennie Brockie asked Mr Hamilton to discuss why sexualisation was such a problem he responded, 'because it's the slutty celebrity images that girls are aspiring to' (*Insight* 2007). The risk of sexualisation extends beyond girls becoming objectified within the paedophilic lens of corporate imagery, to girls transforming into subjects who desire and have crushes 'on all males' all the while 'they are still in primary school' (Rush and La Nauze 2006b, 4). The hazard lies *within* the girl's body and imagination, dormant yet intensely susceptible to distorted awakenings. Once awakened, this tendency is both unstoppable and destructive of 'innocence', that assumed-with-age quality. A slippery slope, eroded girlhood innocence is especially vulnerable and thus susceptible to shift from purity to 'slutty' with exposure to sexualising materials. Here, the gendered dimensions are made explicit. Female sexuality is both more corruptible *and* more socially disruptive.

There is an echo here of an earlier moral panic: the provision of contraception for 'under-age' girls in the 1980s and 1990s (Hawkes 1995), in which medical arguments about the dangers of disease masked concerns about the essential 'sexual irresponsibility' of teenage girls unable to control their sexual behaviour.³ Less than a century earlier, opponents of the provision of birth control to married women, especially working-class women, argued that arming women with protection would ensure sexual promiscuity (McLaren 1978; Hawkes 1995). Working-class women's sexuality was deemed as more problematic and in need of greater regulation due to its propensity for corruption and its corrupting potential. Male physicians against the birth control movement were highly successful in 'creating a fundamentally new social order surrounding [the] sexual behavior of women' in the United States and Britain (Luker 1998, 624). In both epochs, female sexuality was characterised as inherently unstable, deeply dangerous and in need of social control.

A New and Present Danger?

As discussed by Rush and La Nauze in 'Corporate Paedophilia':

... the very direct sexualisation of children, where children themselves are presented in ways modeled on sexy adults, is a new development. The pressure on children to adopt sexualised appearance and behaviour at an early age is greatly increased by the combination of the direct sexualisation of children with the increasingly sexualised representations of teenagers and adults in advertising and popular culture. (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, vii)

The tone of their warning affirms the need for urgent action and this call is further legitimated by their claim that the danger of visual imagery is in its unique effect, 'direct sexualisation'.

Sexualisation, for Rush and La Nauze, 'is the act of giving someone or something a sexual character' (2006a, 1). This process is considered problematic because it moulds the sexuality of children 'into stereotypical forms of adult sexuality' (2006a, 1). What does this exactly mean? Is it the acquisition of knowledge of the body and its capabilities, of the mind and its desires? If so, then whither sex education for the young? Is it pre-pubescent sexual sensibility? Is the game of dress-up, which often promotes stereotypical gender roles, the same sexualisation? If the widely accepted developmental stage of childhood sexual curiosity and sexual play includes adult clothes and make up is it the same as 'sexualisation'? What are stereotypical forms of adult sexuality? If girls resist stereotypes but act sexually, is this an expression of sexualisation? Is sexualisation always inevitable and unidirectional? None of these aspects are critically assessed.

This lack of definition speaks to the exnominated status of childhood sexuality within Rush and La Nauze's discussion of sexualisation (Barthes 1972). Exnomination, according to Roland Barthes, illustrates how a particular phenomenon evades the need for explication and cultural critique due to its taken-for-granted and naturalised status.⁴ By exnominating childhood sexuality and defining it as something beyond concern, Rush and La Nauze unintentionally make critical interrogation into the idea of sexualisation much more difficult. Children who express sexuality are always and already deemed tainted by the market, making any manifestation outside of this equation impossible. Within this logic, any coupling of childhood and sexuality is a manifestation of stereotypical adult sexuality qua sexualisation and thus deviant.

Assumed to be pathological in both process and outcome, sexualisation becomes an endpoint from which all children should be properly protected. As such, an exploration into the context and variability of sexualisation becomes impossible. It is the immediacy of images on the bodies and minds of girls (who by implication have heretofore evaded such influence) that makes sexualisation so problematic and powerful. In the absence of critical examination, sexualisation is assumed to be a 'new and present danger', the result of thoughtless and exploitative marketing practices; or worse, a perilous chasm into which all (girl) children can fall and be lost.

As we have argued elsewhere, the appeal to new and threatening dangers has been a facet of most discourses on childhood sexuality since the late eighteenth century (Egan and Hawkes 2007). Whether it was purity activists expressing concern over the licentious quality of new urban centres, or sexual hygienists warning of the perilous threat of recent immigrants, the insistence that children's sexuality is endangered from a contemporary and corrupting presence in its life is anything but new. Sociologist David Evans, in his text *Sexual Citizenship* (1993), highlights the cyclical nature of moral panics surrounding popular media and its effects on the sexuality of children. Narratives on the risks associated with dangerous novels in the 1890s, comic books in the 1940s, television in the 1980s, and the Internet in our contemporary culture, share a similar plotline: fears about the corruption of innocence and the concomitant need for protection. Cumulatively, the hazards of popular media in the life of the child have been a reoccurring theme of moral panic over the past 150 years (Lumby and Fine 2006; Evans 1993; Spigel 1993).

Moreover, it is certainly the case that images that would be read as sexualising or even pornographic within our contemporary culture have had a persistent place within

popular media in the past century. Deconstructing the images of Alice Liddell or Irene MacDonald by Lewis Carroll in the nineteenth century,⁵ or the popular 1930s films featuring Shirley Temple, one finds two examples of media viewed by children and adults with similar or even more graphic images to those found in 'Corporate Paedophilia'. Other critically acclaimed cinematic representations such as Louis Malle's 1978 *Pretty Baby* which featured full frontal nudity of then 12-year-old actress Brooke Shields or the 1976 film *Taxi Driver* by Martin Scorsese with then 14-year-old Jodi Foster (both actresses play child prostitutes), present far more sexually explicit images for their adult audiences.⁶ The ever-provocative Calvin Klein has also presented children and teens in a similar way as early as the 1980s (see the 1980 advertisement with Brooke Shields: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77ewV2l0fN8>). Representations of sexualised children by adults for audiences that include both children and adults have had an enduring place within anglophone culture. We are not arguing that they have all been positive; instead, we want to highlight that sexualisation is far from new, nor is it monolithic is its manifestation. As art historian Anne Higonnet notes, there are many different kinds of sexualisation and 'some forms endow a subject with a sense of power and personhood, which is the opposite of objectification' (Higonnet, quoted in Najafi 2002/03, 2).

Rush and La Nauze's conceptual insistence on sexualisation as a new and distinct danger creates a powerful rhetorical strategy. First, to distinguish something as 'new' and 'extremely dangerous' justifies the claim that the said phenomenon is worthy of being deemed a 'social problem', helping to facilitate a kind of moral panic (Cohen 1972). Second, this 'new' danger is seen as so pervasive and ubiquitous that it demands levels of social control that might otherwise be seen as out of proportion if the 'problem' were conceptualised in a less dramatic fashion. Together these strategies work to make dissent or critical interrogation more difficult. As Emma Rush questions:

Is it wise to actively encourage girls of primary-school age to have romantic fantasies about older men? How do we then expect them to behave if an older man approaches apparently offering romance? To sexualise children in the way that advertisers do—by dressing, posing, and making up child models in the same ways that sexy adults would be presented—also implicitly suggests to adults that children are interested in and ready for sex. This is profoundly irresponsible, particularly given that it is known that pedophiles use not only child pornography but also more innocent photos of children. (Rush 2006)

These conceptual associations close down any discussion or reflection that acknowledges the rights of the child as a sexual being in its own terms. Rather, the sexual child can only be in peril, defined as such in terms of adult (male) desire rather than in terms of their own subjectivity and awareness. The discourse of corporate paedophilia restricts the sexuality of children to either risk or danger.

Sexualised Sexuality

Sexualisation, according to Rush and La Nauze, fosters premature sexual expression and damages other forms of 'natural development' in the process. To this end, 'children are only likely to be able to develop freely if government assists parents by limiting sexualising pressure at its source—advertisers and marketers' (2006b, 2). Thus

emancipated, girls are constructed as 'free', innocent and able to develop normally (read asexually) in their progression towards adulthood.

In her editorial to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Emma Rush further elaborates the threat of sexualising influences:

One less obvious risk to children as a result of an excessive focus on 'sexy' appearance and behaviour is that other important aspects of their lives can suffer. The developmental period known as 'middle childhood' (about six to 11 years old) is critical to children developing a sense of self and self-esteem. (Rush 2006)

The notion of 'age-appropriate behaviour' is a common thread within the discussion that surrounds both reports; suggesting that an awareness of self, bodily experience and the possibility of interpreting contemporary cultural messages all represent a distortion of what is being uncritically designated as 'age-appropriate behaviour'. Girlhood sexuality is conflated with sexualisation; as a result, sexuality, outside of the context of exploitative corporate messages, is rendered impossible. Held in reserve until its natural emergence much later in life, 'normal' girls are seen as essentially asexual beings. Sexualising media go beyond depicting sexy behaviour, to actively teaching tween-aged girls 'how to engage in sexy behaviour' (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, 28). Rush and La Nauze's narratives paint a truly disturbing image of hypersexualised girls who, owing to such influences, 'may escalate [their] level of sexual behaviour necessary to attract attention' (2006a, ix). Because childhood is constructed as inherently innocent and asexual, it follows that the idea of popular culture invading and corrupting innocence would signal a truly dire situation.

There is an automatic relationship cited between such media representations and developmental (both physical and psychological) processes in the girl child. Sexualised images, according to the reports, produce premature sexual actions. The risk lies not only in mimicking the bodily comportment of their sexy adult counterparts but also in the fact that sexualised girls, once taught, may take it a step further and engage in sexual behaviour. Again, there is a gendered element, simultaneously assumed and actively deployed to intensify anxieties. Once stimulated, a girl's imagination is presumed to be vulnerable and thus highly corruptible.

This aspect constitutes a departure from our historical examples where concerns about premature sexual awakening involved *both* boys and girls, articulated through the concept of their corruptible imagination. As Purity activist Richard Arthur argued in his 1903 instructional booklet for boys:

The boy knows nothing of this instinct, which is well; and I believe that most lads would not be disturbed by the vague stirrings of the sex sense, were it not that in many of them it is preciously developed by a constant turning of the attention to sex matters, and a pruriency [*sic*] of imagination, which some wise and judicious teaching at an earlier age would have prevented. (Arthur 1903, 4)

As with our contemporary example, if the imagination remained dormant, children would be less likely to act in sexually precocious ways (Egan and Hawkes 2007).

Rush and La Nauze, like their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century corollaries, assume a hypodermic model of cause and effect. Images produce action. As feminist scholar Judith Levine articulates in *Harmful to Minors*, 'the idea that young minds (and female minds are feeble minds) are vulnerable to bad thoughts, which might lead to bad acts, may be considered the founding principle of obscenity law' (Levine 2002, 10).

By constructing the mind of women and girls as both pliant and fragile, this argument legitimates state intervention into dangerous materials and validates reformers' calls for their elimination.

Endangered Daughters

Similar to other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses, the message of corporate paedophilia promotes the belief that, after sexualisation occurs, its effects will impact both the present as well as create potentially 'pathological' consequences later in life (Foucault 1990, 153). As Rush and La Nauze postulate in 'Corporate Paedophilia':

Firstly, children may be encouraged to initiate sexual behaviour at an earlier age, well before they have full knowledge of the potential consequences. Earlier sexual activity in teenagers is linked to a higher incidence of unwanted sex (particularly for teenage girls) and to increasing potential to contract sexually transmitted infections. (2006a, 5)

Here, the authors draw again on historically familiar preconceptions that are infused with gendered assumptions.

Sexuality is understood as a hydraulic force, which once switched on, cannot be switched off. As Rush and La Nauze argue in their discussions of sexualisation:

Because sex is widely represented in advertising and marketing as something that fascinates and delights adults, the sexualisation of children could play a role in 'grooming' children for paedophiles—preparing children for sexual interaction with older teenagers or adults. This is of particular concern with respect to the girls' magazines, which actively encourage girls of primary school age to have crushes on adult male celebrities. (2006a, 4)

Sexualising media create the desire to dress up and wear make-up and in so doing encourage a dangerous predicament. Girls wearing make-up not only promotes sex, both consensual and non-consensual, but it also cultivates paedophilic tendencies through its 'normalisation' of sexualised young bodies (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, 40). The girl's body is both catalytic and incendiary, her volition irrelevant.

This process of sexualisation identifies the presence of more culturally entrenched aspects of youthful sexuality; that sexualisation is something done to children by adults. Thus the use of the term paedophilia negatively conflates autonomously gained sexual awareness of the young person as premature and by association with pathological adult sexuality, axiomatically damaging. The deployment of paedophilia here is so unreflective as to be, at best, irresponsible and, at worst, actively comprising the very protection this discourse seeks to extend. As such, to positively recognise and affirm sexual subjectivity in young girls is to collude with those who would seek to legitimate paedophilia.

The hazardous outcome of sexualisation is that it imposes adult eroticism on children. We contend, however, that it is the assumption that follows from this that ultimately disempowers girls. Sexualisation creates girls who are a danger to themselves as well as endangered; a double-edged sword where a girl's life seems in peril at every turn (Lumby and Fine 2006; Walkerdine 1997). The bodies of girls are placed at the nexus of corporate imagery and the paedophilic gaze. Coming out of this media landscape unscathed seems almost impossible, particularly when the consumption of sexualised imagery is so widespread.

Drawing on data from the Australian Advertising Standards Board (ASB), Rush and La Nauze further highlight the danger of this medium with complaints and concerns expressed by parents and other adult citizens about sexualising advertisements. What is curious about the data discussed in both 'Corporate Paedophilia' and 'Letting Children be Children' is the absence of data on children. Although the authors acknowledge that some research has found that teens may, at times, be cynical of particular types of branding, they ultimately contend that:

it is a further and much more difficult step for them to reject the cultural underpinnings on which most advertising depends, including the desirability of both consumption and sexualisation. (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, 33)

Emphasis is placed on the omnipresent and irreversibility of the media message instead of on how different tweens might interpret these messages. An analysis of how race, class and sexuality might affect children's understanding of the media or how they engage with these images is missing. Moreover, how various children might be confused by, desire, reject or experience some combination therein while watching sexualised or sexualising media is omitted.

The validity of Rush and La Nauze's suppositions on the costs of sexualisation is rendered suspect in the latter half of 'Corporate Paedophilia'. They admit that 'research on the effects of sexual content in the media' on children 'are virtually non-existent' (2006a, 41). This lack is ultimately glossed over in the pages that follow immediately, by using data featuring the propensity of first-time intercourse among ever younger adolescents (14 years of age) and increasing sexual frequency among 15–17 year olds. This rhetorical strategy covers over the fissure between data and argument through the deployment of an anxiety-producing picture of sex-crazed youth engaging in promiscuous sex away from the prying eyes of their adult parents.

There is another problem with this rhetorical move; children, tweens and teens are conflated in the discussion. Data on teens stand in for data on tweens. The inevitability of their message leads one to wonder whether any public or pedagogical intervention would help girls. Relegated to their fate, girls are seen as always already destined to be promiscuous. Any recognition of a sexual subjectivity has been silenced, screened off from discussion by the spectre of the paedophile and of the dangerous (prematurely sexualised) girl-child body. We argue that, in the end, Rush and La Nauze create a rhetorical—as opposed to empirical—link between media consumption and sexual activity (either consensual or non-consensual) in girls.

Women Locked in the Bodies of Girls

According to both reports, sexualisation creates two distinct problems. It promotes sexually expressive girls, and it produces victimised girls. Girls who express sexuality, in one form or another, are represented as tainted, damaged and deviant. Falling outside the parameters of 'normal' girlhood, sexualised girls morph into something else—an ambivalent and ultimately irresolvable category—girl-woman or 'miniature adult'. The girl-woman category is seen as dangerous because its lack of innocence challenges the hegemonic construction of the child and renders societal boundaries between adult and child arcane at best and unattainable at worst.

The vision of 'normative' childhood that Rush and La Nauze draw on is a highly sentimentalised nineteenth-century conceptualisation of the child, which requires protection due to its 'incomplete' and innocent status. Literary critic James Kincaid postulates that our contemporary vision of innocence finds its roots in Romantic and post-Romantic philosophy. This valorised the child 'as free of adult corruptions; not yet burdened with the weight of responsibility, morality, and sexuality' and in so doing it prefigured the child as an empty figure, a 'coordinate set of have nots' (Kincaid 1998, 14–15). In this regard, children were understood as free from liberty, rights, sexuality, complexity and even voice. Similarly, policies that have historically addressed the rights of children in relation to sex have confined them 'to non-adult status, their immaturity and ignorance demanding the paternalistic protection of father and state' (Evans 1993, 238).

The girl-child continues to embody these concerns; her innocence validates parental authority and social control by making her passive, vulnerable and in need of protection (Kincaid 1998; Walkerdine 1997).⁷ As historian Steve Angelides notes, attempts to 'naturalize childhood innocence and asexuality' within protection-oriented policies fail to promote the liberation of children and instead more often 'reinscribe the adult-child opposition as a hierarchy and binary dynamic of mutually exclusive terms' (Angelides 2004, 166). To this end, the possibility of conscious experience and decision making on the part of girl children is nullified. We argue that this conception ultimately denies girls agency, thereby undercutting the very possibility that Rush and La Nauze seem to want: a better life for girls. The narrative of risk and protection absents the voices of girls, in all of their complexity, from both process and solution.

Recalling strategies of past discourses of sexual protection, girls are pacified by the scrutiny of experts and the discourse of protection. Rush and La Nauze argue that 'an all-encompassing office of media regulation' staffed with 'experts in areas relevant to the potential harms caused by the premature sexualisation of children' is the solution (2006b, iii). Sexualisation consigns the sexual subjectivity of girls into the hinterland of disempowerment. Education scholar Marie Wilkinson cautions against family-policy measures wherein 'children exist as "virtual" rather than actual constituents in the child-welfare decision making processes' (Wilkinson 2005, 64–65). Wilkinson highlights how policies drafted with the child's best interest at heart often absent the child from the conversation and solution altogether. In effect, policies are driven by abstract concepts of the child and reflect adult anxieties and concerns as opposed to attending the voices and experiences of material children. It is our contention that 'Corporate Paedophilia' ultimately falls into this trap by making girls into only *virtual actors* within their conceptualisation of the problem and its policy solution.

Conclusion and Suggestions for the Future

After a careful review of the reports produced by Rush and La Nauze, we want to pose some alternative questions. How might our understanding of girls' relationship to the media and its consequences look different if they did not rely on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century epistemological frameworks? How might we come to a different set of conclusions if we move beyond reproducing conceptions of the innocent child and the premise that childhood sexuality is abhorrent and even pathological? Although it is clearly beyond the scope of this article to reframe the entire debate on the impacts of popular

media on the lives of children, we want to begin to raise some questions that might provide new possibilities for future research.

Education scholar Marie Wilkinson illustrates the importance of placing the voices of children at the centre of policy debates that seek to address their best interests (Wilkinson 2005). Children are often absented from such discussions owing to their marginal status within the world of adulthood. As a result, many family-friendly social policies unwittingly 'disguise and occlude' the interests of children (Wilkinson 2005, 63). With this concern in mind, we are curious as to how the questions of scholars and activist might shift if we put the voices of *girls and boys* at the centre of the current concern about sexualisation. How would research and policy making look different if we took children seriously as 'social agents in their own right' and made their autonomy and their rights, as sexual citizens, the starting point (Alanen 2005, 35)? How might our solutions transform if we began from an understanding that sexuality is a complex social site that can be pleasurable and deeply fulfilling and extremely painful if exploited? Starting our conversations with these questions in mind, we believe, could significantly change the direction of our discourses on sexualisation as a process rather than an unwanted outcome.

Several conceptual shifts would have to take place to make this idea a reality. First, we believe that innocence should be removed as the criterion against which a girl's relationship to sexuality gets measured. As we have illustrated throughout this piece, innocence requires passivity and operates as 'a pure point strangely connected to its opposite, depravity' or, in our case, sexualisation (Kincaid 1998, 54). We contend that the cultural construct of innocence ultimately disempowers girls. For example, what happens to girls who hover at the boundaries or actively refuse innocence? Are they not worthy of protection or policy intervention? If a girl desires or acts sexually, in any manner, has she given up her innocence? If we continue our dogged attachment to innocence do we not risk promoting the idea 'that a defiled child is of no use to us' (Kincaid 1998, 17)?

There is another problem with innocence: it allows for no specificity. Innocence, owing to its overarching and archetypal status, denies the materiality of girls' lives. Race, class and sexual identity seem to disappear from the conversation altogether. Do girls of colour relate to corporate advertising in the same manner as white girls? How do queer girls interpret these images? Do working-class girls desire sexualised imagery in the same manner as middle- and upper-class girls? Why is the sexual subjectivity of boys excluded? How do boys of various races, classes and sexualities understand and make sense of such media? The invisibility of 'the sexual(ised) boy' in the current discussions intensifies the gaze of anxiety on the sexuality of tween girls in ways that perpetuate 'double standard' constructions of the sexuality of the young.

Second, the voices of both boys and girls must be central to an alternative approach. Although children's voices have been taken seriously in other fields of policy analysis, they have been missing in discussions surrounding their own sexuality (Mayall 2005; Robinson 2005). A reflexive understanding of how both boys and girls interpret, engage with, and offer alternatives to the contemporary media landscape seems crucial. If we want to make the lives of children better in all domains, *sexual and otherwise*, then we must take them seriously as 'knowers' of their own experience. Sociologist Berry Mayall illustrates how children make meaning of their everyday lives. Her findings show that children are social actors who 'see themselves as participants in the structuring of their own lives and the lives of their family and friends' (Mayall 2005, 86). Children understand and can make

meaning of their social location, *as children*, within the social world, displaying a level of reflexivity that is often accorded only to adults (Alanen 2005).

Third, we need to move away from the presumption of sex negativity in our conversations with children. As we have already suggested, when conversations around sex are conceptualised as dangerous, dirty or pathological, the outcome might be more harmful to children than helpful. Children might be less likely to report when sexual exploitation has occurred owing to feelings of shame and they may be less likely to talk to parents or other adults about sexual questions, curiosities or problems (Robinson 2005; Krivacska 1992). As is evident from research on abstinence-only sex education in the United States, negative messages about sex do not stop sex from happening. Rather, it only makes pre-teens and teens more likely to keep sex secret and less likely to use condoms (Irvine 2002; Levine 2002). In the face of this research, sex negativity and the denial of childhood sexuality is not only inappropriate but demonstrably counter-productive. Children should be viewed as sexual citizens and collaborative social agents in policies concerning this integral part of their everyday lives.

The discourse of sexualisation and corporate paedophilia moves feminist thinking away from a deconstruction of dominant patriarchal culture. Owing to its reliance upon nineteenth- and early twentieth-century moralistic frameworks, the current narrative on sexualisation unwittingly reproduces patriarchal assumptions of women *and* girls. The problem of premature sexualisation is the danger of girls aspiring to 'slutty behaviour'. We contend that this logic *vilifies sexuality as opposed to sexism*. By assuming the binary of innocent/sexualised the authors reinforce frameworks that place women's and girls' sexuality into narrow and often repressive categories such as virgin and whore or innocent and sexualised.

Reframing the debate with these conceptual shifts in mind would change our research questions, and possibly our outcomes and solutions. For example, censorship and strict governmental control might be replaced by an expanded and age-comprehensive sex-positive sex education curriculum⁸ that includes critical media literacy as a central part of its pedagogical aims and goals. Such a curriculum would be crafted in collaboration with, not simply for, girls and boys. This type of program could give children a language and analytic framework to help them negotiate the complexity of sexist and sexual imagery not only in their immediate lives but also far into their futures. The research on 'corporate paedophilia' and the debate it engenders offers important insights into the fault-lines that still prevail in discourses on sexuality, on gendered sexuality and currently on the sexual 'tween'. It is reflective of the need to confront 'knee-jerk' responses of peril and protection, and through this to offer a more meaningful and effective refuge from sexual objectification and exploitation. Denial of sexual subjectivity does not protect, it continues to disempower.

NOTES

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1. As Historian Estelle Freedman insightfully illuminates, the ideologies of nineteenth-century literature on sexuality were highly variable, even within the same movement (Freedman 1982).

2. We employed discourse analysis on policy papers produced by the Australia Institute (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, 2006b) in our attempt to answer these questions. It should be noted that our analysis steers away from reader- or viewer-response research (for more on this debate see Elliot and Elliot 2005; Levine 2002; MacQuarrie and Mick 1999). We are not arguing 'that children benefit from sexualisation because their sexuality gives them a source of power in a world in which most of the power is held by adults' (Rush, quoted in *730 Report* 2006). Nor are we interested in defending the imagery of girls as unproblematic, celebratory or particularly resistive.
3. We are drawing here on Stanley Cohen's use of the term moral panic to describe the construction of a social problem as an issue or group of people deemed dangerous to the social order (Cohen 1972). For work on moral panics and childhood, see Jenkins (1998) and Furedi (2005).
4. Barthes defines bourgeois ideology and culture as occupying an exominated status within European culture. It is the norm, the unquestioned against which all others are measured (Barthes 1972).
5. Although Dodgson's activities were considered suspect during the Victorian period, it was not because he photographed nude children; this was seen as perfectly normal (Leal 2007). Rather, it was the fact that he spent unsupervised time with children that was deemed problematic.
6. *Pretty Baby* was nominated for the Palme d'Or at Cannes and won a technical prize at the same festival. *Taxi Driver* was nominated for the Best Picture category in the Academy Award, British Academy of Film Award and won the Palme d'Or at Cannes.
7. It should come as no surprise that that we see remnants of another figure within this conception of the sexualised girl: the nymphomaniac, sexually promiscuous and 'slutty' woman who refused the confines of the marital bed and chose vice over virtue.
8. An Australian example of this is South Australia's SHINE initiative. For an excellent analysis of this program, see Gibson (2007).

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R. Danielle Egan and **Gail Hawkes'** current research explores the historical construction of childhood sexuality in the anglophone West from 1840 to 1940. They have published their research in *Historical Sociology* and are working on a forthcoming manuscript for Palgrave Macmillan tentatively entitled *Knowing Innocence: Theorizing Childhood Sexuality*. In addition, they are co-editing special issues of *Historical Sociology* and *Sexuality and Culture* on historical and contemporary examinations of childhood sexuality.

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