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The problem with protection: Or, why we need to move towards recognition and the sexual agency of children

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Drawing on historical and contemporary reform narratives, we highlight the implications of and problems with the discourse of protection and its conceptualization of childhood sexuality. Within the reform materials discussed, the child's sexuality is constructed as the result of a dangerous and socially unacceptable outside stimulus, and as a result, any realization of subjective sexual expression is rendered abhorrent and in need of adult intervention. It is our contention that sexual agency is unthinkable and ultimately unattainable within this model. Drawing on the recent work of Judith Butler we forward her theory of recognition as a framework for rethinking the sexuality of children. We argue that foregrounding recognition will help us create a cultural context that fosters sexual agency and in so doing promotes the sexual citizenship of children.

Introduction

> 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 precociously developed by a constant turning of the attention to sex matters, and a pruriency of imagination, which some wise and judicious teaching at an earlier age would have prevented. (Arthur 1903, 2)

> In every community are to be found children who are in manifest danger of sexual instability and exploitation. These causes are many and varied including such factors as bad housing, undesirable neighbourhood conditions, lack of home protection or understanding on the part of parents, broken homes, poor mental equipment, early entry into industry, economic conditions, ignorance and many related causes. (Parker 1925, 49)

> In a cultural context where sex is heavily glamourised [*sic*] and represented as highly desirable, 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 … implicitly suggests to adults that children are interested in and ready for sex. (Rush 2006)

At the turn of the twentieth century, Richard Arthur penned several pamphlets warning Australians about the dangers of sexual vice. In his work as a social reformer and later as the Minister of Health, Arthur forwarded the cause of social purity by highlighting the consequences of venereal disease and sexual intemperance in the lives of small children (Egan and Hawkes 2007). Arthur's lectures, to parents and children, underscored that childhood innocence, if not protected and reinforced by an education in purity, was

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vulnerable to those 'who impart the knowledge [of sex] in a prurient and objectionable manner' (Arthur 1896, 7). Left uninformed, boys and girls remained 'unwarned against the dangers which may assail them at any moment' and thus 'nothing could be better fitted for the purpose of the seducer' (2). Equating ignorance with parental neglect, Arthur painted a picture of despondent children addicted to self-pollution headed towards a degenerate future. Authur's pamphlets espoused the belief that the battle against solitary vice would be won by shaping the imagination and, as a result, the body and soul of the child (Egan and Hawkes 2007; Warne 1999).

On the precipice, a child's imagination and future actions could be moulded through the pedagogy of purity or shaped by stories of sexual vice, especially when stimulated through the influence of other corrupt children (Egan and Hawkes 2007). Purity reformers believed that moral education had the power to place the sexual instinct under rational constraint and, in so doing, impede it from 'blindly and impetuously [seeking] its [own] gratification' thereby equipping a child for 'the battle before him' (Arthur 191?, 17). The path to purity could deter a dangerous future by giving rise to 'enlightened innocence' and protecting children from the taint of new urban centres and the debauched influences contained therein (Arthur 1896).

Concerned about the dangers of dysgenics and its impact on the population, Australian social hygienists promoted sex instruction for children as the course for a brighter and more racially 'secure' future. Unlike the overtly moral sentiments of social purity, social hygienists validated their entry into the domain of sex and legitimated their claims through a medico-moral rhetoric of science and expertise (Mort 2000). Organizations such as Jessie Mary Grey's short-lived Social Hygiene Association and the long-standing Racial Hygiene Association of New South Wales claimed that sex instruction offered the entry point for a more eugenic future (Egan and Hawkes forthcoming a; Warne 1999). If done correctly, an education in sexual hygiene could provide both an honest presentation of the meaning of sex and foster character training through the inculcation of hegemonic and socially acceptable qualities (Parker 1925, 46). Drawing on a neo-Lamarckian[1] theory of habituation, hygienists believed that sex instruction could shape a child's future by instilling bourgeois conceptions of gender, marriage and reproduction. To this end, sexual hygienists reinforced the boundaries of whiteness in their teachings through the discourse of acceptable mate selection, which relied on and reproduced eugenic ideals of racial fitness (Egan and Hawkes forthcoming). Fusing the promotion of hegemonic character traits with a discourse of romantic love, sexual hygienists deployed the child's sexuality to forecast the future of individual children in the hope of making society and its inhabitants more predictable.[2] Hygiene narratives legitimated these goals in two ways, namely through a plea for the protection of children and through the affirmation of medical expertise via a biomedical model (Egan and Hawkes forthcoming a).

A century after Richard Arthur's warnings, in their reports written for the Australia Institute, feminists Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze gave voice to increasing cultural concerns on the sexualization of girls (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, 2006b).[3] Rush and La Nauze's remarks reflect the wider feminist discourse on sexualization taking place in the anglophone West which emphasizes the danger of media messages and their impacts on girls (Egan and Hawkes 2008b, 2008c). The risk of sexualization is conceptualized in two ways: first, sexualizing images in the media violate age-appropriate standards for 'tween'-aged girls and, second, sexualization hampers normal cognitive, physical and emotive progress by diverting attention away from more age-appropriate milestones. Collapsing the production and consumption of sexualized media, critics fear that the outcome of such representations will be girls 'aspiring' to, or worse still, emulating, 'the slutty celebrity

images they see in the media' (Hamilton 2007). To this end, sexualizing media 'actively encourage[s] girls of primary-school age to have romantic fantasies about older men' and 'implicitly suggest[s] to adults that children are interested in and ready for sex' (Rush 2006). As we have argued elsewhere, the problem of sexualization extends beyond girls becoming objectified within the paedophilic lens of corporate imagery, to girls transforming into subjects who desire and have crushes all the while 'they are still in primary school' (Rush and La Nauze 2006b, 2; Egan and Hawkes 2008c). The hazard is seen to lie *within* the girl's body and imagination, dormant yet intensely susceptible to distorted awakenings. Within this model, images have a catalytic quality that impede normative maturation: they impair the 'mental functions and cognitive processes necessary' for healthy sexual relationships (APA Task Force 2007, 19). Rush and La Nauze argue that 'an all-encompassing office of media regulation' is needed and should 'include a division with the primary responsibility of protecting children's interest in the contemporary media environment' (2006b).[4]

Endangered and dangerous: Protecting childhood sexuality

At first reading, the dangers discussed within these reform narratives, purity reform, sexual hygiene and feminist, respectively, seem as divergent and disconnected as their causes. However, we contend that each relies upon and reproduces a particular vision of the sexual child that forecloses the recognition of children as sexual subjects and the possibility of their sexual agency. It would be erroneous to claim that the political motivations that drive these reform movements are uniform (we would contend that even within the same movement motivations vary); however, we argue that the construction of childhood sexuality within these narratives rests upon the same foundational assumptions. Childhood sexuality is conceptualized as the result of an outside or deviant stimulus inevitably condensed into an exosomatic response. It becomes the outcome of something done to children and not as something that can take place within a larger constellation of a child's sexuality. Moreover, once sexuality is realized in the body of a child it becomes cause for concern and adult intervention. As a result, the only viable outcome becomes adults taking action in the child's best interests.

Purity reformer Henry Varley warned that the city was 'honey-combed' with immoral and prurient influences which were particularly dangerous to children (Varley 1884, 1). For Varley, the only way to avoid a moral crisis wherein all children 'as early as seven years of age' would masturbate was to keep them away from the 'corrupting influence of fellow classmates' (5). Disreputable companions, according to Varley, catalysed deviance by providing instruction on sexual vice, in the 'dark recesses of the school yard' (5). In the early twenty-first century, sexualized media are considered equally ubiquitous and dangerous in that they 'encourage' children to 'initiate sexual behaviour at an earlier age, well before they have full knowledge of the potential consequences' and could produce a 'higher incidence of unwanted sex (particularly for teenage girls)' and 'sexually transmitted infections', both of which 'can have serious long-term consequences' (Rush and La Nauze 2006a, 5).[5] Given the gravity of the outcomes under discussion, it is no wonder that adults get mobilized into protective action on behalf of their children.[6] However, is this enough? What are the limitations of protection and the vision of childhood sexuality that it reproduces?

Childhood sexuality within this framework remains solely under the auspices of parents, the state and other adult protectors because its expression is considered the outcome of a dangerous influence. Legal scholar Roger Levesque highlights the

limitations of laws which employ a discourse of protection to deny access to information for adolescents in the United States. He argues that such laws assume an 'inculcative approach' which does not deny young people should 'have rights' but 'simply views adults and state actors as best suited to control the nature and exercise of those rights' (2008, 726). In terms of sexuality, this law has been particularly punishing to young people because it has legitimated the Bush policy of abstinence-only sex education and its heteronormative model. At base, such models conceive of adolescents as incapable of rational and reasoned discussion, input and judgement, and thus unworthy of inclusion in such conversations. We contend that a similar logic is at work in discourses of protection, albeit from a distinctly different political ideology.

Conceptualizing childhood sexuality within the discourse of protection creates a framework that pathologizes the sexual subjectivity of children; a process given added weight by the exosomatic assumption upon which it depends (Egan and Hawkes 2008a; Hawkes and Egan forthcoming). Within these narratives, once the sexual consciousness of the child is spurred into expression it is constructed as dangerous and pathological and thus in need of outside intervention. While Rush and La Nauze, unlike purity and sexual hygiene advocates, acknowledge 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), their lack of 'concern' is belied by their supposition that children's sexuality is precociously catalysed and damaged by the marketplace (Egan and Hawkes 2008c; Hawkes and Egan 2008). The expression of sexual awareness confirms that sexualization has already occurred and legitimates the need for governmental intervention. Discourses of protection are also used to validate the normalization and control of its manifestation. Collapsing the emergence of childhood sexuality with its endangerment forecloses a more complex discussion of children's sexuality and makes the conceptualization of the sexual agency of children impossible.

Another common theme within narratives of protection (in this article social purity and sexual hygiene, but not sexualization) is that these discourses and concerns expressed are rarely about children themselves – instead, the fervour over childhood sexuality is often a metaphor for larger social disquiet around issues of cultural insecurity, such as urbanization in purity reform and the reaffirmation of racial purity and the institution of marriage and heterosexuality in the sexual hygiene movement (Egan and Hawkes 2008b). As a result, when a child's desires and/or behaviours directly contradict adult constructions their manifestation is blamed on 'others' who are deemed to be the cause of such abhorrent incitements (Egan and Hawkes 2007, 2008b, forthcoming a; Hawkes and Egan 2008a, 2008b, forthcoming; de Coninck-Smith 2008; Robinson and Davies 2008; Angelides 2004, 2008; Robertson 2006; Kincaid 1998). Moreover, if a transgression (perceived or real) goes too far in breaching dominant cultural constructions of childhood and the mystique surrounding its innocence, children may find themselves outside the classification and protection of 'childhood' itself (see Maksudyan 2008; Schneider 2008; Walkerdine 1997). Jennifer Schneider's historical research on moral panics involving intergenerational sex with queer boys in the United States is particularly illustrative in this regard. In our contemporary Anglophone culture, this is highlighted most evidently in criminal cases of charges of sexual assault involving young people and the lack of social support and violence that queer youth face after coming out in both the public and private sphere (Lehr 2008; Luker 1997; Males 1992).

The epistemological assumptions of this framework and its ramifications have hindered discourses on the sexuality of children in the anglophone West from moving forward in the modern and postmodern epoch. By tethering sexuality, desire and

subjectivity to a model of exosomatic response as opposed to an experience shaped at the nexus of cultural norms and individual biography, one that is punctuated by moments of resistance, inequality and complicity, children's sexuality remains marginalized and in need of management, regulation and normalization. As Judith Levine and Sally Gibson have shown in their work on and with children and teens, dominant discourse on youthful sexuality rarely addresses the variation and complexity of experience: from how they make meaning of sex and desire in their everyday lives to how they negotiate homophobia, sexism and the stigmatization of being deemed a 'slut' (Gibson 2007; Levine 2002). Sex-positive websites for tweens and teens such as scarleteen.com and glsen.org illuminate the depth of reflection youth bring to issues of sexuality – something rarely acknowledged in our dominant adult culture.

It is important to note that societal attempts to regulate sexuality in the name of 'protection' are nothing new. Reviewing the history of sexuality of women, gays and lesbians, ethnic and racial minorities, the intersexed or the colonized, one can see the vagaries of the various regimes set in play to enforce sexual management as well as an active confrontation through sexual dissent and resistance in the form of collective social movements and individual opposition (Gordon 1998, 2007; Hill Collins 2005; Hawkes 2004; Stoller 1995, 2002; Weeks 2000; McClintock 1995; Evans 1993). It is the difficulty of enacting or envisioning agency in any collective manner that highlights, for us, where the history of sexuality of childhood departs from the other sexual histories mentioned above (Egan and Hawkes 2008a). Foucault argues that the most effective challenge to sexual regulation is 'through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality – to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures and knowledges in their multiplicity and their possibilities of resistance' (1980, 157). It is our contention that the cultural space for and social acceptability of such tactical reversals has been and, for the most part, continues to be, absent in discourses on childhood sexuality.

This is not to say that children were or are passive. The frequency of reform movements historically and in our contemporary culture speak to the fact that the 'problem' of childhood sexuality was never resolved and continues to be a thorn in the side of adults today. However, the idea that a child has the right to claim its body, pleasure (homoerotically, heteroerotically or something in between) and knowledge would be as abhorrent now as it was historically. The extent to which this is true is always striking during discussions of the sexual rights of children and how those rights are often conceptualized in very narrow terms. The rights of children, as sexual subjects, are often singularly framed as the right of protection from sexual exploitation but rarely do these conversations turn towards the equally important right of sexual agency (Levesque 2008; Lehr 2008; Evans 1993; Males 1992). Even theories that historically acknowledged sexual instincts in children (e.g. developmental theories) only go so far in the acceptability of its realization – discussions are limited to sexuality as an exosomatic response and not an agentic site (Hawkes and Egan forthcoming; Romesburg 2008). Children's sexuality within dominant discourse is still ideologically dependent on what adults deem to be socially acceptable.

We want to be clear that we are not arguing that we should do away with the protection of children. Rather, our contention is that the discourse as it is currently conceptualized is deficient and unrepresentative because there is no place for the sexual subjectivity of children, their agency or recognition of their rights as sexual citizens. Until we move our thinking away from these historically persistent assumptions and their concomitant desire for normalization our discussions with and on childhood sexuality will remain stymied by contradiction and beset by deeply troubling political ramifications. Reconceptualizing discourses on childhood sexuality through a framework of recognition that acknowledges

children as sexual subjects might offer a powerful starting point. An ethic of recognition could promote a more nuanced and collaborative vision that moves beyond a cultural conception of 'the child and its sexuality' towards children's sexuality in all of its complexity. Before we discuss what a framework for recognition might look like, it is crucial to contextualize our use of this term in the work of Judith Butler's recent text *Undoing Gender* (2004).

Recognition, social viability and agency

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler underscores the primacy of recognition as the entry point through which an individual becomes a socially viable member of community and culture (2004). Drawing on Hegel's theory of the master/slave dialectic, Butler argues that our ability to function in culture is predicated upon an *other* who acknowledges us as an individual and in the process accords us status as a socially acceptable person. For Butler, however, recognition is not a battle between two autonomous beings as Hegel contends – rather, it is mediated by and through larger social structures of inequality and privilege. To this end, cultural hegemony sets the parameters for acceptable social existence. Recognition is not the outcome of rational action, individual will or autonomy – rather, it is constituted by and through dominant discourses. As a result, our recognition, or lack thereof, is a deeply political question because of its connection to power and its effects on how humans are differentially constructed and materially live within our culture. It is this differential effect that confers social legitimacy to some within our social sphere and marginalizes others as less than worthy and, in the most extreme cases, as less than human.

Butler's supposition challenges the Western vision of agency by decentring the autonomous individual. Departing from theories which presuppose a rational agent who freely acts to shape his or her place in the world, agency within this model is understood as 'a river of paradox' (Butler 2004, 30). Our recognition, as social beings, is neither the result of our own making, nor is it entirely predetermined. Although we are constituted by and through our culture, we can also 'endeavour to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation' to social norms (30). By placing the individual within a social context subject to historical shift and reflexive transformation, Butler moves away from a strictly determinist approach. Cultural critique entails an interrogation of the terms by which social life is constrained in order to foster and create different modes of living. Transformation within this framework becomes a community question – conceptualized as the process of negotiating a set of cultural standards that were defined prior to one's own acceptance or consent. To this end, we are dependent upon institutions for social support and the exercise of self-determination. Self-determination is viable only in a culture that promotes and enables the exercise of agency. It is only through collective contestation that self-determination is made possible. Agency, for Butler, is a definitively social endeavour.

Within this theoretical framework, issues of subjectivity, identity and bodily integrity are not the product of individual desire or an act of will; rather, they are dependent upon a culture that recognizes and supports their viability. This co-dependence raises larger questions about the ethical imperatives of social relations and agency more generally. Co-dependence requires a reconceptualization of our relationship to the social. Our connection to and recognition within our culture and community extends far beyond family, friendship and even political alliance. Whether we like it or not, recognition is bound to those with whom we feel personal propinquity and those we do not – as such the context for our community membership and social acknowledgement is highly complex. Moreover, it reveals why associations across difference are not a luxury but crucial for

collective change and the transformation of social institutions. This does not mean that we should rely on a singular vision of social change. Rather, 'to live is to live a life politically, in relation to power, in relation to others in the act of assuming responsibility for a collective future' (39). Predicting the shape our culture takes and how it will look in the future should not be the goal; rather, 'contestation must be in play' for society to be truly democratic (41). Democracy does not speak in unison – instead, it is an ethic of recognition and mutual dependence that foregrounds diversity and variation in all of its complexity that should be the guiding principle of democracy.

We contend that Butler's framework offers a powerful model for thinking about the sexuality and sexual agency of children. By highlighting the mutually interdependent nature of social recognition the possibility of social and sexual agency extends beyond the province of adult rationality to a reflexive and dynamic collective endeavour – one that includes children and adults as socially viable members and agents in their community.

Sexual agency and the sexual subjectivity of children

Recognizing children as sexual subjects requires the creation of a cultural context that acknowledges children as socially viable sexual subjects and affirms their agency as such. Moving past previous paradoxical models of exosomatic response and adult projection would be the first step. Children's sexuality, like all sexuality, should be seen as a part and parcel of the body and dominant discourse – as something that is shaped by the social and open to refutation and resistance. In this regard, discussions on children's sexuality should no longer be the sole domain of parents, policy makers, reformers or even children alone. Instead, the sexual rights of children should be part of a larger collective and collaborative endeavour to create a social setting which promotes children's self-determination and the exercise of sexual agency. Both children and adults should be recognized as subjects who are mutually engaged, as agents, in questions of sexual rights and sexual citizenship. This would be a major step forward because although children's voices have been taken seriously in other fields of policy analysis, their presence is often missing in discussions surrounding their own sexuality (Angelides 2008; Levesque 2008; Macalliar and Males 2004; Mayall 2005; Wilkerson 2005; Levine 2002; Males 1992).

Making the lives of children better in all domains, *sexual and otherwise*, means we must take them seriously as 'knowers' in the world. Sociologist Berry Mayall illustrates in her ethnographic research how children make meaning of their everyday lives. She argues that children 'see themselves as participants in the structuring of their own lives and the lives of their family and friends' (2005, 86). Children understand and can make meaning of their social location, *as children*, within the social world – a level of reflexivity that is often accorded only to adults (Cote 2006). Children are reflexive and thoughtful social actors capable of taking part in a dynamic and dialogical exchange on their sexuality. It is only through collective recognition that we can begin to create a cultural context and set of social institutions that acknowledge this capability and in so doing encourage the sexual agency of children. Making such a culture a reality would involve a paradigmatic shift in thinking. It is impossible to consider the entire set of complex changes needed to make this happen, but we want to offer the following four in the hopes of starting a conversation that might move us in the right direction.

First, recognizing the sexual subjectivity of children should highlight the mutual co-dependence of children and adults. Children should not be constructed as lower in the hierarchy of cognition or as in the process of becoming adult, because both of these positions render children illegitimate as social subjects. Recognition takes children seriously as valid

and socially legitimate subjects entitled to sexual agency. To this end, discussions on children's sexuality should not be confined to the boundaries of the private sphere or be an issue of familial prerogative. Broader cultural conversations should help create social institutions that are extra-familial, with the goal of promoting the sexual citizenship of children.

Such a change would make agency a cultural endeavour and not dependent upon parental consent. We argue that this shift is crucial for two reasons. One, as scholarship on sexual abuse has shown, the sexual exploitation of children is far more common within the confines of the family than in the streets or at the hands of a stranger – an image often perpetuated in the news media and television shows (Sternheimer 2006; Kincaid 1998). Two, as the work of feminist scholar Valerie Lehr highlights, the home can be a homophobic and violent place for queer children and youth. Coming out can result in verbal harassment, physical abuse and in the most extreme cases homelessness (Lehr 2008). Given this, we argue that the private sphere should not and cannot be the only space for promoting the sexual agency of children. Placing the recognition of children as sexual agents outside the home requires the creation of a more social theoretical approach to the issue. Children's sexual agency should not be a private affair.

Second, we need to uncouple children's sexuality from an adult model. Children's sexuality should not be constructed as a mirror to or corollary of adult sexuality. Such a framework reproduces the assumptions of previous discourses which rendered the expression of children's sexuality as prematurely adult and thus an abhorrent manifestation. In equal turn, the goal should not be one of adult liberation of a repressed and uninformed youthful sexuality. The underlying logic of both of these discourses is that the sexual subjectivity of children is the result of an outside stimulus, and although the outcome is negative in the former and positive in the latter – both rely upon and reproduce a vision of childhood sexuality through the lens and desire of adulthood. There is a circularity perpetuated by the insistence on the adult-defined and centred model here that can only be uncoupled by the acknowledgement of the existence and legitimacy of children's sexual subjectivity. And such a venture must go beyond simply assertion: to render this dimension of humanity coherent it must be possible to listen to and acknowledge evidence of this without fear and anxiety.

In this endeavour we should be cautious of uncritically deploying proscriptive terms (e.g. healthy, normal, proper) in our interpretations of children's sexual subjectivity. Undertaking a reflexive engagement would require a deconstruction of all the terms that have come to define and delimit the sexuality of children. Discussions on childhood sexuality should instead critically interrogate the terms by which the sexual life of children is constrained in order to foster and create different modes of living (Butler 2004). All too often these classifications narrow complex discussions by predetermining the outcome and in so doing unwittingly reconstruct hegemonic boundaries. If we avoid this step, we may fall back into a model that recognizes a few and marginalizes many. As we have argued elsewhere, feminist discourses on sexualization have been hampered by falling into this trap (Egan and Hawkes 2007, 2008b, 2008c; Hawkes and Egan 2008a, 2008b). Within the discourse on sexualization feminists acknowledge that girls should be entitled to 'healthy' sexuality. However, their definition of health is an ideological construct that restricts sexual subjectivity to a painfully narrow and socially proscribed outcome. Healthy girls are basically asexual girls. As a result, girls who express sexuality in any way that mirrors popular culture are de facto tainted by the market and any coupling of childhood and sexuality becomes an expression of stereotypical adult sexuality qua sexualization (Egan and Hawkes 2008c). Confining acceptable sexuality to an uncritical adult vision of 'healthy sexuality' keeps sexual agency out of reach.

Third, we need to take sexual difference and multiplicity seriously. A culture that supports the sexual agency of children must acknowledge a multiplicity of *sexualities* and sexual expressions. Sexuality is shaped at the nexus of personal biography and our relation to social norms – thus it is constructed within a sociological context. It is never simply our own nor is it only a reflection of dominant culture – it is an amalgamation of culture, biography and experience. The intertwining of race, class, gender (including transgender), sexuality, disability, religion, desire and experience shapes complex negotiations to sexuality and it is for this reason that we should avoid cultural parameters that produce a singular vision. The shape of children's sexuality cannot be known, defined or supposed in advance. Recognizing children as capable of sexual agency requires that we get more comfortable with ambiguity and be open to its becoming. To this end, a cultural context that acknowledges the sexual agency of children involves a continuously reflexive critique in order to help co-create a different mode of living which acknowledges difference. The research on the sexual educational curriculum and gender and sexuality in the classroom conducted by Marti Blaise, Sally Gibson, and Kerry Robinson and Cristyn Davies provides a powerful example of how this work is being conceptualized within the education system in Australia (Robinson and Davies 2008; Robinson 2008; Gibson 2007; Blaise 2005).

The final paradigm shift would require that we stop using the protection of children to legitimate surveillance and social control more broadly. As we discussed above, discourses on childhood sexuality have often been used to blame its manifestation on an external and 'deviant' (i.e. homosexuals, prostitutes, the poor) stimulus. Historically these narratives were rarely about children themselves; rather, childhood sexuality and the desire to bring it under control was often an avenue for addressing other cultural anxieties (e.g. racial purity, affirming the institution of marriage and constructing more rigid gender boundaries). Discourses on childhood sexuality served to legitimate social interventions far beyond the bodies and pleasures of children themselves. Protecting children's sexuality from harmful influences was used in the service of sodomaphobia in the eighteenth century, and homophobia, racism, classism and sexism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Egan and Hawkes 2008b, forthcoming; Rousseau 2008; Schneider 2008; de Coninck-Smith 2008; Edelman 2004). The work of Steven Angelides illuminates the unfortunate continuation of this trend in our contemporary culture (2004, 2008). Childhood sexuality should not be the ground upon which both the normative and the deviant get produced.

Conclusion

Changing our cultural conceptions of childhood sexuality will not be easy. Over the course of writing this article we have questioned the plausibility and the utopian tendencies of such an endeavour ourselves. However, we believe that continuing down the same road is both untenable and unjust. During the writing of this piece we were reminded of the writings of ecologist and legal theorist Christopher Stone (Stone 1996). In his essay, Stone argues that prior to every paradigm shift in the according of rights to a new social group, the extension of such rights is considered impossible and even anathema to many members of society. Stone argues that impossibility should not deter us in our attempts to refashion and re-vision society. If we review the history of women's rights, gay and lesbian rights, civil rights and children's rights we see evidence of such a transformation in thinking. The election of Barack Obama to the Presidency of the United States, the naming of Cem Ozdemir, the son of Turkish immigrants, to the head of the Green Party in Germany, and Prime Minster Rudd's public apology to Indigenous Australians for untold atrocities also speak to the power and possibility of social change. Although difficult to visualize,

we believe that a model of social recognition could help us move towards a more socially just culture that recognizes children and adults as sexual subjects and affirms their sexual agency as such. This would not do away with the complex challenges that children face in their sexual lives but it could create a more collaborative and democratic context for conversations about potential solutions to take place.

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Notes

1. Jean Baptiste Lamarck believed that the evolutionary process was not driven by chance but rather functioned progressively, increasing the complexity of the species towards perfection. Lamarck argued that this process could be aided by outside intervention. Drawing on this idea, hygienists believed that sex instruction could create socially acceptable gender and heterosexual traits in the poor. Hygienists espoused that correct sex instruction would foster the habituation character traits in the individual that would appear as if inspired by nature. In this regard, for sex hygienists, sex instruction differs conceptually from what we mean in our contemporary culture when we use the term sex education.
2. For more on how this goal was operationalized in the sex education curriculum in Australia see Robinson and Davies (2008).
3. The Australia Institute is an academic think tank dedicated to illuminating the taken-for-granted assumptions and implications of corporate capitalism in Australia. In addition to its reports on children, the organization has published reports on the environment, politics and poverty.
4. Owing to the constraints of time and space, we are offering very truncated summaries of three very complex movements. For more on each see Egan and Hawkes (2007, 2008), Darby (2005), Warne (1999) and Powels (1987).
5. The recent scandal over Bill Henson's photographic work in Australia also offers another contemporary example, but owing to space limitations we will not delve into it in this current article.
6. For a complex discussion on the right to information for youth please see Levesque (2008).

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