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Rescuing a Theory of Adolescent Sexual Excess

Young Women and Wanting

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During World War II, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly coloring it. I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience.

Audre Lorde (1984)

So, it's the same thing, right, like being wet and having an orgasm, right?

16-year-old high school student, Jacqui (2006)

The two women in the above quotes imagine their relationship to their own desire quite differently. Audre Lorde and 16-year-old Jacqui are situated at different points in their lives, however, each narrates her capacity to *want*. Each speaks about how she imagines her body responding to sexual and desired moments. And although these moments may be dissimilar and even divergent, they alert us to what it means to hear a woman talk about her body, her fluids, and her desires. The second quote, Jacqui's, also feels like a punch in the gut—a failure to properly educate this young woman about her capacity to have an orgasm. Her question tugs painfully at us; where does her confusion spring from? How many more young women would ask the same question—or one much worse? Or not ask at all? For decades, we have heard Jacqui's words emerge from so many young women's mouths that we have imagined

and documented their access to discourses of desire as missing, absent, and silent. And yet listen again to Jacqui, asking—from her body—is this all there is? Is there more?

The documentation of the empty spaces where desire should be spoken by young women has been valuable work; it has established the landscape of adolescent sexuality as an important and uneven terrain—a space where resources, education, and communication can have enormous impacts (see Fine 1988; Rasmussen 2006; Rose 2003; Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson 1983; Thompson 1990; Tolman 1994, 2002, 2006). In this essay, we try to inch forward out of silent spaces, and instead, enter into the *hidden transcripts of desire* (borrowing from James Scott 1990), eavesdropping into the corners where young women wonder, speak about, try on, and reflect on questions of desire. We seek to understand the *release points* where snippets of young women's desire can be heard in the culture and to reveal that which is designed to limit and encase such talk within discourses of (im)morality, protection, or victimization.

Refusing to believe that every generation must perpetually rediscover the embodied details of women's sexuality, each time starting from scratch, we take a new look at the images and words that circulate among teen women and between teen and adult women. We try to track how, when, and where young women think about desire and experience feelings of wanting. We next wonder how these yearnings and questions do move and refuse to move through individuals, through feminist discourses, and through media representations of young women.

In a set of essays published recently in *Harvard Educational Review*, *Emory Law Journal*, and *Qualitative Inquiry*, we have written on the explicit and insidious ways in which the U.S. government and fundamental religious ideologies have influenced schools, courts, and science with hegemonic practices that seek to extinguish or punish young women's desire in classrooms (Fine and McClelland 2006), in law (Fine and McClelland 2007), and in what we call the "embedded science" of abstinence research (McClelland and Fine in press (a)).

In these previous writings, we document the deportation of pleasure (and even prevention) discourses out of classrooms and out of adolescent bodies and theorize what we are calling young women's *thick desire*: a deep, material yearning for a secured sense of tomorrow, which situates sexual and reproductive freedoms in a larger struggle for human rights. *Thick desire* includes intellectual and economic freedoms, protection from violence, and entitlement to healthy sexuality and living in a nation that supports the education, health, and well-being of its people (Fine and McClelland 2006). In their search for thick desire, we argue that young women seek lives of pleasure and responsibility, strength of mind and body, alone and with community. Denied the enabling conditions for thick desire, young women pay a heavy price for their sexual and reproductive lives, layered by racism, poverty, homophobia, and antidisability policies.

In addition to theorizing the framework of thick desire as a way to conceptualize sexuality as not merely a private act but, indeed, a highly moderated public activity, we have worked at mapping the disparate consequences of state-sponsored surveillance and punishment for teen sexuality (see Fine and McClelland 2006, 2007; McClelland and Fine in press (a)). With this work in mind, we see the importance of not simply noting what lacks and what is lost for young women and their sexual selves, but to think about what should be, what could be, and what we, in fact, desire for young women. In this essay, we move towards the relatively unexplored terrain of what female desire looks and sounds like. In this chapter, we attempt to rescue a discourse of *sexual excess* within young women and track its circulation in feminist discourses and cultural practices.

Within medical, psychological, and cultural spheres, there has been significant debate around the subject of female sexual excess. Images of female eroticism, enjoyment, or pursuit have historically been linked with pathological categories, such as “nymphomaniac” and “slut.” These images have been countered by feminist critiques that challenged the narrow margins in which female sexuality was permitted to grow. Audre Lorde’s description of the erotic inside her body that begins this essay is just one example of how feminists have pushed hard to create space for the erotic to exist within the female body and not be labeled pathological. Although adult women have been somewhat successful in resuscitating a discourse of sexual excess for them/ourselves, the sexuality of teen women has remained more securely locked within a judgmental box that treats female teenage sexuality as dangerous, risky, and excessive—or as victimization. It is this conflation that concerns us here. Is it possible to bring women into this erotic sphere? Must young women and sexual excess remain mutually exclusive?

Three Aims

In an attempt to craft a theoretical model of sexual excess for young women, we stretch toward three aims. First, we look at how female sexuality has been historically considered excessive. With *excess* as our guiding principle, we then consider how re-claiming this once pathologized description might allow young female sexuality a space to emerge into—before it hits the cold air of risk prevention and commodification.

Second, through an analysis of four focus groups we conducted with a total of 36 young people in the New York City area, we peek under the covers of the term “desire” in order to look to an early stage of desire: the stage of *wanting*. We start with this idea of wanting because it seems the ultimate form of being excessive. “I want” is a small but powerful statement that exists at multiple levels—physical, emotional, material. This narration of excess is used as a way of bringing nuance to the conversation about desire; what more can be known about the moment of wanting and the discourses within it?

Third, we describe examples of what we refer to as “release points.” We define release points as cultural practices and research methodologies that have the potential to wedge open a space that is not-yet. Using examples of informational and community-building Web sites aimed at young women, we see the potential for these outlets to create new language that allows young women’s descriptions of wanting to get air and breathe before becoming covered with a salve of abstinence, safe sex and prevention. Most important, we draw attention to the link between how young women individually come to embody wanting and then, socially, how these experiences and inquiries travel across the landmines of teen surveillance and disease/pregnancy prevention. It is in this move from individual experience to social representation that we see the greatest potential for loss and for opportunities to let wanting, desire, and female excess into the room.

Rescuing Excess

Definitions of “excess” are revealing: “a quantity that is much larger than needed,” “beyond sufficient or permitted limits,” “overindulgence,” “more than is required.” These descriptions remind us of that which is too much, excessive. But a closer look reveals that excess is actually a word that draws attention to the line between what is required and what is not required, but is there anyway. Female sexuality, and specifically female sexual pleasure, exists at this very line. As a result, female sexuality has historically been linked with excess and fears of what lurks over the border of what is required, necessary, and sufficient.

Fear of excessive female sexuality accelerated into a moral panic in the nineteenth century when large segments of the medical community believed that masturbation and sexual excess caused insanity and disease (Cameron and Kulick 2003; Hare 1962; Whorton 2001). Excessive sexuality in women was considered suspect because of its potential to undermine patriarchy—it revealed that women did not depend on men for sexual release and that procreative possibilities were not the only outcome of sexual activity. In fact, the term “heterosexual” was coined in 1869 as a way to denote a perversion—having sex with someone of the other gender for pleasure rather than to reproduce. The first “heterosexuals” were men who had sex with pregnant women or who engaged in oral sex rather than intercourse (Cameron and Kulick 2003). Although this aura of perversion did not cling to heterosexual men who engaged in sex for pleasure, it has always clung to women.

Rescuing pursuits of pleasure has occupied feminist writers for the much of the last thirty years (Hite 1987; Irigaray 1981; Koedt 1970; McElroy 1995; Rubin 1984; Willis 1992). This has meant consistently decoupling female pleasure from reproductive capacities and staking out women’s rights to orgasms, contraception, reproductive choice, and relations with other women. Part of this project has meant imbuing women with an inherent eroticism. One

thinks of Irigaray's image of the woman always in pleasurable contact with herself—"two lips which embrace continually"—as representing pleasure in the very act of being biologically female (Irigaray 1981, 100).

However, even with this attention from some, issues of pleasure have, to a large degree, been supplanted in political organizing by issues of sexual freedom—freedom from violence, coercion, homophobia, sterilization, abuse, etc. Feminists and reproductive rights activists have come to understand that women's sexuality and reproductive freedoms must be fundamentally integrated into human rights campaigns. Women's access to abortion, contraception, condoms, child care, employment, freedom from violence, etc. are increasingly recognized (if not enacted) as foundational to global social welfare.

Although freedom from negative sexual events has often overshadowed the right to positive sexual events, there are a few examples of where this has not been the case. In various campaigns for sexual rights, demands for sexual pleasure have recently made a showing (see Correa and Petchefsky 1994; Edwards and Coleman 2004; Misra and Chandiramani 2005). In other words, we are slowly seeing the right to sexual pleasure integrated into the larger conversations concerning women's rights to sexual freedom.

In fact, feminist international advocacy work has recently taken an interesting turn. Cesnabmihilo Dorothy Aken'ova, a sexual rights activist with the International Centre for Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights in Minna, Nigeria, spoke at the Population Council in 2006 about her work on women's sexual entitlement. In a simple sentence, she captured the room when she explained: "If a Nigerian woman dares to ask for an orgasm, who knows, maybe next, she'll demand clean water." Reversing the traditional logic of a socialist-feminist-postcolonial platform—give her good schools and economic possibilities and she'll reduce her fertility rates—Aken'ova argued (not instead, but alongside), *give her body a sense of entitlement to pleasure and her political demands will follow*. In other words, although the right to sexual pleasure has long been held as a potential outcome of women's rights, it may be more powerful and practical to place bodily pleasure at the center of a rights campaign. When someone is able to negotiate what they want within themselves (and perhaps with a partner), these skills start a ripple in the water that continues to travel outward.

Although the articulation of pleasure as a woman's right has occupied some quarters of feminist discourse (McElroy 1995; Queen 1996; Rubin 1984; Willis 1992), there have been some corners that have gathered dust and remain less well explored. For example, novelist Suri Hustvedt notes that, "Feminist discourse in America ... has never taken on the problem of arousal with much courage" (Hustvedt 2006, 49). So too Katherine Franke (2001) argues that feminist legal scholars have focused so tightly on girls'/women's right to say "no" and questions of consent, they have abandoned the territory of pleasure, the right to say "yes" and to invite pleasure, to queer theory:

Women's right to enjoy their own body is entirely absent ... it has been the gay and queer legal theorists who see these issues as about a "right to sex..." (200–201)

... it seems that legal [and other types of] feminists have ceded to queer theorists the job of imagining the female body as a site of pleasure, intimacy, and erotic possibility." (182)

In her essay "Theorizing Yes" (2001) Franke challenges Catharine MacKinnon's position that female sexuality is always already colonized by male power. Franke is troubled that female sexuality is presumably never without coercion or violence; that "no" is the only viable feminist answer to any heterosexual question (198). She writes, "In this domain of legal feminism, sexuality is accounted for not as reproduction and dependency, but as danger. Sexuality is something that threatens from without" (199). Franke's work is an important step towards framing female sexuality as not merely something to be protected; she highlights the need to release it from feminist legal frameworks that consistently and relentlessly theorize women and their sexualness as in danger.

In response to these limited views on the potential for sexuality, Franke and others argue that female pleasure be recast as a radical space for theorizing *sexual excess*. Within the open range of sexual excess, women's capacity for multiple orgasms, orgasms free of reproductive consequence and transmission of sexual disease, pleasure with no market value and, perhaps, no evolutionary value—there have been inklings of research suggesting there is much to learn from women's pleasures. Quoting Miranda Joseph (1998), Franke writes, "revolution must involve heterogeneous expression, *wasteful gift exchange* (pure expenditure rather than accumulation, final consumption rather than productive consumption), and non-procreative sex" (emphasis added, cited in Franke 2001, 187).

In critical legal studies, and more recently in biology, interesting debates about sexual excess and female pleasure have heated up around the "purpose" of the (adult) female orgasm. If women's orgasms do not serve a genetic or species survival purpose, then why do they happen (again and again)? Women get pregnant just as frequently without having an orgasm during copulation—there is no evidence that orgasm affects fertility or reproductive success. Biologist Elisabeth Lloyd in her book, *The Case of the Female Orgasm* (2005), makes a compelling case for divorcing female orgasms from evolution. She decouples female orgasms from reproduction, which entails distinguishing "evolutionary function" from "biologically useful" structures. In a liberatory move of science, Lloyd argues that women's orgasms are indeed important (i.e., biologically useful), but not necessarily evolutionarily functional (they do not necessarily increase the likelihood of offspring). Women are so accustomed to being categorized as functional beings, this move away from evolution may

seem (and has been) disarming for a number of feminist researchers (Fausto-Sterling, Gowaty, and Zuk 1997; Hrdy 1981).

But instead of a loss, we see this description of the female orgasm as a moment of reprieve—where women are not biologically driven (or obligated) to procreate and yet our pleasure is allowed to live on its own. This allows for what we consider a *release point*. It allows us to imagine sex as fantasy or practice—with oneself or with a partner (female, trans, male)—as outside the boundaries of drive, nature, and babies. It is an intellectual opening that gives permission to reclaim sex and pleasure for women without genuflecting to heteronormativity and natural destiny. Decoupling pleasure from reproduction, Lloyd makes female orgasms the height of excess. This move to redefine female orgasms as excessive is not meant to diminish or demote them. Instead, this move has the potential to be liberatory in how it helps us rescue what it means to be excessive.

In the flush of women's desire being asserted at the center of global human rights struggles, legal rights, and evolutionary debates, we ask now about *young* women. Have we successfully campaigned for the rights of girls and young women to feel sexual desire and reproductive safety in the United States or globally? Or, have we continued to shelter their bodies in discourses of prevention and victimization as a means to secure their legal, health, and educational rights? It seems clear that young women inherently mark the radical possibilities and dangerous boundaries of sexual excess.

Young Women and Excess

Young women are fundamentally and inherently sexually excessive. Their sexuality captures cultural attention and collects cultural (and feminist) anxieties. Collectively, we seem to wonder, how much is enough? Their sexuality flaunts itself as “much larger than is needed,” goes way “beyond sufficient or permitted limits,” and is consistently cast as overindulgent. Although the sex they want and the sex they have are *typically* intended to be decoupled from reproduction, they are considered too young to reproduce (see Geronimus 1997 for an important critique of this position); too young to know enough about their bodies and their capacity; too young to be sexually pleased and pleasurable (Greif 2006).

Under the best of circumstances, when they choose to be sexual, teen women are the litmus test for how much room we have given women to be sexually excessive. Those on the political Right and Left join in their fears for the sexually excessive young woman: both sides arguing for laws and policies aimed at restricting the harms that young women face. She is indeed vulnerable; we all want to protect her. But how, in the process, have we become suspicious of her displays of excessiveness, just as we have learned to embrace our own? It seems we have restricted her access to expressions of excess. We ask her simply not to *want*.

Wanting and Wetness

Moving past the presumably missing discourse of young women's desire, we inch toward an investigation of young women's experiences of wanting. Wanting is wide and deep; it does not require an object. A theory of wanting allows the focus on other people, activities, outcomes, risks, and dangers to fall away for a moment. Wanting does not linger on the object of desire, but on the feeling in the mind or the body; therefore, it allows identities and orientations to progress after the identification of want within the self.

Wanting lives beside other related words that have histories of their own: desire, arousal, pursuit, release, orgasm, satisfaction, just to name a few. The term "desire" has been used to describe the early part of this sequence, while "behaviors" (and consequences) have covered the latter half. Typically, the thinking goes, he has desires and she has consequences. Given this and given the feminist reclamation of sexual pleasure, it is necessary to consider the frame around the words we have come to associate with female sexuality and ask ourselves, have we invited excess into the room? Or have we invited in just enough to not seem greedy?

We look more closely throughout this essay at moments when we heard inklings of *want* emerge from young women's mouths. These utterances would not have been considered statements of desire in any way. They were earlier, less formed, more unsure than desire. They were often in the form of a question; a question about whether her body had more to offer; whether she was entitled to more; asking, at base, how to ask.

Sixteen-year-old Jacqui's question at the start of this essay, her inquiry about her own experience of "being wet" speaks of wanting. *So, it's the same thing, right, like being wet and having an orgasm, right?* That is, she wants both an answer and an orgasm. In the moment of asking, we noticed, in retrospect, that she was right at the border of excess—evident in the giggles that subsequently tumbled through our focus group. Being wet is sufficient; having an orgasm is excessive. Her question alerted us to how these early inklings of want are important material to consider when imaging how sexual desire and anticipation meet up with sexual activity and satisfaction.

The question also brings us to the reality of vaginal discharge and the production of a viscous fluid that, for Jacqui, had come to serve as the proof that she had achieved pleasure. While wanting, arousal, and vaginal fluid are not all the same thing, they exist near one another and share a space in which anticipation hangs in the air. Elizabeth Grosz, in her book *Volatile Bodies* (1994), explores the history of viscous fluids in discourses of social control in the feminist writings of Mary Douglas, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray. Borderline states, according to Douglas, are sites of possible danger and contamination (and, we would add, excess). Bodily fluids tend to be present in these borderline states:

Blood, vomit, saliva, phlegm, pus, sweat, tears, menstrual blood, seminal fluids, seep, flow, pass with different degrees of control, tracing the paths of entry or exit, the routes of interchange or traffic with the world, which must nevertheless be clear of these bodily “products” for an interchange to be possible. (Grosz 1994, 195)

If we were to theorize the experience of wanting as a borderline state, as in the above image, we would need to add vaginal lubrication to this list of borderline fluids. However, we find in Grosz’s work a reminder that viscous fluids—those that are neither liquid nor solid—are imagined as the most dangerous type of fluids. Perhaps this is why we resist imagining the experience of wanting and the fluids that it sometimes produces—we don’t need any more reasons to link wanting or female arousal as dangerous or unseemly. Maybe we back away from describing this borderline state because we resist these linkages with danger and dirt. In the name of protection, we have perhaps cut off the visceral for young women.

Grosz reminds us that “it is women, and what men consider to be their capacity for contagion, their draining, demanding bodily processes” (1994, 197) that figure so strongly in how female fluids are imagined and handled. In our own work, we heard these same sentiments about the dirt, danger, and taboo of young women’s sexual bodies. In an all-male (except for us) focus group, when asked about sexuality, desire, and dangers, for a few minutes the young men focused on the troubles of girls’/women’s “dirt.” “Just because she looks clean and smells fresh doesn’t mean she is.” To which another added, “I make sure she uses Wet Wipes, cleans up before we get busy.”

In their work, both Kristeva and Douglas wonder about the costs of women becoming a social body—one that is required to be clean, obedient, and law abiding. Bodies that fall outside of this definition are suspect as dirty, marginal, and problematic. Although adult women have made strides in refusing to be labeled as dirty or having problematic bodies, young women remain stuck with these words. The only alternative they have is to remain within or feign virginal status. Young women of color and queer teens are caught materially and discursively in ways that are most oppressive. Held responsible for bodies considered disobedient and problematic, they are punished for sexual desire and excess at every turn (see Fine and McClelland 2006, 2007). Desire for young women too quickly metastasizes into danger.

Excess and Danger

We presume that desire swims through young women’s bodies but gets stalled in the circuitry of social, legal, and educational policies, drowning in discourses of protection, victimization, heteronormativity and abstinence, searching for a language of its own.

But the situation is even more complicated than a twenty-first-century Virginia Woolf search for a discourse of one's own. Indeed, the French twist of *desire* and *risk* is constitutive of young women's sexuality. Risk is sexy and desire is risky. Desire, for young women, materializes into risk the moment it is enacted. That is, once young women's desires are performed or named, they sour potentially into risk and danger. Once her desire hits the air, her cleavage is displayed, her caresses linger too long, or she enters his bedroom, her desire curdles into cultural shame, slut, rape, pregnancy, and disease. Like blue blood that turns red at the touch of oxygen, young women's desire turns rancid once visible and/or enacted. Luscious and confusing in her mind, her body, and her fantasies, once released, desire collects danger.

In conversations among feminists, lawyers, and activists working on reproductive rights, like in more obviously conservative conversations about abstinence, we have found that the question of *young* women's desires renders a room squeamish. *They* need condoms, contraception, health care, access to abortion, sexuality education, freedom from parental waivers—because they have perhaps been exploited by an older man, a father, uncle, brother. If a young woman is drained of responsibility or sexual curiosity, it often makes it much easier to protect her.

Young women's sexuality has a collective hold on the popular imagination, at once a trope for innocence and for abuse (Greif 2006). And although we, too, are susceptible to these concerns, we worry that we have collectively smothered the flames—in public discourse—of young women's capacity to want. Political expedience, perhaps, has encouraged us all to render her innocent of desire—as though desire outside of marriage and/or reproduction were inherently contaminated and contaminating. It is hard to defend or fight for young women's right to sexual excess. Not that *it* is missing, not at all; but that it has been banished, sent to the margins, rendered mute, but not absent, itchy, but not named (see Reich 2002; Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson 1983; Vance 1984; Willis 1992).

For young women, then, *wanting itself is excess*. Although young women desire, like we all do, once their desire is, as Lorde writes, “released from its intense and constrained pellet”—spoken, enacted with herself, a young man or another young woman—it gathers up cultural shame, risk, punishment, hypervisible performance, or quiet secrecy. Although White middle-class heterosexual teens hold the ideological space of sexual containment, girls of color, poor girls, violated girls, and lesbians hold the ideological space of sexual contamination. These young women are held, culturally, most responsible for their excessiveness. No longer pure, they are at once contaminated and contaminating (Douglas 1966). They smell like want.

Is Being Wet the Same as Having an Orgasm?

In 2006, we held a series of focus group conversations with young women and men in urban high schools (ages sixteen to eighteen) around the New York

metropolitan area to try to understand how young women and men spoke about sexualities and desire. The young people ranged from solidly middle class, to working poor; their schools spanned from deeply deprived to well equipped, all within the confines of public urban education in America today. Their racial/ethnic biographies ranged through White, Latina, Caribbean-American, African American, Vietnamese-American, Indian-American, and varied combinations. Their sexual histories seem to vary as widely. Two of our four conversations were “co-ed,” one all female, and one all male.

To open, we asked them how they would design a textbook on sexuality education: “What do young people need to know?” The conversations swirled around sexuality, desire, and bodies, but the youth, for the most part, held us with discursive brackets of heteronormativity, focused narrowly on prevention of disease and pregnancy. That is, until we could pry open the well-patrolled discursive membranes. It was the rare moment when kernels of pleasure would be released into the conversation, like the yellow of Audre Lorde’s childhood margarine. We offer snippets of these conversations in order to analyze how young people talk with each other in the presence of adults about sexuality and bodies. Searching for sea shells of desire, we found ourselves treading water in a sea of prevention talk. But if you look hard enough, granules of *want* float by.

Scene One: In the most impoverished community high school we visited, our conversation about sexuality fixated on the dangers of sexuality in an era of HIV/AIDS and pregnancy. When asked about designing a sexuality textbook for teens, what it would look like, and what should be included in it, Tiffany opened the conversation:

I don’t know what should be in the book, but I know that the last chapter should be something like, “If all else fails, and bad things happen, know that we still love you.” I just want teenagers to know that we are there for you, even if something bad happens and you get sick or have a baby.

And that’s where the conversation remained—on condoms, HIV prevention, and boys not trusting girls who might “poke needle pin pricks in a condom.” The whispers of pleasure were wholly male; those charged as prevention police were female. In this school, sanctioned sex talk happened under the skirts of prevention, STD testing, and condoms. Talk of abortion or lesbian/gay/bi teens was more risky; perhaps it was excessive. In a school “flooded,” according to the teacher, with teen pregnancy and a community “infested” with HIV, prevention was the primary available discourse. Although prevention talk is normative here—and this is an enormous accomplishment given the restrictions of the abstinence-only-until-marriage movement in the United States—when prevention is the only discourse in the room, it can suck the air out of a complicated conversation. When protection from disease and pregnancy is only the goal, a young woman’s desire can too quickly be seen as “gravy” (Burns and Torre 2005) or perhaps, simply excessive.

Scene Two: In a more “mixed” urban high school—heterogeneous by social class, race/ethnicity, and neighborhood—we convened three groups: one all female, one male, and one mixed group for a discussion on sexuality. In our all-female focus group we heard a variety of discourses about sexuality. In particular, we witnessed how a discourse of prevention or victimization can give permission for “lite” discussions of wanting.

As the session began, we asked the young women to generate a list of questions one might ask in a survey of young people’s experiences of sexuality. We positioned the students as experts with bodies, biographies, and serious inquiries. We asked them to consult on a hypothetical project to design a national survey, to help us understand what needed to be asked of young people if we wanted to understand their experiences of sexuality more fully. In the wording of their projected or embodied concerns, the dominant discourses of victimization, prevention, waiting, secrecy, and shame speak.

- Michelle:* So what questions would you add to a national survey, what would you want to ask other young women about sexuality?
- Tammy:* I would want to ask other girls how having sex affects your mentality, your mind. I had it really young, and I just want to know how sex affects you mentally.
- Susan:* What do you know about STDs? I learn from the nurse practitioner in the clinic but I would like to know more, and what could happen if you don’t use condoms.
- Niqua:* What do you think the Bush administration is trying to do? High school students aren’t stupid—look at the media, magazines, books, movies. Sex is everywhere. They have to teach us about it!
- Parma:* I don’t really need to ask anything or learn anything now, because I am definitely waiting until I am married.
- Sara:* And then where will you learn about sexuality?
- Jacqui:* Society gives a message that [teen sex] is horrible, so how do you know when you’re ready or if the person is someone you can trust? Saying condoms don’t work is so dangerous!
- Susan:* The classes should be a conversation like this. Take them to a clinic so they know what they can expect. Have boys and girls in the same class.
- Parma:* Actually I would like to ask, what happens after high school, when you’re married? It’s not like the knowledge just comes to you.
- Niqua:* They should treat it seriously but not preachy. It has to be a conversation not a lecture!
- Wedillo:* Someone has to be listening and responding, not judging.
- Jacqui:* Teaching abstinence, and only the dangers of sex, is more dangerous than not teaching it at all.
- Susan:* In Catholic school we learned that even if you’re raped you can’t get an abortion.

- Niqua:* I need a place to talk about this. My parents know, but they don't want to see it.
- Lin:* My parents are immigrants; I can't talk to my parents because of the shame. I don't want to put them through that but I need someone to speak with.

We hear, across this ten-minute segment, traces of the discourse of *victimization* (“I had it when I was young ... what does it do to you mentally?”); *morality* and *waiting* (“I am definitely waiting until I am married”); and *prevention/dangers* (“Saying condoms don't work is dangerous!”). And then, as if reenacting the orgasm cycle of Masters and Johnson, the group gained some momentum, reached a plateau, and spun into desire talk. First Parma asked the only legitimate and authorized question about women's pleasure: Where will I learn about sexual pleasure *after* I am married? Others expressed a deep desire for conversation about sexuality, a space for inquiry, and safety. And, then questions about sexual desire—outside of marriage and disconnected from reproduction—leaked into the room.

- Michelle:* So, if you could ask other young women any question about sexuality or desire, or whatever, what would you want to ask them?
- Jacqui:* So, it's the same thing, right, like being wet and having an orgasm, right?
- Many respond:* What do you mean?
- Jacqui:* Sometimes I don't get wet, and it hurts. But when I'm wet, that's an orgasm, right?

Another young woman, Khari, jumps in: “It's really important to be wet—you know, if you're not wet, or lubricated, you know the condom can break and then it's possible you can catch an infection or get pregnant. You need to buy some lube!”

We took this opening to explore with the group the politics and practices of wetness, lubrication, and orgasm. As outsiders, we suggested to the young women that they think about and explore their bodies, at home, to find sources of pleasure. But we note a recurrent dynamic—only after disease prevention and victimization discourses had been dutifully narrated by the group, could pleasure poke its head into the room. We see this both in Parma's delicate question about “after marriage” and then in Jacqui's more courageous question about “being wet.” Immediately thereafter, as if in an act of discursive chivalry, worries about disease prevention swooped in: “If you're not wet ... the condom can break ... and you can catch an infection! You need to buy some lube!” Khari saved us from desire and returned us to (the safety of) prevention talk. Protection/prevention became a discursive cocoon for young women's talk of wanting/desire, a way to enter (and exit) the zone of pleasure.

Jacqui insisted that she was not about to purchase lubrication for protection or pleasure: "I'm not spending money on lubrication." And then in a shocking last minute victory for a hybrid discourse of protection-and-pleasure, Khari opened her purse, removed a sample packet of lubrication and handed it over to a much embarrassed, much delighted, laughing hysterically Jacqui as we all watched a conversation rarely had.

Additional stories about how long it takes for women to have an orgasm floated into the room, pushing their way into the conversation until one woman wondered aloud if women were ever meant to experience pleasure: "Why would our bodies be made so that it was so hard for us to have pleasure? Maybe we were just meant to have babies. Maybe we're not meant to enjoy sex." Her voice, while filled with disappointment, also disclosed that she was questioning her "fate" as simply not "naturally" able to experience pleasure. In her question, hope and disappointment slept together.

Studying the Unspoken

Anyway one cuts "positive," at least thus far in this body of research, [desire] crops up only sporadically, infrequent but extraordinary interstices that are portals to the positive.

Tolman (2006, 73)

Through our focus groups and readings, we have come to distance ourselves a bit from the earlier notion that a discourse of desire is missing (Fine 1998). We've gotten intrigued, instead, by the search for methodological release points that allow teen women's experience of wanting and desire to be heard and perhaps, languaged and made into words to be shared. Interested in articulating potential methods to accommodate emerging—and perhaps disguised—discourses of wanting in young women, we bump into issues of epistemology, theory, and method. That is, trying to capture the hidden transcripts of wanting and desire challenges us to rethink how sexual knowledge is constructed within and how it circulates among teen women (and researchers). This leads us to reconsider a number of other questions: where wanting/desire lives and how it moves in the body and in the body politic; what we ask and where we look; how embodied knowledge develops, speaks, and acts at the border between the body and the social membrane; how such knowledge circulates, scabs over in shame and prevention language, and is traded among peers and with adults; and, finally, how knowledge is cauterized by sexualized commodification and surveillance.

Like the young woman we heard earlier who worried that she couldn't have orgasms because her body was deficient or unworthy, we now believe that the missing discourse of desire hasn't been missing at all. Perhaps, just perhaps, researchers (at minimum) haven't figured out how to mobilize cultural practices (including critical research methods) that would allow utterances of

young women's desire to breathe. Perhaps we haven't figured out how to move slowly enough towards understanding, how to neutralize the cultural brakes that shut it down in public, in research, and in the body.

As feminist researchers, we have focused with a keen eye on what was not there and what was missing when we listened to young women speak about their desires. This silence has been heart-breaking to hear. And we have simultaneously been committed to teaching young women to protect themselves from violence, viruses, and victimhood. These parallel discourses in adolescent sexuality research have created a chasm within our research methodologies. It is not that we have not listened carefully enough or that we have used the wrong methods to ask our questions. It is that there is simply not enough language and what language we have specifies danger, shame, and judgment. Our language of desire is insufficient, especially for young woman, to be able to describe adequately what it feels like to want.

Feminist researchers are on the cusp of creating new language for women to imagine and describe themselves and their erotic inner and outer lives. New words need to be made up, old words need to be reclaimed, and new ways of understanding sexuality need to be designed. This process will not stop until we have more than enough words to describe the nuances of sexual experience. *The missing discourse needs to be filled in.* We resurrected the idea of excess earlier in this essay because we believe it may hold some potential for imagining sexual feelings that grow bigger than they "need" to be. We think there is something important in thinking more carefully about the zone of sexual development pre-desire: the zone of simply wanting.

Release points are imagined as ways of making potential openings in the "assumed" and the "common sense"—even that of feminist research. We have been focused in this essay on creating a theoretical space for wanting and sexual excess to emerge. In other writing, we further elaborate potential release points—within methodological practices—that allow researchers to keep wanting and desire from being extinguished before being swallowed up by prevention and safety discourses (McClelland and Fine in press [b]). Below, we reflect on a *cultural* release point. We introduce this example of a cultural release point because we hope that it offers future researchers entry points into asking new questions, imagining new relationships with young people, and new language for filling in the gaps in our vocabulary and bodies.

Release Points: Youth Media

One important feminist project is to understand how the hidden or buried transcripts of young women's desire move through the capillaries of media culture. To examine this circulation more carefully, we turned to teen magazines and to Web sites created for girls and young women in order to see what languages were being used in these settings. Although the teen magazines continue to describe young women's sexuality as somewhat passive and prob-

lematic, in the Web sites we reviewed, we saw a different trend. We saw desire emerging as a fruitful and alive discourse and even the language of what it means to want showing up in new and unexpected ways. This shift in language represents an opening—a moment of interruption where we see new language developing to describe various aspects of female sexual want, desire, arousal, satisfaction, etc., as they circulate both in individual bodies and in the social body. These examples of youth media articulate young women's desires at the complicated intersections of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and (dis)ability. They use a variety of languages to speak out loud what wanting and desire might look and sound like for a young woman.

We reviewed thirty magazines aimed at teen women from the years 2005 and 2006, with the majority of the sources from *Teen People*, *Elle Girl*, and *Seventeen*. In addition, we also analyzed four Web sites aimed at educating young people about their sexuality: *Scarleteen.com* (“Sex Positive Sex Education”); *SexEtc.com* (“a web site by teens for teens”); *MySistahs.org* (“by and for young women of color”); and *gURL.com* (“an online community and content site for teenage girls”).

Pleasure narratives were found with a staccato presence in teen magazines, typically with an authoritative voice-over that represented young women as fundamentally desired but not-really-very-desiring (see Isaacson 2006; McRobbie 1996). In a 2005 issue of the magazine *Teen People*, for instance, the ten most asked questions about sex were answered by the editors and two physicians. One read:

Why do guys seem to think about sex more than girls?

Guys' brains seem to have a whole section dedicated to sex, possibly because guys have more testosterone—a hormone that makes them have a higher sex drive—than girls do (yes, we have some). Guys are also more apt to be visually stimulated while girls tend to be more focused on the relationship and their emotions. “Guys probably feel more social pressure to have sex, says [a gynecologist]. “When guys see a beautiful girl, they want to have sex!” adds [an ob-gyn]. (Grumman 2005, 101)

Young women here are clearly imaged as having inadequate levels of desire (when compared to men). No danger of embodied excess here, only excessive provocation by young women. There were, however, plenty of examples of proclamations of being “in love,” but the link to sexual expression was evident in only one example seen below and in this example, we only hear a whisper of desire in the often used phrase, “it just felt right.”

Once we said we loved each other, though, we decided that if the right time came, we would be ready. So the night before Halloween last year, we were alone in my house, lying on my living-room floor, and things just felt right. (Wilson 2005, 100)

In contrast, however, there are remarkable Web sites run by and for teens, directly addressing questions and concerns generated by young people. The ethics of researching on online material still need to be articulated critically and collaboratively with participants in these Web sites. In the public sections of these sites, however, you can watch as young women's questions about their desire swim in their own bodies, between groups of young people, across sexualities, histories of sex and abuse, continents and zip codes, sexualities, racial and ethnic lines, bumping into risk as a necessary caution (but not stop sign) for how to proceed with embodied sexual subjectivities.

For instance, the Web site *Scarleteen.com* defines sexual desire as the following:

We must experience desire to feel sexually aroused. People sometimes describe sexual desire as being "hungry" or "horny." We may feel sexual desire towards a particular person, or we may feel it simply in and of itself, a kind of free-floating feeling of wanting to be sexual. (*Scarleteen 2006*)

Definitions like this move us towards excess. Defining desire simply "wanting to be sexual" expands its boundaries by focusing less on objects or experiences; desire is allowed to be "free-floating" and, as a result, perhaps, given room to breathe before being attached to someone or something.

The Web site *gURL.com* echoed this same expansive sentiment when their advice columnist responded to a young woman who was "confused about what to call [herself]" when she "noticed that [she] was attracted to boys and, maybe, girls." When the young woman wrote to the "Dear Heather" section of *gURL.com* for advice "on trying to figure it out," the columnist responded:

I think you should just relax about finding a name for your emotions and spend some time around both girls and boys observing what you feel. I believe it is very natural to have feelings for both boys and girls and that often it is the person and not the gender that really matters. ... But I think for right now it is important for you to really enjoy the luxury of not giving all your feelings a name. (*gURL.com 2006*)

By advising this young woman (and all the young women who read the advice column) to "observe what you feel" and "enjoy the luxury" of feelings that bleed past the boundaries of identities and labels, Web sites like *gURL.com* offer young (lesbian, bi, and straight) women language with which to color in their experiences of want and desire.

In addition to expanding definitions and offering identities that have luxurious space for attraction and desire to develop, zines and virtual communities have been highlighted by other researchers for their opportunities to offer "covert models of both self-expression and networked activism" (Harris 2004, 170). As young women are faced with limited opportunities for full citizenship in certain areas (due to age and gender, race, ethnicity,

citizenship status, class, disability, etc.), they may find opportunities to create “a new girl citizen” who does not just consume commercial culture and is not just consumed by commercial culture, but produces and critiques what she learns through the venues of girl-produced zines and Web sites. For example, MySistahs.org features articles written by young women of color on subjects such as “colorism” in the African American community, critical media skills, and women’s sexual exploitation in hip hop culture. These cultural spaces are essential for social and sexual development because they exist outside of the market and provide opportunities for information and expression without relying on the marketplace to provide the circuitry (Harris 2004).

Conclusions

We write this piece with a sense that young women are now struggling at the nexus of embodiment and politics. They want to speak and act above ground about desire, wanting, and risk. Dutifully trying to squeeze their feelings of wanting and desire into discourses of abstinence, heteronormativity, or prevention, they seek a much wider platform for conversation, questions, and talk in which to think through their bodies, relationships, and their futures as both profoundly political and embodied. We want to help imagine, with them, a political, theoretical, and cultural plane—in youth movements and human rights campaigns; in zines, Web sites and movies; in health care settings and schools; in science; and in bedrooms—where young women’s desire, upon “release,” wouldn’t be eaten by commercials, predators, or shame, but could loiter, a bit, in talk and body, among teens and even with adults. We would hope, that in these spaces, they be allowed to be *excessive in their expectations and demands for a fully embodied sexual present and future*.

We use this essay to imagine embodied desire, floating through bodies and also to track how young women’s enactments and relations of sexuality move in conversation, Web sites, magazines, youth community settings, and in classrooms. These moments are stitched together from whispers and gasps—both heard in person and through cultural products that inspired us to speculate how a language of young women’s wanting and desire can begin to enter public discourse, feminist research, and organizing. This requires that researchers, young women, educators, and the many other adults who shape young adult worlds, enable the lines of vision, the bodies, and the ambivalences of young women to emerge from the closet of abstinence, prevention, and heteronormativity. We must, for even a moment, hold the sex police at bay, turn away from our surveillance, and allow excess to emerge.

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