

Writing on cellophane

Studying teen women's sexual desires, inventing methodological release points

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Why cellophane?

In this chapter, we theorize methods to study teen women's sexual desires. Our title stems from a concern that young women's desires come to be laminated in cellophane. We see layers of cellophane being produced by: a market economy that rushes to commodify young female bodies; sociopolitical, moral, and heteronormative panics that obsess over young women's sexualities; racist imagery and institutional practices that vilify the sexualities of women of color; and by schools increasingly kidnapped by the policy of teaching abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula in place of serious sexuality education (see Fine and McClelland, 2006, 2007). In this chapter, we are particularly interested in *methods* to study sexual desires as they are narrated, embodied, and enacted by young women in this political context. Wrapped in a kind of *collective discursive cellophane*, we believe it may be difficult for them to speak as their tongues are weighed down with dominant assumptions and panics; and, similarly, our ears may be clogged with our own dominant (feminist) discourses for *their* desires.

In this essay, we ask: how can critical feminist theories and methods account for the layers of discursive cellophane that instruct young women to be ashamed, guilty, provocative, hot, dissociated, and/or regretful about their sexualities? Like many critical feminist researchers, we wonder about the process of researching a *subject* that is continually objectified and distorted through public and private scrutiny and regulation. How do we craft methods that acknowledge these political and discursive contexts – including the varied (yet limited) positions available to and imposed upon young women – and still manage to understand something about what it means to be a young woman living and developing sexually in the early decades of the twenty-first century?

The methodological dilemma

As they mature, young women learn specific lessons about what is permitted and what is expected of them. We live today in a culture in which teen women's

sexual desire has been commodified: that is, made into something that can be sold in the market place. Parallel to (and sometimes in response to) this sexual marketing, a series of federal and state policies and laws have been implemented ostensibly to 'protect' young women from commodification, disease, pregnancy, their peers, older men, the Internet, predators, and the list goes on.

Our methodological dilemma revolves around our desire to theorize a wide range of young women's 'desires' in a social climate in which teen women's sexuality is read alternately as *vulnerable* (especially for White and elite young women), *confused* (lesbian, bi, or queer young women), or *dangerous* (young women of color). Our dilemma deepens when, in conversations with us, so many young women themselves speak fluently in the hegemonic, heteronormative, racist, and sometimes misogynistic discourses, and yet stammer when they are asked to speak about where desire lives in their own bodies.

Various feminist researchers have noted these gaps in women's descriptions of themselves. The 'missing discourse of desire', heard in both personal and institutional discourses, has been well documented (Allen, 2004; Diamond, 2005; Elliott, 2003; Fine, 1988; Fine and McClelland, 2006; Tolman, 1994, 2002). More recently, however, we have become interested in the political and cultural brakes that impress on young women. In our chapter in Anita Harris's (2008) volume on young women and post-'wave' feminism, we try to 'rescue a theory of sexual excess', arguing that:

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.

(McClelland and Fine, 2008b: 96–97)

While we, too, hear the stammering and the silence from young women, we want to play out here the possibility that the silence is not an absence, but perhaps something else: *an absence we know to be present*. We take the position that young women's desires have been overwritten as taboo, converted into a product to be sold, drenched in biographies of violence or shame, silenced and made dangerous, or displayed provocatively on MySpace pages. If we shift the discussion of young female sexual desire from one of missingness to one of present but laminated in political and cultural cellophane, the theoretical task of the feminist researcher shifts from documenting the loss and silencing to investigating the varied strategies by which desires are buried, forming and yet emergent: spoken, embodied, performed, and/or enacted. It is a subtle but important modification in how we imagine the role of feminist research in this area.

Below we try to unravel the layers of this methodological dilemma and offer some very tentative and very partial – written in pencil – ideas for method. We begin with an overview of the political and discursive forces that produce the cellophane. Reviewing the commercial performances of hypersexuality by young women and the moral panics inscribed in government policies on teen sexuality, we provide a cursory look at how the market, politics, and popular culture (im)press on young women's bodies. From there we move into data – eavesdropping on a focus group we conducted with young urban high school women, where we asked them to teach us about what they and their peers needed to know about sex. Third, we consider various strategies for critical analysis of this focus group material, how to listen and interpret with 'faith', but also with 'suspicion' as Ruthellen Josselson (2004) has suggested. Finally, we offer a set of methodological strategies which we think may enable researchers interested in the ghostly presence of young women's desire. We envision these methodologies as 'release points' because they remind us to see desire as released or releasable, curdling and circulating, fleeing and fleeting, performed and repressed, rapping and wrapped. We hope to suggest research methodologies that can fracture and warp the light that is already highlighting every move a young woman makes.

Commodification and moral panics: young women's bodies, the market, and the state

Young women today live in an era of sexual surveillance, continuously viewed from every possible angle. As they transition from girl to woman, they are closely monitored by the market place, popular culture, and neo-liberal policies aimed at minors, such as abstinence-only-until-marriage education and parental notification for abortion laws. Within these contexts, young women are excellent students and learn that sexual thoughts and behaviors are things to be sold, feared, loathed, or all of these. But they also learn there is much to be gained from sexual performances and displays of horniness, often in front of cameras.

To highlight the landscape of commodification and moral panics, we turn to Ariel Levy's analysis in her book, *Female Chauvinistic Pigs* (2005). Levy describes what she terms 'raunch culture' – a cultural paradigm that privileges the *performance* of sexual desire rather than the *experience* of desire. Interviewing women who remove their clothes for cameras and kiss other women to turn men on, Levy describes an elite culture that values a 'tawdry, tarty, cartoonlike version of female sexuality' (Levy, 2005: 1). For example, she asks us to consider the following scenes:

I first noticed it several years ago. I would turn on the television and find strippers in pasties explaining how best to lap dance a man to orgasm. I would flip the channel and see babes in tight, tiny uniforms bouncing

up and down on trampolines. Britney Spears was becoming increasingly popular and increasingly unclothed and her undulating body ultimately became so familiar to me . . . People I knew (female people) liked going to strip clubs (female strippers). It was sexy and fun they explained; it was liberating and rebellious. My best friend from college, who used to go to Take Back the Night marches on campus, had become captivated by porn stars.

(*Ibid.*: 1–4)

bell hooks, Tricia Rose, Monique Ward, Carla Stokes, and others also write on young women's sexualities, hoisted theoretically at the intersection of critical race theory and popular culture, cataloging the images of Black young women in videos, MTV, and on young women's own web pages (hooks, 1996; Rose, 2003; Ward, 2003; Stokes, 2007). Profoundly misogynistic and racist images are performed and rehearsed. For instance, Jones's (1997) study of music videos shown on Black Entertainment Television (BET) reports that 42 percent of hip-hop videos featured sexual fondling, 42 percent featured women wearing hot pants, and 58 percent featured a female dancing sexually (cited in Ward, 2003). Carla Stokes (2007) has studied Black American adolescent girls' web pages, their own self-representations, finding the performances of dominant scripts such as 'Freaks, Virgins, Down-Ass Chicks/Bitches, Pimpettes and Resisters' filling the pages.

In combination, these performances beg the question: how do we read these performances of desire by young women, even as we recognize that sales, as well as heteronormativity, racism, and male gaze, are central to these scripts? How are young women engaging dominant scripts? To what extent are they resisting *and* internalizing them, selling their bodies through these scripts and yet holding a(nother) space, perhaps, for desire? The material available in popular culture, such as the 'oral sex panics' reviewed below, can always be read critically through triple lenses: as evidence of market commodification, as performance of popular culture, and/or as assertion of agentic selves. This is where we intervene theoretically with a bookmark of critical analysis: where do we read young women's desires in these performances? Are we naive to believe that desire remains in partial eclipse?

Consider the middle/high school oral sex scandals. A rash of anecdotes and media reports describe young girls/women performing oral sex on young boys/men in public displays (e.g., Rockdale County in 1999; Tolman, 1999). At 'rainbow parties' in Minnesota, purportedly 'girls wear different colored lipstick . . . and the goal is to get as many different colored rings on their penises by night's end'. At 'chicken head parties [in Florida] . . . girls supposedly gave oral sex to boys at the same time thus bobbing their heads up and down like chickens'. And our very favorite, in New Jersey: 'oral sex was becoming the ultimate bar mitzvah gift in one community, given under the table during the reception hidden by long tablecloths' (Gelperin, 2004: 64;

Levy, 2005: 139). These examples can be (and have been) read in a number of ways – as evidence of the moral breakdown of the American teenager, and, conversely, as an overly dramatized media-fueled ‘moral panic’ around teen, and particularly female, sex.

Many feminist researchers have noted this conflation of commodification, development, and sexualization – especially for young women and girls – and its confusing relationship to desire (APA, 2007; Harris, 2005; Merskin, 2004; Nelson, 2000). Indeed, the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) asserts, ‘there is no question that girls (and boys) grow up in a cultural milieu saturated with sexualizing messages’ and argues for increased research on the impact of hypersexualized cultural messages on female sexual development. This position has been echoed in the press. One writer recently noted that the proliferation of ‘sexy’ imagery surrounding girls and young women was impossible to miss:

Ten-year-old girls can slide their low-cut jeans over ‘eye-candy’ panties. French maid costumes, garter belt included, are available in preteen sizes. Barbie now comes in a ‘bling-bling’ style, replete with halter top and go-go boots. And it’s not unusual for girls under 12 to sing, ‘Don’t cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?’

(Weiner, 2007)

With all of this teen ‘sex’ in the air, a third force has entered the picture, joining the market and popular culture, to ‘save the girl child’. That is, from fundamentalist religious groups and from the US government, there is a considerable policy rush to protect girls and young women, with racialized representations of ‘the girl’ diverging in significant ways (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Meyers, 2004; Millard and Grant, 2006).

Strange allies come together in the crusade to ‘protect’ girls and young women. Replaying historic alliances between conservatives and feminists (seen previously in struggles around prohibition of alcohol, pornography, prostitution, human trafficking, and most recently debates about the wearing of hijab in Europe), on the issue of young women’s sexuality and abuse, some feminist interests *fundamentally* overlap with those of social conservatives. Both presumably want to protect young women. And, with enormous ambivalence, we include ourselves here as well. Girls and young women are, and are seen as, vulnerable. The trouble is that the dominant response is to portray girls and young women as *lacking the capacity* psychologically or physically to manage the pressure, expectations, and attention that are heaped upon their sexually developing bodies *and*, therefore, they are denied the education, networks, resources, opportunities, and second chances that would *build capacity and community* for healthy sexual development. As adults rush in to ‘save’ and ‘protect’, they undermine girls’ and young women’s development, rendering them ultimately more vulnerable.

We worry greatly about the dangers of a discourse cast in the language of protection sculpted into social policies. An example (Fine and McClelland, 2007) of this slippage from state-protection ideology to state-regulation policy occurred in 2003 when Kansas Attorney General Phillip Kline released an opinion which *legally mandated that all adults who interacted with minors* must report any sexual activity (consensual or nonconsensual) involving youth less than sixteen years old (Kline, 2003). Teachers, physicians, nurses, and therapists would therefore be legally required to report all minors under sixteen who engaged in any type of sexual activity (even developmentally appropriate and consensual sexual activity). These youth, in turn, would be prosecuted as victims or aggressors of sexual abuse.

In this legal maneuver, the state of Kansas attempted¹ to position itself as the prosecutor and protector of all teenage sexual activity and attempted to prevent trained adults from providing young people (and, in particular, young women) with information, support, or advice in sexual matters. In the name of state protection, a punishing moral framework was to be laid atop all forms of teen sexuality *and* public supports for youth withheld.

In a similar duet of government-sponsored moralizing about teen sex paired with withholding of support, the proliferation of abstinence-only-until-marriage education has been paired, politically, with legal moves to restrict minors’ rights to emergency contraception and abortion (see Fine and McClelland, 2007). Like the Kansas action, these policies align *against* teen sex, abortion, contraception, and gay and lesbian relationships, thereby threatening the possibility of open and educational conversations about sexual desires and dangers.

Rasmussen *et al.* (2004: 3) offer a stunning analysis of how ‘protectionist’ discourses subvert the developmental needs of queer youth:

Contemporary understandings of youth make it nearly impossible for young people to embrace non-normative identities or take possession of their bodies and their lives. With these understandings reigning supreme, is it any surprise that an entire regime of social service programs, modeled on child-saving concepts, has emerged in the past two decades, intended to ‘service’ and ‘protect’ queer youth? When such cultures insist on seeing ‘good’ young people as asexual, how can there be a lesbian seventh-grader? When society constructs teenagers as the chattel property of their adult parents, how can we talk about a young person’s right to forge his or her own gender identity? When schools embrace abstinence-only approaches to sex, how can we begin a dialogue about young people’s sexual pleasure?

The fear of teen desires, masked as public policy and worry, leaves young women (and queer boys) quite literally holding the bag, the baby, the disease, the responsibility, the shame, and sometimes the police record, all in the name of protection. The neo-liberal state, infused with fundamentalist values, is punishing the bodies

of youth – students of color and queer youth, in particular – constraining and shaming teen sexual subjectivities, bodies, and souls. Let us be clear – there are many, many things that put young women in danger and we are not suggesting that these threats are invented. Rather, we are highlighting what happens to young women who grow up and develop with the constant din of alarms in their ears when we publicly and privately imagine them and their bodies as portals to danger. Like others writing about the current loss of civil liberties both nationally and internationally (ACLU, 2003; Cassel, 2004; Cornehl, 2003), we wonder what is lost, for whom, for how long, and with what consequences, launched in the *name of protection*.

We turn now to listen in on how young women speak of their sexualities, amid the politics and discourses that swirl around, about, despite, and through them.

Sex talk among young urban high school women

Over the last three years, we have conducted a number of focus groups with young women, young men, and young women and men, asking them to *teach us* about the worlds of teen sexualities. In a hope to move beyond the ‘missing discourse of desire’ (Fine, 1988), we have been trying to hear what and how young women experience *want* (see McClelland and Fine, 2008b).

In a ‘mixed’ urban high school – heterogeneous by social class, race/ethnicity, and neighborhood – we convened three focus groups for conversation about adolescent sexual desire. We asked the high school 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.

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.

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: In Catholic school we learned that even if you’re raped you can’t get an abortion.

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 many things over the course of this exchange. We hear discourses of moral judgement, fears, outrage, victimization, prevention, and many others. We could dismiss these statements as merely the repetition of what has been dutifully learned and repeated. We could interpret these exchanges as the result of shame, as an example of a missing discourse of desire, as evidence of these young women having learned their (sex ed.) lessons well, or as the result of the presence of two strangers collecting data on their responses. Any and all of these are possible. But for now, we are less interested in the literal words. Instead, we are more taken with the dynamics in the group and the discursive patterns – what is said and not said, by whom, and when.

For instance, we have found that with enough time, in safe collective settings, issues of desire, pleasure, and questions about entitlement do ultimately surface but only after young women speak through a kind of *discursive fore-play*. Early in these groups, someone says something like, ‘You know, I want to be a virgin when I get married’ (the abstinence discourse). Soon thereafter someone else mentions the dangers of sex: ‘I think it’s dirty’ or ‘If you start too young it messes up your mind’ (the damage discourse). Then, suddenly or more slowly, the discourse of desire slips out:

As the discussion progressed, 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?

Khari: 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. So you need to get some lubrication.

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 assertion about 'after marriage' and 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 get some lubrication!' 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 very embarrassed, much delighted, laughing hysterically Jacqui as we all watched a conversation rarely had.

Analyzing sex talk through cellophane

While listening to the words of these young women, we found ourselves in a methodological dilemma: we heard them talking about themselves *as if* in a Bakhtinian poly-vocal/heteroglossia chorus (Bakhtin, 1981), reproducing and challenging the dominant discourses of shame, prevention, and protection. When we listen to young women talk about their bodies, and particularly their bodies in states of wanting and desire, we find ourselves in an echo chamber of MTV, popular culture, celebrities, church, school, parents, teachers, and politicians. The philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986) helps us understand how private utterances are connected with social practices, how utterances are woven with conventions, rules, and notions of appropriateness. He reminds (1986: 89) us that 'our speech . . . is filled with other's words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of "our-own-ness"'.

With Bakhtin's theoretical insight, as well as years of feminist scholarship on the role of culture in gender identity development (Chapin, 2000; McKinley and Hyde, 1996; Tolman *et al.*, 2007; Thorne, 1997; Walkerdine, 1996; Ward, 2003; Ward *et al.*, 2005), we have borrowed a page from psychoanalytic and Foucauldian theories, to recognize that when someone speaks – maybe especially teen women – we must assume that there are other relevant words both unspoken and not-yet-spoken.

Some strains of feminist theories and methodologies have argued for turning our research gaze squarely on women's words, descriptions, behaviors, and experiences in order best to understand women's lives (Harding, 1986;

Hartstock, 1983a, 1983b; Reinhartz, 1992; Smith, 1979, 1987; see also Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1997) for exception). Indeed, Michelle has been among these writers. At this point and in this work, however, while we do not necessarily disagree, we want to draw our methodological attention to the bounded nature of the information that is possibly spoken in these spaces. This is a particularly feminist methodological dilemma we face: acknowledging the highly ideological contexts in which young women develop and speak their many *laminated* utterances.

Over fifteen years ago, Linda Alcoff (1991: 12) reminded feminists always to attend to the 'discursive context' in which words are spoken and not to forget that we cannot always see or hear the relevant environments of those who are speaking: the discursive context 'refer[s] to the connections and relations of involvement between utterance/text and other utterances and texts as well as the material practices in the relevant environment, which should not be confused with an environment spatially adjacent to the particular discursive event'. And taking this one step further, ten years ago, Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson (1997: 572; emphasis in original) reminded us that, 'part of being a feminist means not validating, but directly *challenging* women's taken-for-granted experience'.

Wilkinson (1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2006), Kitzinger (1992), and Stephen Frosh *et al.* (2003) help us think through analytic strategies to assess how discourses are engaged in focus groups, as well as how groups contend with unconscious conflicts in an effort to understand the dozens of voices being spoken in the room when only six or eight bodies are present. Frosh *et al.* (*ibid.*: 42) highlight the role of the *unspoken* in moments when the cultural and the individual can be co-revealed:

While culture makes available the subject positions we can inhabit, the 'investment' that people have in these subject positions is not necessarily captured by the articulation of the discourses themselves; rather, it may hinge on unspoken and at times unspeakable events, experiences and processes, all of them 'cultural', but also deeply embedded in subjectivity.

Thus we came to think about some new ideas for analysis, such as the *hidden transcripts of teen sexual desire*, borrowing from James Scott (1990), and *proximal discourse* to understand the sequence of utterances that needs to occur before the patently counter-hegemonic can be spoken. Who can speak these differently weighted discourses? Josselson (2004: 14–15) helped us move between analyses of what seems to be 'known' and 'not known' by young women simultaneously:

That which is unconscious may nevertheless be apparent in symbolization processes . . . Attention is directed then to the omissions, disjunctions, inconsistencies and contradictions in an account. It is what is latent,

hidden in an account that is of interest rather than the manifest narrative of the teller.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000) concur with Josselson, arguing that qualitative approaches have been useful in exploring the meanings and layers of phenomena, but may be limited when we commit to 'telling it like it is' (Midgley, 2006). We similarly wonder: how do we both respect the positions that young women speak *and still* analyze critically the ideologies and discourses through which the young women are speaking? Relying heavily now on Josselson (2004), we press: what does it mean to approach young female sexuality with a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'?

In the second half of this chapter, we turn explicitly to feminist methods, theorizing how we gather up evidence of desire, relying upon what we call 'methodological release points'. We try to understand how critical/feminist scholars can map, and interrupt, the political smothering, commercial seduction, and discursive moralizing that surround young women's sexual desires. And like cartographers of buried treasure, we try to follow the heat.

Methodological release points

Audre Lorde offers us a vivid image of desire and release. We borrow her image of 'the erotic' being released into the body in order to imagine new methods for inquiry about young women's desires. Lorde (1984: 57; emphasis added) writes:

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.*

Borrowing Lorde's image of erotic release, we reflect on methods that function as release points. We imagine release points as ways of making potential openings in the 'assumed' and the 'common sense' – even that of feminist research. Extending Lorde's image of the margarine kernel being released inside each woman's body, we move to theorize moments of release into the social body writ large (see McClelland and Fine, 2008b). Ideally, these methodologies

(and others) will help in developing new language to describe various aspects of female sexual want, desire, arousal, satisfaction, etc. as they circulate both in individual bodies and in the social body, releasing streams of the counter-hegemonic, the shameful, the whispered, the giggled, the embarrassing, the yearnings, and the confused. In sum, we imagine methodological practices as capable of shedding light in ways that make the context of the subject explicit and foregrounds the social unconscious (Steele and Morawski, 2002) as it pops into her mouth and body.

We present a set of release methods below. These are not methods for better, truer, more valid, or even sexier data. These methods are offered to expand the methodological imagination and respond, if partially, to the methodological dilemma of writing and researching *on cellophane*; helping us think through how we might take a young woman's words at face value *and* analyze what she may not necessarily be able or willing to see, feel, speak, know, or reveal.

We start with a discussion of *theory as design*, taking seriously the role that history, politics, theory, power, and local contexts have in shaping how we design our research projects. Second, we discuss *aesthetic and performative methods* that invite performance into the research dynamic, thickening the already complicated roles of 'viewer' and 'viewed'; taking on the critical process of watching, performing, gazing, and counter-gazing. Third, we combine various experiences of research projects in which groups of young women, men, or women and men have been asked to think through ideas, and we highlight the praxis of *collective, critical interrogations*. Fourth, we present the method of *asking the counter-intuitive and interrogating the obvious* with young women; inviting them to reinterpret 'common sense' and 'facts', turning long-held assumptions into research questions, and using data to interrogate cultural ideologies and mythologies. Finally, we discuss the use of feminist *participatory action research* (Lykes and Coquillon, 2006) as a method that disrupts the traditional power dynamics in research relationships and turns those who are studied into experts on their own conditions.

Our hope is that by sketching these methodological practices we can invite critical feminist researchers to acknowledge, engage, and queer, so to speak, the role of cellophane that we find in our research with young women.

Thick desire: theory and design as method

One answer to the dilemma presented in this chapter is to begin with theory; that is, to structure our arguments by theorizing explicitly the existence and suppression of young women's desire. In this regard, theories have the capacity to compel researchers to design projects that attach, for instance, individual narrations of embodied experiences to social policies, relationships, and dominant discourses. This may seem obvious or redundant, but we think it is important to correct what is sometimes a feminist genuflection toward the primacy of *voice*.

In our work together (Fine and McClelland, 2006), we have developed a theory of sexual desire, namely *thick desire*, that encourages researchers and activists to thread the sexual experiences and wants of young people to the ideologies, policies, power relations, institutions, families, and schools in which they live and develop. In 1988, Michelle published an article which argued that schools, by positioning young women primarily as potential victims of male sexual aggression, seriously compromised young women's (and men's) development of sexual subjectivities. She wrote: 'The authorized sexual discourses define what is safe, what is taboo, and what will be silenced . . . What results is a discourse of sexuality based on the male in search of desire and the female in search of protection' (Fine, 1988: 40). Before and after this article, feminist scholars, educators, and activists have voiced substantial concern about the missing discourse of female desire (see Rose, 2003; Snitow *et al.*, 1983; Tolman, 2002; Vance, 1984).

In a 2006 update to the 1988 piece, we introduce a theoretical revision to the missing discourse of desire (Fine and McClelland, 2006). We argue that young women (and men) are entitled to and psychologically motivated toward thick desire: a broad range of yearnings for meaningful intellectual, political, and social engagement, the possibility of financial independence, sexual and reproductive freedom, protection from racialized, homophobic, and sexualized violence, and a way to imagine living in the future tense (Appadurai, 2001, 2004; Nussbaum, 2003). A framework of thick desire locates sexual well-being within structural contexts that (dis)enable young women's economic, educational, social, and psychological rights. That is, we understand that young women's thick desires require a set of publicly funded *enabling conditions*, in which teen women have opportunities to: develop intellectually, emotionally, economically, and culturally; imagine themselves as sexual beings capable of pleasure and cautious about danger without carrying the undue burden of social, medical, and reproductive consequences; have access to information and healthcare resources; be protected from structural and intimate violence and abuse; and rely on a public safety net of resources to support youth, families, and community.

While we have theorized thick desire as the *outcome* of these enabling conditions, it also has the potential to live as a *precursor* to them. While the right to sexual desire/pleasure has historically been seen as a potential product of struggles for women's rights, it is interesting also to place bodily pleasure at the center of a rights campaign. Cesnabmihilo Dorothy Aken'ova, a sexual-rights activist with the International Center for Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights in Minna, Nigeria, said something we have not been able to forget since we heard it in 2006. In a simple sentence, 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 material conditions and reproductive changes will follow – Aken'ova argued (not instead, but alongside), *give her*

body a sense of entitlement to pleasure, and her political demands will follow. With Aken'ova's insight, we strive to theorize thick desire as not only produced by enabling conditions but *productive* of these conditions. Thick desire, then, may be a catalyst as well as an outcome of sexual rights.

By theorizing thick desire as political, social, and embodied, we begin from an argument that is grounded in human rights frameworks, *but it does not hinge on whether or not girls say they have desire.* That is, like reading, walking, breathing, bonding, relating, and learning, it is assumed that young people yearn for full lives, including sexual lives. Thick desire carves out a theoretical basket of rights, levels of analysis, and embodied experiences, within which 'voice' may be placed. But – and this is our key point – *the presence or absence of desire in young women's narratives does not determine its existence.* This is a bold statement that we think will serve to discard a false binary between 'missing' and 'present' discourses of desire for young people.

The theory of thick desire has shaped our program of research on young women's sexualities. We have written on the processes by which politics surround and embed themselves within the sexual lives of young women with close attention to the intersections of gender with class, race, disability, and sexuality. Sara created the empirical basis for an amicus brief for the US Supreme Court, cataloging the social science evidence that could support the legal arguments for young women's access to abortion without parental consent (see McClelland, 2005). Together, we have published a critical analysis of the abstinence-only curricula in low-income public schools (Fine and McClelland, 2006) and a scientific interrogation of the ideologies circulating within the federally funded 'embedded science' of abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula (McClelland and Fine, 2008a). Further, in an *Emory Law Journal* special volume on reproductive rights, we have summarized these social policies as they differentially affect the lives of teen women across lines of race, class, ethnicity, disability, and geography (Fine and McClelland, 2007). In these writings, we have drawn from observations in courts, focus groups we have conducted with young women and men, interviews with educators, reviews of youth-based websites, and critical analysis of empirical work on girls' and women's desire in the abstinence literatures and medical research to understand the material, legal, ideological, and educational contexts within which young women try to speak their desires.

While we recognize that this framing of thick desire does not entirely resolve our stated dilemma, it positions the investigation of desire within critical race studies, feminist theories, queer theory, and human rights contexts. Thick desire takes seriously gender, sexuality, race, class, geography, disability, and the fundamental(ist) role of the resource-low but surveillance-high state. It allows us to listen to young women's narratives *and also* to insist on the need to tether these narratives scrupulously to the political and social contexts from which they are spoken and silenced (Weis and Fine, 2004). Thus, in the focus group material excerpted above we can hear the dominant hegemonic press on

young women to speak for abstinence ('I will wait until I am married') or prevention ('I will use condoms'). But we also detected what we might call stuttering toward *desire*, buried in a question about wetness, slipping over into the iconic sharing of 'lube'. And in other segments of the transcript, we could hear the ways in which the school-based health clinic's nurse practitioner and the school's commitment to student inquiry have carved out safe spaces where young women could begin to whisper and inquire toward sexual health and desire. That is, in the focus group we could trace how the filaments of desire seek expression, suffer political suffocation, and weave through the student body as poly-vocal threads of discourse, relationships, and questions of entitlement. This framework has led us to locate *desire in motion between the outside and inside* of the body.

We use the remainder of this chapter to offer a series of responses to our dilemma. We discuss here how we might delicately peel back the cellophane, study what it is made of, and see/hear/study what lies at this borderland between child and adult, private and public, visceral and spoken.

Aesthetic and performative methods

[A]n aesthetic experience [is] that [which] resides in the connection between what a person already knows (of herself and her community), feels, and desires and what a new experience might offer.

(Gallagher, 2007: 161)

A number of critical, feminist scholars have written on methods for designing research through aesthetic youth performances (Driver, 2007; Gallagher, 2007; Rasmussen and Wright, 2001). Kathleen Gallagher, in her work with young people who produce and perform in dramatic performances that closely resemble (but do not replicate) their own lives, makes a compelling case for researchers to use performance as a tool to aid with data collection, as a way to unearth connections and insights that might not have otherwise been spoken. She explains that youth who are involved in performances as part of the research process have the chance to act out and then reflect on daily struggles, to interrogate the space between what she 'already knows . . . feels and desires – what a new experience might offer'. Gallagher argues that these performances offer 'a shared point of reference, across a range of very diverse lived experiences', and allow both researcher and participant the opportunity to 'examine precisely how the social, the political, the ideological are entering and shaping our lives and activities' (Gallagher, 2007: 132).

Gallagher has termed this the 'sociology of aesthetics' and explains that drama is integral to making social contexts explicit *in the course of data collection*. Indeed, with this insight, she reveals that 'new theories . . . become imaginable in the moment of dramatic improvisation' and echoes our own work with theory development and the power that theories have in organizing the worlds of both researchers and participants.

With similar approach to method, Rasmussen and Wright (2001: n.p.; emphasis in original) argue that 'dramatic knowing' enables both deconstruction of dominant ideologies and reconstruction of social possibilities:

[D]ramatic knowing, [can take] many forms in different human, societal or cultural contexts. The aesthetic identity of such practices implies both *experiential* and *experimental* processes where forms of cultural signs and representations are *deconstructed* and *reconstructed* within the dramatic world of space, time, figure and objects. The theatre/drama workshop provides such a space.

Committed to creating spaces for critique and imagination, Susan Driver (2007: 309) invites young people to produce video, dedicated to those 'poetic, embodied, or visually articulated moments of sexual subjectivity that are not easily transcribed into interview models'. She suggests the use of video as a potential means to invite the yet-to-be-spoken or never-to-be-spoken elements of girls' sexuality into conversation. It is not language per se that interests Driver, but performance and communication with another that has the opportunity to create space for girls to understand and embody their own desire, as well as circulate these understandings outside of the written text.

Driver has written about the need to allow elements of the unpredictable and the unnameable to enter into research conversations. Her critique of the semi-structured interview as a hallmark of feminist research in this area is useful as it highlights and echoes some of our own concerns about how one-on-one interviews and their dialogues may too quickly silence young women who are either unwilling or unable to verbalize what they feel. This is especially true if they are also unwilling or unable to hide in the folds of safe sex discourses as a means to talk about their experiences of desire. Driver (*ibid.*) explains why even the most conscientious feminists may end up silencing the girls they interview because the interview model inherently calls for 'transparent and direct naming of empirical experiences'. She argues that this leaves too little room for 'unpredictable fantasies and loose narrative lines of dialogue' to emerge because the social science paradigm does not encourage this kind of disorganized data to be shared in the interview space.

Driver focuses on the *production* of media rather than the mere consumption of media by young people. She argues (*ibid.*: 317) that it is in this production young people 'talk back' to the media, 'provid[ing] youth with the means to talk about, challenge, and go beyond heteronormative ideologies and institutions,' in essence allowing for the constantly 'viewed' young person to become a 'viewer'. This flipping of roles has the potential to offer young people, and young women in particular, a moment of reprieve – a moment when they are not observed, even if it is for just a moment. Examples like these remind us that research always has the potential to 'queer the gaze' (Doll, 1998) and to make room for new experiences *in the act of* collecting data on the experiences

of people. This work on aesthetic and performative experiences reminds us of this responsibility and opportunity most poignantly.

Collective interrogations: the intellectual and political possibilities of focus groups

From the beginning of second wave feminist psychology, researchers emphasized the importance of social context and insisted that feminist methods should be contextual: that is, they should avoid focusing on the individual devoid of social context, or separate from interactions with others.

(Wilkinson, 1999a: 224)

In our varied projects with/on teen women's sexualities, we have relied heavily on focus group conversations – primarily among young women but also, at times, with young men. Wilkinson alone (1998, 2006) and with Kitzinger (2000) and many others have crafted focus groups as spaces for talk that is ridden with anxiety, surrounded by surveillance, and in need of a soft interrogation on a landscape of shared vulnerabilities and wild wishes. We too found an ironic 'safety' in the open group, in part because no one student had to hold the anxiety, shame, embarrassment, or yearnings alone. Embarrassment lives in a focus group, but it also diffuses. Judgement survives, but does not land on one body. In groups, anxiety is allowed to float, whereas in one-on-one data-collection processes, the anxiety of endorsing illegitimate excess often has no room to drift and comes to rest, instead, in the only available discourses – safety and abuse. Groups allow distance, for giggling without hesitation. Individual interrogations with young women often move too easily to judgement and then to shame – even/especially if the interviewer says nothing. In focus groups, all of these emotions can travel around the room – anxiety, embarrassment, judgement – *across* bodies, diving into mouths and pelvises, across discourses that are acceptable (abstinence, morality, victimization, and prevention) and those more risqué (for an interesting parallel, see Haug, 1987).

Further, there is an important distinction between a focus group that asks young people to produce ideas and questions and one that asks them to reproduce facts and answers or admit/confess their sexual desires. We have found it essential to allow the subject of sex to travel between personal experiences and combined imaginations. A simple methodological probe to 'generate questions for teens throughout the country' or create a survey, design a textbook, or produce an MTV show allows young people the position of expertise, the comfort of inquiry, and a platform to speak for ambiguity.

Asking questions: the counter-intuitive and the obvious

Another important methodological release point has been the simple act of asking a question that appears naive but actually is quite provocative. This can either be a counter-intuitive question, such as 'What is heterosexuality and why is it so common?' (Kitzinger *et al.*, 1992: 293) or a more 'obvious' question that troubles the common sense, such as 'Why do you think girls might want a waiver from parental consent laws for abortion?'

To illustrate, Jennifer Ayala (2006) interviewed sets of Latina teens and their mothers, separately and together, asking: 'What have you taught each other about gender, sexuality, and power?' In each couplet, when she turned to the fourteen- and fifteen-year-old girls, and asked, 'So, now I know what your mother taught you, what have you taught your mother?' the girls and their mothers were silent, taken aback, curious. But as she pressed, the responses were revealing. These largely immigrant mothers had taught their daughters lessons of culture and struggle. They nurtured them to seek opportunity, embody persistence, and display strength. In a complex dance of reciprocity, the daughters took up the work of educating their mothers about gender, sexuality, and power: they warned their mothers about discrimination – 'you don't have to take that from your boss/your boyfriend/my father' – and, ultimately, how to buy sanitary napkins without embarrassment. Ayala, by asking the obvious question, was able to pry open the complex dynamics of mother–daughter relations, challenging the hegemonic (Eurocentric) beliefs in developmental psychology that mothers teach daughters and that teen daughters seek separation from their mothers. By engaging theoretically with the writings of Anzaldúa and *mestiza* consciousness, Ayala thickened our understandings of the negotiations of culture, gender, and power that transpire between mothers and daughters – particularly among immigrants.

A quite distinct example of the power of asking the simple and the obvious question comes out of one of our focus groups; in fact, in the conversation we describe earlier in this chapter. We had just asked the group what they needed to learn or talk about in terms of their sexuality. You will remember that Parma responded by saying that she did not need to learn about sex now because she was waiting until she was married to have it. Given the cultural and educational emphasis on 'waiting until marriage', this was not an unexpected response; the group did not remark on her comment and the conversation continued. We, however, took this as an opportunity to ask a simple question of this young woman and of the group: 'Where will you learn about sexual pleasure after you are married?' It was a simple inquiry borne out of curiosity, taking the young woman and her plans at face value. It was a question that did not insinuate that she was naive; we asked the question simply to find out more about her future plans for herself and her body. The question did not stop the group, nor did Parma respond, but it floated a thought into the group: Where

do we learn about these things later? Even if I do not do anything until I am married, who will teach me about my body then? Where will I go?

These questions should make all of us remember that education is not necessarily meant to be used the absolute moment we learn something new. When young people learn about algebra or learn to speak French, it is not because they will be doing complex math in the immediate future or because they are moving to Paris tomorrow. They learn skills that are meant to help them *throughout their lives* – sometimes, well after their schooling years are over. Sex education can be thought of in these same terms – as something that can be learned about today but not used until you want it to be.

Problematizing ‘facts’

A related strategy for opening up new conversations might involve asking teens to reassume the position of experts and problematize ‘facts’ – that is, reinterpret existing epidemiological data bases on teen sexuality. In our work, we have snuck up on this process but not actually tried it. We remembered only in retrospect, after one of our meetings with students and their teacher, that data are powerful tools.

For instance, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that one-third of fifteen to seventeen-year-olds (36 percent of males and 39 percent of females) have had vaginal intercourse; almost a third have ‘given’ oral sex (28 percent of males and 30 percent of females) and more have ‘received’ oral sex (40 percent of males and 38 percent of females). The CDC also reports that adolescent females are about twice as likely to report same-sex sexual contact as males (with slight variation in the language of the item, see CDC, 2005). That is, high school-aged young women are twice as likely as young men to engage in same-sex relationships; young women and young men are equally likely to give and receive oral sex. These are interesting findings; how might we understand these data?

These epidemiological ‘facts’ potentially double as potential evidence of young women’s heightened sexual agency and/or evidence of ever more sophisticated forms of their sexual exploitation. These public health indicators too often sit heavily as facts, self-evident proof of bodies acting out. More generously, we would like to reconsider these facts as *liminal interpretive spaces* (Morawski, 1994; Turner, 1967) where researchers can interrogate, with youth, various levels of meaning. What we would imagine is presenting to young people standard ‘facts’ and asking them to explicate *how these came to be*. That is, we would introduce *thick desire lite*, and ask them to re-view evidence on teen sexual behaviors as outcomes of social and political conditions and individual actions, asking, for example: ‘What do you think the stories are behind these data?’

Do these snippets of evidence suggest that young women are pursuing sexual freedoms and explorations for their own pleasure? What is behind these

rates of same-sex interactions for the young women in the CDC data? Are these based on same-sex attractions, newly found freedoms to cross gender and sexual boundaries, or other more complicated reasons that might bump into sexual performance for boys/men and perhaps even exploitation? Have same-sex relationships and cunnilingus been appropriated into patriarchal versions of heterosexual adolescence?

An important feminist critical method involves speaking with young people about these data as *outcomes* of unevenly distributed enabling conditions; that is, to invite them to interpret the material through the lens of thick desire. Typically, however, these data are either suppressed – to sustain the hegemonic belief that youth are indeed abstinent – or framed as evidence of good or bad, moral or immoral, reproductive and sexual ‘choices’ born in bad/immoral/out-of-control communities.

Consider a conversation we held with students in a classroom with teens in an all-Black, extremely impoverished high school:

The conversation turned to the question of abortion. Actually we turned the conversation toward abortion. The discomfort in the room was palpable; we could feel the strong resistance to acknowledging abortions in this low-income, predominantly African American and immigrant community.

Michelle: So, do people in this school talk about how you can get an abortion if you need or want one?

Teacher: Not so much in this community. They don’t really get abortions here.

Students: We don’t talk about it that much.

Most of the students in this class knew someone who was or had been pregnant. They could tell you who had given birth, but few would admit knowing anyone who had had an abortion (out loud; in that space; in front of us). The shared silence functioned as an ideological blanket, another layer of cellophane, hiding an important public health reality, protecting a local illusion of teen abstinence and religious rejection of abortion as a reproduction option, which would crumble if the evidence were exposed. That day we unfortunately missed an opportunity to talk with the young people about this disjuncture of evidence and perception. But we followed up and sent them the local statistics to educate gently and wedge open the deceptive and dangerous ‘common sense’ that ‘They don’t really get abortions here.’

Indeed, when we look at the rates at which young women are terminating their pregnancies nationally (Table 12.1), it is clear that there is a silent, yet highly regular process in which young women are engaging – privately, maybe with a friend or relative, perhaps with shame, perhaps with a sense of relief, but likely imagining themselves to be the only young woman in her community having an abortion.

Table 12.1 US Teen pregnancies, births, and abortions per thousand women aged fifteen to seventeen

	Pregnancies	Births	Abortions
White	31.0	19.4	11.6
African American	103.2	62.6	40.6
Latina	88.2	66.3	21.9

Source: Frost *et al.*, 2001: 7

Table 12.2 Percent of birth control methods by race, sexually active women aged fifteen–seventeen

	Pill	Condoms	Withdrawal	No method
White	18.9	44.0	11.5	12.3
African American	5.6	57.3	10.6	12.1
Latina	4.9	45.2	16.3	19.8

Source: Santelli *et al.*, 2004: 86

Table 12.1 displays the differential rates by which White, African American, and Latina teens experience pregnancy and abortions. For example, Latinas get pregnant close to three times the rate of White girls, and African Americans at rates more than three times those of Whites. Table 12.2 is more nuanced in terms of use of birth control. It shows that while all three groups rely on condoms more than other methods, White girls are the group most likely to use the pill (which requires access to a healthcare provider, a prescription, and some way to pay for contraception), African Americans are more likely to use condoms, and Latinas are more likely to rely on withdrawal or no method at all.

These data need to be displayed and unpacked insofar as they represent what happens in the absence of enabling conditions. They need to be demystified, not naturalized. They are too often seen as *behaviors* or *mistakes* made 'by choice' by youth. The radical twist recommended here is to theorize with youth how these 'facts' come to be and might not come to be; that these facts represent enduring, cumulative, and yet mutable outcomes of historic injustice, not inevitable facts of irresponsible human behavior in their communities. Thick desire requires us to wrestle with public health data and explain that choices are never made independent of history and politics, both outside and also within communities, homes, and bodies.

Participatory action research

When we can't dream any longer we die.

(Emma Goldman)

Across schools, communities, and prisons, the Participatory Action Research Collective at the Graduate Center, CUNY, has designed a series of participatory projects with youth to document not only the enormous costs of current conditions of injustice but movements for resistance (for more information, see Fine *et al.*, 2001, 2004; Fine and Torre, 2004, 2005; Torre, 2005). Indeed, over the past decade, in sites as varied as prisons, the South Bronx community-based organization Mothers on the Move, suburban public and private schools, and urban schools, we have taken up projects of participatory action research with youth (the 'we' includes a broad cast of researchers, including María Torre, Janice Bloom, April Burns, Lori Chajet, Monique Guishard, Yasser Payne, Rosemarie A. Roberts, and a number of youth, educators, and organizers). In these spaces, youth critique has attached to educational studies and harnessed to sustained struggle. Youth critique and research have risen to collective challenge and action – in schools, communities, prisons, courtrooms, and on the theater stage.

While the challenges of youth participatory action research (PAR) can be substantial, the contributions of critical research to social theory, social policy, and social movements can also be exhilarating in terms of challenging dominant scripts and reimagining new conceptions for social justice. We view PAR as a release method, and would like to encourage PAR projects focused on sexualities and the presence or absence of enabling conditions for healthy sexuality.

One example is a PAR project in which we (with Valerie Futch, Melissa Rivera, and Sarasota Planned Parenthood) are currently studying the sexual, social, and political development of young people who have participated in a Planned Parenthood student theater group, the SOURCE, in Florida over the past twenty-five years. This student theater group is renowned throughout the region for its candid educational plays that teach students through theater about topics related to peer relationships, self-esteem, sexualities, as well as many other concerns facing young adults in and out of school. We are working with a diverse group of young adults who were actors in this group over the last fifteen years; and with them as co-investigators, we are studying the relationships between sexual development and the complex web of influential forces, including local policies, sex education in schools, community organizations, and teen theater. Working with them, we are asking current and former theater participants about how these experiences affected their future sexual decisions and experiences.

We gathered for our first participatory advisory group meeting with participants from varied historic generations of SOURCE members, creating

maps of their lives, generating questions they would like to ask other members, remembering how trauma, opportunity, pain, depression, sexuality, coming out, abortions, babies, friends, disappointments, pregnancies, and eating disorders marked their bodies over the years from 'the pill to HIV/AIDS'. Over the course of this study, we will be gathering material, via the Internet, focus groups, and interviews, producing scholarship, pamphlets, and ultimately a performance of sexuality stories over thirty years, as the schools moved from comprehensive sexuality education to abstinence-only-until-marriage, and bodies moved from sexual liberation to fears about HIV.

Examples of PAR projects that focus on young female sexuality might include collectively designing a study on the geographies of sexuality – inviting young people to map the kinds of space they would need to discuss their sexual experiences, the kinds of questions they need to ask and have answered, and the kinds of concerns they have about their sexual health and development. The work could be undertaken with a broad-based 'contact zone' (Torre, 2005) of youth, with respectable elders and/or with specific sub-groups of young people engaged with projects of specific intellectual and political significance: for example, queer youth, young women with disabilities, or undocumented teen mothers, elite youth seeking outlets for social responsibility, children of incarcerated parents, and so on.

PAR projects trouble traditional questions of power and hegemony; they queer the relationships between researcher and researched; they bridge social theory with critique and imagination; and they create products and actions to provoke a different tomorrow. PAR, by design, works as a release point to challenge and rearticulate the 'common sense' and re-vision 'what could be'.

Conclusions

Over the past fifteen years, Deb Tolman, Sharon Thompson, Ann Snitow, Carole Vance, Tricia Rose, and others have written about the search and rescue of adolescent and adult female sexual desire. In 2006, Lisa Diamond placed the search for 'positive adolescent sexuality' into a strong theoretical and methodological framework, recognizing the need to approach this question from as many vantage points as possible:

[A]n increasing number of thoughtful and constructive critiques have challenged negatively oriented perspectives on sexual risk. These critiques have argued for more sensitive, in-depth, multi-method investigations into positive meanings and experiences of adolescent female sexuality that will allow us to conceptualize (and, ideally, advocate for) healthy sexual-development trajectories.

(Diamond 2006: 1)

We have proposed in this chapter a number of methodological suggestions for those who are caught up in these methodological dilemmas of how to peer through layers of cellophane and are trying to understand phenomena that are wrapped up in layers that are produced culturally, politically, and intersubjectively (by the very act of doing the research).

That is, we strive in this chapter to color in the missing discourse. Challenging long-held feminist commitments to 'voice', we invite feminist researchers to theorize the sexual imaginary for young women, *even when it is denied or stuttered*; to craft methods that account for the cellophane wrap; to study the structures and dynamics of young women's lives; and to design research that troubles the consensus that can be heard between dominant discourses and those who speak about them. We aim to balance what Josselson (2004, citing Ricouer) calls the 'hermeneutics of faith and suspicion' when we analyze young women's descriptions of their sexual lives that center on heterosexuality, abstinence, and prevention. We encourage researchers both to hear *and* to distrust the moment when words and actions speak one truth and, finally, to wonder about and dig for the unspoken, the dissociated, the embodied but denied, and the not-yet-acted-upon truths as well.

We aim to document the dynamics at the cellophane's boundary – when it is cement and when it is porous; when the young woman inside is speaking and stammering, trying to tell us something about her life. We are listening and trying our best to write these things down on a surface that refuses to hold our marks. She is there and she is almost not there. It is here – at this boundary – where we can document the poly-vocal sexual imaginary. This sexual imaginary does not spring alone from the inside of young women's heads or thighs; it is multifaceted and must be treated as fantastic, as intimate, as precious, as if it were the product of many tongues. In developing a methodology for this work, we do not try to get *beyond* or *beneath* the cellophane. We are, instead, interested in multiple methods and angles that can help splinter the light shed on young women's sexualities.

Note

- 1 While the District Court of Kansas permanently blocked enforcement of Attorney General Kline's legal opinion in April 2006, the spirit of Kline's opinion nevertheless highlights current trends in legislating the sexuality of minors.

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