

LET'S TALK ABOUT 'IT': CONSTRUCTIONS OF SEXUAL CONTENT IN LITERATURE FOR YOUNG
ADULTS

TITA MAGDELINE KYRTSAKAS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN ENGLISH
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

May 2026

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores representations of sexual content in texts for and by young adults: non-fiction sexual health manuals, traditionally published young adult literature, and online writing, such as fan fiction, through a primarily North American lens. Through close readings and application of scholarship in children's literature studies, I highlight the ongoing development of illustrating teens as agents with bodily autonomy, rather than reinforcing teens as culturally "innocent," which has been a trend in the past. Instead of continuing to suppress teen sexuality through abstinence or fear narratives, many texts published between 2001-2025 paint adolescence as a time where common feelings such as desire, pleasure, and shame are relatable and exciting. My overall argument is that contemporary texts (mostly) support sexual growth and reinforce the development of adolescent sexuality.

Sexual content appears in numerous texts for young people in different modes and therefore constructs adolescent agency in varying manners. I found that the sexual health manuals of the early-to-mid 2000s, such as Nikol Hasler's *Sex: An Uncensored Introduction* (2015), add necessary topics (such as including LGBTQ+ material) and build on precedent-setting texts from the late twentieth century, such as Peter Mayle's *"Will I Like It..."* (1977) that establish the foundation for direct information on sex for teens. Similarly, the sexual content in young adult (YA) literature has changed in the last twenty years, moving from unwritten, insinuated scenes of sex (such as teen Bridget's experience in Ann Brashares' *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* [2001]) to much clearer illustrations of sexuality (such as Charlie and Wren's experiences in Lauren Myracle's *The Infinite Moment of Us* [2014]), which signal the progress of teen agency and sexuality developed in novels.

This dissertation examines how sex is written in the contemporary YA canon through English-language texts, including American and British publications and online fiction from *Wattpad* and *Archive of Our Own*. Chapter one analyzes sexual health manuals published between 1970 and 2024. Chapter two studies American and British YA novels (2001–2022) in which adolescent protagonists explore their sexuality focusing on works such as Camryn Garrett’s *Full Disclosure* (2018), Elizabeth Acevedo’s *The Poet X* (2018), and Jenny Downham’s *Before I Die* (2007). Chapter three presents a study of new adults (ages 18–24) reading fan fiction alongside *Full Disclosure* and *The Poet X*, placing their responses in dialogue with fan fiction theory.

My project emphasizes the importance of young people’s voices; while the first two chapters centre on close reading and analysis, the last chapter provides direct commentary from seven adults in my focus group study, who analyze literature and discuss wide-ranging topics around teen sexuality, such as consent, pornography usage, and emotional intimacy by reflecting on their own youth. Their voices are integral to the study of adolescent exploration of what it means to be a sexual young person in the 21st century.

DEDICATION

With love, to my parents, Christos and Giovanna, for your endless support.

And to my husband, Maxim, for all our lovely days.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my committee, Dr. Alison Halsall, Dr. Susan Warwick, and Dr. Cheryl Cowdy, for believing in the project, especially when I found it difficult to continue. A big thank you to the participants of my focus group for being so incredibly brave and vulnerable in sharing their thoughts on their own sexual journeys.

To my amazing people (I can't list them all!) who have rooted me on for years (my teachers, friends, & colleagues). Nicole Ognjanovski and Jessica Luong, my bee bo boop sisters; Susan Lindsay, for always being a guiding light; Dr. Johanna Frank for her mentorship and friendship; Samantha Younan for our laughter. To my Allison family for being my rocks. And to Marcie, for helping me swim in the maybes and build the muscle for the here and now.

Finally, to my beautiful family. Thank you to Dad for reading my essays for years and teaching me wit, and Mom, for immersing me in the love of the arts and teaching me how to relish the day. I wouldn't be here without your leaps.

To my grandparents, George and Magdeline Kyrtasak & Gabriel and Titi Maggio, for being dreamers and starting home from scratch. To my dear aunts, Mia and Tina, for all the books and fun as we grew.

To my siblings, George, Maggie, Zoe, and Chloe—you are one of the greatest gifts of my life. I feel so blessed to have you. Fifi and Lola, who bring unconditional joy to our lives even though they can't read. To my Matushansky family: Igor, Larisa, Gleb, Liza, Aria, Jonah, and Babushka Tzilia for your love and support.

Finally, to my husband, Maxim: thank you for your unwavering love and endless belief in me. I couldn't have done this without you. Here's to our beautiful, little life together.

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Introduction

Growing up, I thought the definition of sex meant that you were penetrated by a penis or that in general you were penetrated. Something went inside that canal. But then growing up, you realize sex is whatever you call it. If you want to call just heavy petting sex then that is sex to you. There's not a sole definition of what sex can be and I feel like no one taught me that growing up.

—Nadia (18-years-old)

Books gave me the [sex] terms, the better ones gave you the proper positions to practice that you could try and replicate. The well-written ones, not the ones written by 11-year-olds.

—Laura (21-years-old)

When I was in the eighth grade, my health teacher wrote the words “oral sex” on the blackboard at school and asked us to discuss with our peers whether oral sex was *actually* sex. I was very confused, much like Nadia in the above epigraph, I thought sex meant penetration by a penis. I turned to him to say, “Sir, if sex is in the name, then it must be sex. But what *is* oral sex?” My teacher grumbled at me to ask one of my friends, who divulged what the act was and introduced me to some new terms (blow jobs, cunnilingus, fellatio—where had he learned these words?). I remember feeling shocked. But my experience is not unique. Most adolescents receive limited sex education and often piece together partial information from school, peers, and popular culture. Much of my own institutional sex education was dominated by abstinence messaging and pregnancy horror stories at my Catholic high school (stories of fear), while my

personal learnings came largely from erotic novels and Hollywood films (stories of pleasure). Underlying all these early lessons—formal or informal—was a persistent sense of shame.

These early experiences, both mine and that of the young adult participants who informed my research, were shaped by feelings of confusion, embarrassment, and exposure. Whether through Nadia's limited sex education, Laura's discomfort with amateur erotica, or my own bewilderment at discovering new sexual terminology, shame emerges as a common theme in this dissertation, framing how young people grow into their sexual selves.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Sara Ahmed defines shame as an "intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body" (121). She goes on to explain that shame includes the sensation of a person feeling exposed and the subsequent desire to hide that shame by "turn[ing] away from the other and towards itself... To be witnessed in one's failure is to be ashamed: to have one's shame witnessed is even more shaming. The bind of shame is that it is intensified by being seen by others as shame" (121). Thus, Ahmed signals that shame is both personal and social, a feeling policed by the self and regulated by society. It is not a surprise then that the sexual self may feel shame. Phil Mollon also echoes the societal effects of shame in his article "The Inherent Shame of Sexuality" (2006). In this work, Mollon explores sex as shameful through a Freudian lens, emphasizing, "Shame is associated with the desires and other aspects of self that are not allowed access to shared discourse. The objects of shame are driven from the group, the tribe, the conversation" (168).

While shame may seem like an emotion that ultimately leads to negative thoughts, these questions can be productive as Elspeth Probyn suggests in *Blush: Faces of Shame* (2005).

Probyn writes that shame can serve as “a productive force”:

On a basic level, shame always produces effects—small and large, individual and collective. Shame demands acknowledgment. As we blush, we are made visible at the very moment we want to cover our faces and hide. But, equally, shame compels an involuntary and immediate reassessment of ourselves: Why am I ashamed? Why did I say or do that? Can I rectify the actions that have either brought shame upon myself or caused someone else's shame? Shame in this way is positive in its self-evaluative role; it can even be self-transforming. (xii)

Shame, in Probyn's view, can be a threshold to agency. Adolescence is a period when many young people begin to develop their sexual selves, which includes their sexual agency. Teens masturbate, have sex, they fall in and out of love, they make mistakes. Their sexual identities are still forming and with that, comes a range of emotions, especially shame. But as I explore in this dissertation, shame often pushes adolescent characters into positive experiences of growth.

The epigraphs above, drawn from research I conducted with adults (discussed in Chapter 3), also underscore another central theme of this project: the unreliable information about sex that young people receive—from schools, culture, parents, or books—and the significant role that language plays in shaping sexual understanding. Nadia, the youngest participant in my focus group, reflects on how the heteronormative definition of sex she learned growing up—one privileging penile-vaginal intercourse—no longer aligns with her experience; she now recognizes that “sex is whatever you call it,” determined by the language individuals use. My

research demonstrates that, because sex is a complex subject, the language used to describe it is highly subjective. As Laura observes¹, some sexual descriptions are sufficiently detailed to be instructive, whereas others fail to convey the complexities of sexual experience due to the inexperience of the writer. This project examines both contemporary YA novels published between 2001-2022 and online fiction written by young adults self-published during 2020-2023 to consider how language encodes, in both limiting and affirming ways, adolescent sexual agency.

Over the past fifty years, young adult (YA) literature, which “engages readers in the experiences of adolescents, lived and imagined” and focuses on readers’ emotional closeness with the protagonists (Malo-Juvera and Hill 3), has included more sexual content, although the popular narrative pattern continues to frame sex in a negative way. Take, for example, Elizabeth Acevedo’s young adult novel *The Poet X* (2018), a text that focuses specifically on the problems sex may cause for the young characters. The parents of protagonist Xiomara do not allow her to date, and she calls dating the “eighth deadly sin” (Acevedo 139, 141); eventually, she breaks their rule and starts to see Aman, her lab partner in science. When she starts sharing her poetry with him, she feels “as naked as if [she] undressed before / him” (169); this emotional intimacy only increases her desire for him. And yet, Xiomara is told constantly that to feel sexual desire is immoral. Her best friend, Caridad, explains to her: “‘It’s wrong to lust, Xio. You know it’s a sin’” (115). *The Poet X* explores religious stigma about lust and particularly the guilt that seems to accompany it. As Xiomara grows older, she gets excited when boys show her attention at school.

¹ Laura refers here to fan fiction written by children as young as 11, not professionally published books, which she distinguishes in her statement.

She shares, “I’m disgusted at myself / for the slight excitement / that shivers up my back” (81). For Xiomara, sexual desire, brought on by sharing her poetry with Aman and by enjoying other boys desiring her, is deplorable (while exciting). This guilt is not uncommon, as participants in my study eventually express.

Even short descriptions of intimacy in YA teem with apprehension, as is seen in Jandy Nelson’s *I’ll Give You the Sun* (2014). The male protagonist’s scene of masturbation is full of anxiety and embarrassment. After characters Noah and Brian have their first kiss, the two make their way back to Noah’s house, where they hang out in his room, Noah on the bed and Brian at his desk, eyes on the computer. Noah recalls, “I watch [Brian’s] other hand travel down. Still looking at the screen, he asks, ‘Want to?’ and I’m a flood in a paper cup. ‘Totally,’ I say, knowing without a doubt what he means, and then our hands are on our belts, unbuckling” (276-77). The two begin to mutually masturbate, when Noah’s mother walks in and interrupts. She leaves immediately, but the two are left in a panic; not only have they been caught engaging in sexual activity, but one of their parents now suspects that they might be gay. Although Noah’s mother does not judge her son, expressing to him, “‘Love’s so complicated, Noah, isn’t it?’” (278), Noah rages at her and tries to diminish his love for Brian, saying that “circle jerks,” as he calls what transpired, are normal (281). Noah, fearing that his mother will inform his father about his sexual identity, breaks down emotionally. This scene of mutual masturbation is only Brian and Noah’s second sexual experience, outside of kissing. That this experience was interrupted, anxiety-inducing, and eventually the reason the two break up because of their fear of being “outed” as gay, moves the experience away from being pleasurable to one that is embarrassing and even heartbreaking for the characters.

Thus, desire for sex is fused with shame in both Acevedo's and Nelson's narratives, as in so many other young adult novels that are written by adults. This account of desire-as-shameful reaffirms anxiety as a key component of teenage sexual development. Implicit in this pervasive messaging about shame is a deeply conservative argument in favour of celibacy and abstinence over sexual discovery, omnipresent across the United States especially, and exemplified by the ongoing censorship of books in the US and Canada². Thus, the narrative of intimacy and desire as dangerous, especially for young adults, is alive and well in popular literature for adolescent readers. This shame narrative has dangerous real-life consequences, unfortunately: as girls read about the downfall that desire and acting on this desire can provoke, it should not be a surprise that artificial hymen kits are available on Amazon ("Artificial Hymen Kit") or that a hymenoplasty costs approximately \$2,800+ at the Toronto Cosmetic Clinic ("Hymenoplasty"), both products and services that girls can purchase to preserve the construct of purity. My inquiry focuses on sex-positive narratives, investigating whether narratives exist that counter conservative approaches to the teaching of sexual content; the majority of the texts I study are American, with some British and Canadian narratives as well. Some of the questions that fuel my investigation include: how are adults writing narratives for teens and how are young adults writing about "it"? What are the literary differences between and among these varying texts? Is one text more effective at conveying realistic sexual content than the other? Do young readers prefer "traditionally" published YA or online fiction for its sexual content?

² *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007) and *Eleanor & Park* (2012) are two YA novels that continue to be banned due to representations of sexuality, among countless others.

As my investigation confirms, written texts wield power, and the distribution of certain types of information through published novels (specifically young adult literature) is not always positive; however, I also found during my discussions with my focus group participants that online sexual material written *by* young people does not always produce a beneficial reading experience either, as sexual content may be misrepresented and therefore confusing to readers. While there are certainly differences between adults and younger amateur writers when they write about sex (such as proofreading problems and choices in diction), their primary objective—to create moving scenes of intimacy—is a commonality that they share. Because traditionally published authors contend with publishing restrictions that frequently limit the way sexuality can be addressed, many writers, including teen writers, explore their own creative writing through online fan fiction to satisfy their needs to explore sex and intimacy more freely. A significant aspect of my project therefore explores how young adults utilize online platforms to write their own sex narratives, indulging in uncensored descriptions of sex, and how young readers in turn respond to this type of writing. Initially, I hypothesized that young adults gain autonomy over their sexual freedom by reading and writing online fiction, and I believed that this type of work was necessary for social change to occur in how North American culture views teenage sexuality more generally. While my original hypothesis was that young people would prefer fan fiction or works written online over traditionally published fiction, my focus groups proved that online writing is much more problematic for them in how the texts present sex. Eventually, and surprisingly, I concluded that YA or literature published for young adults (such as fictional teen novels) are more effective at representing sexual content, as they bolster teen agency through their language and presentation. I do wish to note, however, that online writing

is still a useful platform on which writers of all ages may explore their sexuality; the reception of these texts, however, is wide-ranging and ambivalent, at best.

Context

My dissertation examines how constructions of sexuality are enmeshed with culturally enforced notions of childhood innocence and heteronormative gender norms. This project analyzes representations of sexual content in sexual health manuals, YA literature, and online fan fiction, examining the limitations that occur around candid discussions about adolescence and sexuality, in literature and society. To be clear, my project focuses on representations of consensual sexual experiences between young adults who are at an age in which they can give consent; while I argue that children have the right to learn about sex and have bodily autonomy, I do not condone young people engaging in sexual activity with others as they are unable to give consent³. Additionally, the parameters of this project reflect a deliberate focus on young womanhood, due to the mostly female-centered narratives in my selection of young adult and online fiction. Although I consider boyhood in select examples, a more comprehensive exploration of male adolescent sexuality, which is an important area of study, falls outside the scope of this dissertation.

For the purpose of my project, I consider sexual content in a text to include any described or suggested intimate material. For example, in Joya Goffney's *Confessions of an Alleged Good Girl* (2022), Goffney's protagonist Monique suffers from vaginismus, a condition in which "the vagina suddenly tightens up when you try to insert something into it" ("Vaginismus"

³ The age of consent in America ranges from 16-18 depending on the state in question. Both Canada and the UK have 16 as the age of consent.

par. 1); this condition is painful, as it can cause “burning or stinging pain” (par. 3). While there is no described sexual activity per se in the text, the narrative centres on Monique’s sexual journey, her eventual relief once her parents know about her disorder, and information about using vaginal “dilators” as sexual aids (309). Another text is L.C. Rosen’s *Jack of Hearts (And Other Parts)* (2018), which includes more obvious sexual content, such as when the protagonist Jack recalls his first time having anal sex: “*So he bends me over the bed and drizzles some lube on my ass*” (25, author’s emphasis). Both Goffney and Rosen join other contemporary writers who offer direct and wide-ranging experiences of teens thinking about and/or having sex. This movement towards providing descriptive and comprehensive sexual experiences in YA contributes to a new need to champion adolescent sexual agency, the main topic of this dissertation.

This turn toward sexual agency in YA raises the question: what exactly is agency? Markus Schlosser defines an agent as “a being with the capacity to act, and ‘agency’ denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity” (par. 1).⁴ As Schlosser outlines, scholarly discussions of agency have expanded significantly over the past thirty years, particularly within fields such as philosophy, metaphysics, and ethics (par. 2). For the purposes of this dissertation, I adopt this general definition of agency, centered on the capacity to act and make choices, as it relates to adolescent sexual agency and broader debates about “free will and moral responsibility” (par. 2). I argue that teenagers are sexual agents: they possess the capacity to make choices about their sexualities and have the right to access information about sex and to exercise bodily

⁴ Schlosser’s definition is in line with other Childhood Studies scholars such as Allison James, Adrian James, and Alan Prout, who emphasize capacity for action.

autonomy. Institutions, families, and communities also bear a “moral responsibility” to support this right through comprehensive education.

This framing is aligned with emerging scholarship on adolescent sexual agency, such as the work of Jenneke van Ditzhuijzen and Amely Overeem in their article “Pleasure-Inclusive Sex Education, Sexual Agency, and Sexual Well-Being in Adolescents and Young Adults: A Scoping Review” (2025). The authors argue that integrating pleasure into sexuality education “not only reduces sexual health risks but may also enhance sexual agency by empowering youth with the knowledge and skills to pursue their desires and refuse unwanted experiences” (1627). My project embraces this pleasure-inclusive perspective, emphasizing that when teens are supported in understanding their desires and boundaries, they are more capable of identifying consensual and non-consensual experiences, which is an essential component of sexual well-being.

This dissertation roots itself in the notion that in an American context, sexuality is culturally suppressed, which permeates to institutions and individuals and affects how people behave. Michel Foucault first explored this concept in his *History of Sexuality* (1976), a series of texts on sexuality and suppression in the Victorian period and afterwards. Scholar Gayle Rubin relies on Foucault’s argument, writing that during the Romantic and Victorian periods, “powerful social movements focused on ‘vices’ of all sorts. There were educational and political campaigns⁵ to encourage chastity, to eliminate prostitution, and to discourage masturbation,

⁵ The Victorian Social Purity Movement is one of many campaigns to encourage chastity. Sue Morgan writes, “Social purity, a euphemism for sexual purity, emerged in the early 1880s out of a combined legacy of traditional moral politics such as that of the Society for the Suppression for Vice, and the heady success of its immediate predecessor, the campaign for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts” (152).

especially among the young” (138). Rubin believes that the consequences of these actions still endure today, as these prohibitive mentalities have “left a deep imprint on attitudes about sex” (138). Foucault also addresses the endurance of these “consequences,” to borrow Rubin’s term. Reflecting on the Victorian period, he demonstrates how the state regulated the sexual behaviour of its citizens and this in turn affected how people spoke about/engaged with sex; he writes, “Between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it... a longstanding ‘freedom’ of language between children and adults, or pupils and teachers, may have disappeared” (“The History of Sexuality” 26-27). In other words, with the imposition of such sanctions⁶, sex became a restricted topic between adults and children. By restricting the population sexually, two main effects were the result, as I discuss more fully below: young people were (and continue to be) regulated by adults in terms of how they explore sexuality, and society continues to enforce the construct of childhood innocence, which negatively impacts adolescent sexual agency. It is important to note, however, that cultural approaches to young people and sexuality vary widely. I reiterate that this project is geographically limited, focusing specifically on North American and British representations of sexuality.

How young people can and do learn about sex greatly depends on how society regulates its citizens’ actions. In *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality* (2013), children’s literature scholar Lydia Kokkola utilizes Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* to explore power relations in YA and the

⁶ For example, texts on chastity deliberately encouraged young boys to develop heterosexual desire by fostering reverence for the opposite sex. Morgan writes, “Most purity literature was aimed at juvenile boys in an attempt to engender an early reverence for the female sex. According to purity consensus, puberty represented a vital stage in the development of the sexual and moral character and habits learned during youth could either impede or promote chastity and self-control during manhood” (164).

regulation of young people's carnality; Kokkola does not give an exact definition of the term, but indicates that carnality broadly designates the explorations and feelings of being a sexual person (16). She argues that Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* establishes a precedent for understanding how Western cultures use sex for regulation; she writes:

Foucault argues that all sexual behaviour is regulated for the purposes of controlling and repressing the masses. He distinguishes between 'sex', which he treats as being synonymous with copulation, and 'sexuality' which is a discursive construct. He argues that the separation of these aspects of sexual behaviour in Western cultures has arisen as a means of regulating citizens. (38)

If Western society is bent on regulating sexuality and suppressing desire, then texts aimed at teenagers perform a part of that mission. There are two main factors that inhibit teens when expressing their sexualities: the control of adults (such as parents and teachers) over the behaviour of young people (such as censoring what material they consume, like novels and television shows), and the shame brought by some cultural/religious beliefs, which come with the assumption that sex outside of marriage is wrong (religion is a major grievance for the participants in my focus groups, for example). Since such suppression still occurs in popular culture⁷, young adults are exposed to skewed material about sex, as this dissertation argues. And, for those who do not identify as heterosexual, there are even more societal limitations; LGBTQ+ teens are also marginalized because their sexual attraction falls outside of the constructed norm of heterosexuality. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick specifies that "Western society is

⁷ In media, teens are generally depicted as being sexually innocent (Baxter 5) or if they do embrace their sexuality, the consequences are negative (Lewis and Durand 39); note the punishment of pregnancy for teen character Zoey in *Before I Die* (2008).

brutally homophobic and the homophobia directed against both males and females is not arbitrary or gratuitous, but tightly knit into the texture of family, gender, age, class, and race relations” (3-4). If heterosexual teenagers are already considered by adults to be too young to explore sex, then LGBTQ+ teens are doubly marginalized, adding pain to what can already be an isolating and shameful experience of desire. Although progress has been made in young adult novels that depict the LGBTQ+ teenage experience, as Chapter Two demonstrates, many of these novels still focus on the “coming out” of the character (frequently accompanied by the embodied feeling of shame), rather than the pleasure they experience as sexual beings, thus stressing the importance of societal acceptance (external validation) over sexual self-growth (internal validation) in such narratives.

Emphasized in this sexual regulation is the argument that teenagers are too young, or “innocent,” to know about sexual intimacy. With the onset of puberty, adolescence is synonymous with the idea of burgeoning sexuality, as many teenagers masturbate or start experimenting with peers, and yet adolescents are still depicted in many narratives as being sexually innocent (Pugh 6). Kerry H. Robinson notes that the concept of childhood innocence reinforces the dualistic nature of child and adult, so that when it comes to sexuality, anything about sexuality is deemed “*adults-only* knowledge [which] stems largely from the fears of children’s perceived loss of innocence” (8, author’s emphasis); thus, adults limit and/or restrict sexual knowledge through a discursive emphasis and they place importance on (sexual) innocence. This desire to protect innocence stems from what Pugh argues is a “rejection of aging and the perpetual celebration of childhood” (1). Thus, by favouring innocence, adults limit a child’s ability to grow and to acquire independent knowledge and experience. Robinson

argues that this type of reinforcement contributes to a child's vulnerability, minimizing knowledge acquisition, and denying "children's sexual subjectivities and desires—that is, their sense of self as sexual beings" (8); when a child's subjectivity is "denied," to borrow Robinson's words, their agency is limited or arguably nonexistent. Furthermore, as my research confirms, this valuing of childhood innocence ensures that favourable sexual content in young adult literature (still written mostly by adults) becomes rare. My dissertation investigates these rare moments of pleasurable sexual content to contribute to conversations about sexually agentic teens. As such, I consciously move away from the well-known ideology of losing one's virginity or becoming metaphorically "deflowered," which is predicated on assumptions about sexual innocence. Instead, "sexual debut" is a term that I mobilize to refer to sexuality in general, so that when we look at sexual activity as something that is not a loss, but rather, something that is gained, sex becomes another valuable experience for a young person. Rachel Golden et al. in "The Risks and Rewards of Sexual Debut" (2016) define "sexual debut" as "the first intercourse experience" (1). While intercourse suggests penetration, as indicated by my first epigraph, I would like to argue that sexual debut can be a more expansive term, and can include any sexual contact or activity. Moreover, this term distances first sexual experiences from the "lost innocence" narrative still in circulation and reorients them to accounts of personal growth.

As previously mentioned, the geographical parameters of my study are primarily North American, with a handful of British texts, while I approach this conversation from a Canadian lens. However, even this framing is complicated, as Canada and the United States are culturally and ethnically diverse, with varying perspectives on sex and intimacy. In the United States, under the current Trump administration, federal policy is working actively to limit sex education,

particularly to “remove LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum and policies while compelling adherence to strict definitions of gender that exclude transgender students and staff” (GLAAD par. 5). Sex education also varies significantly by state, with funding disparities further shaping the quality of instruction. As Venkatesh et al. note, “People of color, LGBTQ, and rural young people disproportionately receive poorer and less effective sexual education than their well-funded counterparts” (par. 11). These inconsistencies highlight the systemic inequities surrounding sex education in America.

By contrast, Canada’s public discourse around sex education is less nationally polarized, although regional and cultural differences remain significant. For example, a 2021 Statistics Canada census found “more than 450 ethnic and cultural origins, 200 places of birth, 100 religions and 450 languages” in Canada (“The Canadian Census” par. 3). These varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds signal different heritages and arguably diverse values about sexuality, as proven by statistics assembled in a 2024 report by Statistics Canada in answer to the question, “Where do 15- to 17-year olds in Canada get their sexual health information?” (Rotermann and McKay). Michelle Rotermann and Alexander McKay report that 22.5% of “adolescents who were not born in Canada,” when compared with 13.3% of those who were born in Canada, “reported not having an adult to talk with” about sex (par. 25). Similarly, young people who are racialized or Indigenous experience similar challenges as “nearly one-quarter (23.0%) of racialized adolescents reported not having an adult to talk with about sexual health or puberty, more than double the estimate for their non-racialized and non-Indigenous (White) peers (11.2%)” (par. 25). These statistics emphasize how cultural differences influence adolescents’ ability to access reliable information and trusted guidance about sexuality.

As a Canadian scholar, I must note that even within Canada there are differences among the provinces in how sex education is administered in school. As Rotermann and McKay report, “Canada does not have a coordinated sexual health curriculum. Instead, each province or territory is responsible for its own programming. Geographic differences related to sociodemographics can also affect regional differences in the sources of sexual health information reported” (par. 13). If there is such a diverse curricular structure at the provincial level of Canada, the variation in sex education is comparable to the regions of Britain and the varying states of the US. When comparing countries as seen through a “Western” lens, then, there is much diversity in how sex education occurs in different educational systems. Norway, for example, has a more liberated sexual education program, as can be seen through Dr. Line Jansrud’s “Pubertet”⁸ sex education series, which “uses actual human bodies to explain the basics of gender, puberty and reproduction in a simple, easy and humorous way” (“Plot Summary”). Jansrud hosts eight episodes during which adult volunteers display their penises and breasts to provide viewers with visualizations of the body in the hopes of increasing young people’s biological understandings of their body parts. Episodes cover different topics of puberty, such as growing breasts, the treatment of pimples and sweat, etc. In one episode, Jansrud displays honestly, and arguably with humour, how to kiss by sucking on a tomato; she also shows how to rub one’s clitoris on an anatomical model. Thus, even within Western society, there is a wide spectrum of views about sexuality and even dissemination of sexual instruction

⁸ At the beginning of my project in 2019, the Pubertet series could be accessed on YouTube; at the time of this footnote in July of 2025, however, viewers can only have access if they are in Norway. This restriction reveals the limitations Canadians have with open access sexual education outside of traditional education taught in Canadian elementary and high school contexts.

that complicates this topic further. Therefore, I position my work within the context of the United States, Canada, and Britain as I have lived in Canada my entire life and have studied and researched English literature in these spaces, with the observation that even within my Canadian education, the access to sexual instruction has its own limits due to the vastness of the country and the many cultures of its people.

Methodology

I specifically look at how adult knowledge bolsters or limits teen knowledge of sexuality in a North American context. If “sex is always political” (Rubin 138), then conveying sexual information to teens is a political act. As I argue, optimistic sexual relationships in YA—illustrated by means of empowering representations of love and lust, masturbation, sexual intercourse, etc.—are necessary for a more complex understanding of human sexuality. In offering a wide range of sexual representations, authors of commercially published YA and amateur authors online work towards critiquing restrictive notions of sexuality as they interrogate the social mores of adolescent sexuality (to varying degrees of success, as I will show). Moreover, young adults reading and writing fiction to satisfy their own curiosities about intimacy and sexuality can be seen as agentic, as shown in my own research when my participants expressed their excitement in reading on/about sex at a young age. In this way, sex-positive YA narratives operate as politically engaged sites in which adolescent sexuality is explored, foregrounding young people as subjects of sexual discourse and as active participants in its production.

In my project, I examine the language used in sexual health manuals and YA to uncover potential instructions and advice for the reader about sex and sexuality. Does a certain author

or narrator promote abstinence? Do they encourage sexual exploration? For the purpose of my project, I utilize Molli E. Mercer and Shannon B. Dermer's definition of sex-positivity: "an attitude toward sexuality that embraces consensual sexual activities, the expression of various sexual and gender identities, and sexual pleasure as healthy and normal" (par. 1). I emphasize the latter part of this definition, that "sexual pleasure" be written as "healthy and normal," meaning that it is natural to desire or not desire sex. In *Disturbing the Universe* (2000), Roberta Seelinger Trites finds in YA literature that "characters who have positive experiences with sexuality are usually strengthened by the experience" (96); she argues that in this "empowerment" approach, the narrative "illustrates Foucault's principle of the power/knowledge/pleasure dynamic" (96). Thus, my examination focuses on uncovering sex-positive narratives both within formally published literature and in online writing, with an emphasis on the young adult writers themselves. My project utilizes a text-centred approach that offers close readings of texts written by adults and young people (print and online) that include moments of sexual intimacy. I ask: Does the narrativizing of sexuality through YA encourage young adults to explore their sexuality in sex-affirmative ways? Are teens writing their own stories anonymously online to explore their sexualities in ways they cannot with published novels? While much existing research concerned with literature for young adults employs reader response methods (Bell et al. 2019) and some contemporary scholarship takes a Cognitive Poetics approach to reading YA (Gavins and Steen 2003), participatory research *about* new adults reading sexual narratives is limited in study. My focus group discussions, therefore, provide a necessary and much needed intervention in the existing research.

Utilizing Virginia Braun and Victoria's Clarke's definition of thematic analysis (2006), I examined the transcripts of four focus group sessions with my participants, concentrating on their experiences of reading sexually explicit content during adolescence, as well as their present-day responses with my chosen texts for this study. Thematic analysis, as Braun and Clarke describe, "is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (79). Through close reading of the transcripts and coding of the material, which is the process of noting certain research themes or finding the theme through the analysis (Braun and Clarke 84), I identified three key themes, which I discuss below, that illuminate how literature shaped the participants' understandings of sex.

The first theme, Sexual Growth and Shame, captures participants' complex emotional responses to learning about sex through reading as teenagers, including feelings of embarrassment and relatability to characters who experience shame. My participants expressed that their issues with enjoying their sexualities were often a result of cultural stigmas. The second theme, Literature as a Catalyst for Self-Awareness, explores how literature, especially fan fiction and young adult novels, enabled participants to recognize discrepancies between their formal learning at school and the more comprehensive learning they experienced through personal experiences with literature. Finally, the third theme, Critical Reading Practices and the Desire for Responsible Representation, reflects participants' engagement with my assigned texts for the study, expressing a preference for the published young adult fiction over fan fiction due to its more responsible and nuanced portrayals of sexuality. My work with thematic analysis

enabled me to uncover major themes, which provided insight into how young people navigate learning about sexual knowledge through literary representation.

The Project: Young People on Sexual Content in Literature

In her article “Let’s Write about Sex – YA Fiction as a Means of Learning about Sexuality” (2016), Sara Hutchinson writes, “Young adult literature has the potential to fill in the gaps left by sexuality education curricula by depicting the many ways – from abstinence to intercourse – young people may choose to be intimate” (317). In examining these “gaps,” I conduct my research with journalist Peggy Orenstein’s question as a frame: “What happens after yes?” In other words, what happens after two consenting young adults say “yes” to sex? Is there pleasure in YA? In fan fiction? This project aims to examine how young adults articulate their own desire to explore their bodies and others’ bodies in consensual contexts, specifically. By exploring YA and narratives written *by* young people, my research contributes crucial new understandings of teenage intimacy and sexuality in terms of their reading habits and preferences; this work is integral for scholars and educators to understand how the current generation is working through their own sexual exploration. Most importantly, the analysis of these young voices highlights the importance of teenage sexual agency.

I argue that most realistic YA narratives focus on the dangerous or anxiety-inducing possibilities of sexual intercourse; these narratives are essential, as they show how sexual experiences are wide-ranging, and inform readers that not every sexual experience will be pleasurable. Take, for example, narratives about sexual assault (see Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* [1999] or E.K. Johnston’s *Exit, Pursued by a Bear* [2017]); these texts are critical in teaching about consent and sexual violence. Outside of these narratives, many YA plots that

include teenage sexuality focus on the panic of pregnancy, the fear of contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI), or a young person's apprehension after engaging in sex due to social stigma. As I have discovered, there are very few positive representations of sexuality and intimacy in young adult novels. At the start of this project in 2022, I found that engaging in sexual activity still came at a price for teenage characters in YA; that the sexual experience was either anxiety-inducing and/or inflicted trauma, or the act was embarrassingly interrupted. Even Camryn Garrett's *Full Disclosure* (2019)—which includes information about preparedness for sexual intercourse (the novel addresses the use of dental dams and condoms during vaginal oral sex)—underscores the fears inherent in exploring one's sexuality. For instance, Garrett includes a scene in which the main character reflects after masturbating but focuses mainly on how her “parents can't hear [her]” rather than the pleasure involved in the act (58).

YA has often functioned didactically, in this way, communicating to teen readers that sexual desire or activity will lead to irrevocable pain and loss (Kokkola 90), yet current research suggests that sex-positive narratives are arguably more common today, such as “Ron Koertge's *Where the Kissing Never Stops* (2005) in which Walker and his new girlfriend, Rachel, easily move from first kiss to a satisfying sexual relationship with his mother's approval” (Reynolds 122). Reynolds maintains that “the sexual experiences of young people in a growing number of novels are depicted as pleasurable and consequence-free” rather than with “guilt” and “unease” (122). While I did not specifically investigate the novels Reynolds analyzes, I have found that award-winning (and highly circulated) novels, such as Jandy Nelson's *I'll Give You the Sun* (2014) and Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X* (2018), are still consequence-focused rather than pleasure-oriented. My inquiry leans toward a close reading of these and other YA texts to

understand how these narratives construct and convey sexual intimacy through literary elements such as narrative voice, imagery, tone, characterization, syntax, form, and symbolism. While many of these narratives still frame teenage sexuality within a discourse of consequence, they also depict characters experiencing personal growth and, at times, genuine pleasure. Considering literary techniques reveals one of the ways contemporary YA fiction illustrates adolescent sexual agency.

Kokkola writes, “Sex positive fiction can help adolescents to understand and enjoy their desiring bodies without shame, witness relationships where boundaries are respected, and recognise the difference between desire and love. Fiction can also be a stimulant for masturbation and consequent self-knowledge” (17). As recognized by the scholarship of Kokkola and Reynolds, young adult literature today “normalizes” adolescent sexuality and foregrounds pleasure, offering a range of consensual sexual experiences on the page that reflect a contemporary sex literacy. Sexual consequences are still often emphasized but are not foregrounded as frequently; instead, today’s realistic young adult literature moves toward affirmative sexual content, which encourages adolescent agency and autonomy, and reminds young readers that sex can be a “normal” part of the teenage experience. As I demonstrate, writers model sex-supportive approaches in form and content by means of extended narrative descriptions of sexual intercourse, by featuring open conversations between and among characters, and by an avoidance of euphemism.

Chapter Overview

My dissertation is organized into three sections, invoking English-language texts (mainly American and British publications) and English-language online fiction (from *Wattpad* and

Archive of Our Own) to explore how sex is written in the contemporary YA canon. The first chapter examines a selection of sexual health manuals that were published between 1970 and 2024, while the second chapter analyzes contemporary American and British YA novels published between 2001–2022 that contain young adult protagonists who explore their sexuality and that feature secondary characters in the texts who participate in the protagonists' initiation into this stage of human development. Some of these texts include Camryn Garrett's *Full Disclosure* (2018), Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X* (2018), and Jenny Downham's *Before I Die* (2007). They provide useful case studies for my exploration of sexuality in texts written *by* adults *for* adolescent readers. Finally, the third chapter investigates the research study I conducted with a group of new adults (18-24 years-old), where they examine fan fiction, *Full Disclosure*, and *The Poet X*; in this chapter, I place my study in direct conversation with theories about fan fiction. Below, I go into more specific detail about each chapter.

Chapter One, "From Foreplay to Outercourse: Sex Manuals and the Language of Sexuality," examines how discourses of sexuality shifted before and after the rise of digital communication. Drawing on Barker et al.'s *Mediated Intimacy* (2018) in which the authors define media as encompassing "novels, films, TV shows, newspapers, and magazines, blogs and YouTube videos" (24), I explore how the digital revolution reshaped sexual knowledge by broadening access to information and introducing pornography as a key reference point. Although I focus specifically on sexual education books, these texts frequently acknowledge how media shapes sexual consciousness. By analyzing older precedent-setting manuals that discuss virginity, pregnancy, venereal disease, arousal, and orgasm alongside contemporary publications that address pornography and digital sexual exploration, I trace how sexual advice

has evolved over the past forty years. I argue that while contemporary texts are more explicit about pleasure, they remain constrained by ongoing cultural anxieties and therefore call for constant updating to ensure that teen agency is at the forefront of reading about sex.

Chapter Two, ““She talked me through it’: Sexual Content in Young Adult Literature,” centers on fictional YA texts, such as Tucker Shaw’s *When You Call My Name* (2022) and Alice Oseman’s *Loveless* (2020), that include moments of solo-sex and sex with a partner. This chapter focuses on the ways that sex-affirmative experiences in YA present adolescent experiences of sexuality and intimacy through rhetoric and form. Moreover, I investigate how adult characters intercede, promote, and/or suppress teenage sexuality in YA, and include examinations of adolescent sexual agency (Egan and Hawkes 2009; Kehily 2012). Within this chapter, I find that most YA excludes descriptive sexual content, but promotes teen sexual agency through representations of emotional growth and consensual sexual experiences.

Chapter Three, ““Liberating and Freeing”: Young People Reading and Writing About Sex,” offers a two-part investigation of online fiction: Part One provides a literature review of fan fiction, online writing, and experiential work with teens as background for the focus group discussions I detail in Part Two, where young people discuss both YA literature and online writing produced on *Archive of Our Own* (AO3), *Tumblr*, and fan fiction websites, such as *Wattpad*. As parental nervousness about teens reading and writing about sex still occurs, this chapter investigates how young adults write for themselves and their peers. This section is crucial in showing how despite the Western suppression of sexual knowledge, young adults seek out opportunities to explore their ideas, with less fear of being monitored, and that digital platforms provide the freedom for them to do so. Part Two centres on the participatory

research I conducted with young adult readers between January and February 2023 at York University in Toronto, Ontario as part of a study, entitled “Let’s Talk About Sex: Constructions of Intimacy in Young Adult Literature,” which was approved by the university’s research ethics board. My lens for this study was based in Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) which “is grounded in children and youth’s own life experiences and concerns and is meant to not only gather data about these experiences, but to improve the lives of these young people” (Shabtay 1). While my goal was not necessarily to “improve the lives” of my research participants, they did express gratitude that they were able to discuss sex in a public space and thus come to feel less sexual shame. My participants also had the opportunity to direct the research in order to foster agency among the participants in the study, as I asked them to provide recommendations for fan fiction pieces for the study. Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak writes, “applying participatory research in children’s literature studies enables children to become peer researchers whose contribution to generating knowledge about what they read has an intrinsic value similar to insights offered by adult readers” (217). My participants explored sexual representation in YA and their analyses, as I argue, can be utilized in new and improved understandings of young adult sexuality. As more than half of my participants identified as LGBTQ+, the impressive range of intersectional identities reflects a much more varied demographic that speaks to the visual spectrum of sexuality today among youth. Their voices help us move research into less dominantly heteronormative and White-dominated spaces, and illustrate the sexual diversity that is true of such a wide range of people.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I explore how contemporary texts—commercially published sexual health manuals and YA novels, alongside self-published online fiction—offer agentic representations of teen sexuality. While, historically, sex has been a stigmatized topic with young people, authors and young people alike are reclaiming narratives and presenting material that emphasizes teenage sexual and personal autonomy. In “Carnality in Adolescent Literature” (2017), Lydia Kokkola argues that reading about carnal desires enables readers to think about “discourses of power” and how power is directly related to carnality (99). While the language in YA often suggests to teenagers that sexual desire or action will irrevocably lead to pain and loss (90), I propose that teens acquire power by engaging with YA and online literature which enables them to think about who they are as sexual beings. That sex is solely for adults is a culturally constructed notion, so when teenagers begin having intimate relationships with each other, they challenge that mentality and disrupt notions of power (92) and continue to do so in their reading and writing habits.

The exploration of young adult sexuality and the representation of sexual content (such as desire, sexual intercourse, and masturbation) in contemporary literature (both by adult and young adult writers) is necessary work to understand how young adults learn about sex and intimacy today. Moreover, my experiential fieldwork is critical in exploring anxiety and joy about sex elicited by fictional texts. Scholars Ewa Chawar et al. conduct research that stresses “the importance of children’s worldviews, voices and agency that emerge in the context of their everyday lives and experiences” (115). My research deliberately foregrounds young adult perspectives about sex and intimacy so that their voices can be heard too.

Chapter 1

From Foreplay to Outercourse: Sex Manuals and the Language of Sexuality

Honestly, it's all kinda BS. Whether you identify as a virgin or not, or want to use that label or not, it's no one's business but your own. If you choose to have sex 'outside of marriage,' you aren't a bad person. You made a choice about your sexual behaviour (if indeed it was a choice). That's it. (123)

- Alison Macklin, *Making Sense of 'It'*, 2018

Virginity, masturbation, porn, kinks⁹, self-regulation, consent, desire, pleasure: this is a handful of terms that are discussed in various North American sex manuals for teenagers about sexuality. While sexuality may seem synonymous with sexual orientation, attraction is only one facet of a much broader concept. Sexuality, as described on the University of Louisville's health services website, "encompasses nearly every aspect of our being, from attitudes and values, to feelings and experiences. It is influenced by the individual, family, culture, religion/spirituality, laws, professions, institutions, science, and politics" ("Defining Sexuality") and can be parsed into five sub-sections: sensuality (how we feel about our body); intimacy (our relationships with others); sexual identity (our gender identity and sexual/romantic attraction); sexual health and reproduction (the parts that enable reproduction if we choose); and sexual power and agency ("Defining"). Recognizing sexuality as a complex interplay of physical, emotional, and social factors helps frame the central question guiding this chapter; as mentioned in the introduction, this project works from the foundation of Peggy Orenstein's question, "What happens after

⁹ "Most people use 'kinky' or 'kink' to refer to sexual behavior considered 'abnormal' in our society. Though many may call them perversions (which is a value judgment, not a definition), most of these desires or behaviors are technically called paraphilias, which simply put, means outside the norm" (Corinna, "Working the Kinks Out", par. 5).

yes?” In other words, what happens when two (or more) consenting people agree to explore their bodies together? This chapter explores how non-fiction sexual manuals as well as other non-fiction texts such as memoirs, journalism, and social and political commentary explore sexuality, specifically the sensuality, sexual identity, intimacy, sexual power, and agency of young people, while also noting how sexual health and reproduction are framed, often as a signal to sexual manuals of the past that prioritized reproduction over pleasure. My research shows that whereas twentieth-century manuals rarely used explicitly sex-affirmative language, recent twenty-first-century manuals increasingly foreground sexual agency and pleasure.

Shifts in the language and framing of sexuality invite another question: if the goal is to empower teens as sexual agents, who decides what information they will receive? Ultimately, adult authors write sexual manuals for teenagers; when an author is writing about teenage sexuality, they are most likely writing from a liberal perspective, by which I mean a pedagogical and cultural framework that positions adolescents as active agents of their lives and resists dominant discourses which promote sexual “innocence” and adolescent infantilization. The texts in this chapter range from Heather Corinna’s book *S.E.X.: The All-You-Need-to-Know Sexuality Guide to Get You through Your Teens and Twenties* (2016), Al Vernacchio’s *For Goodness Sex: Changing the Way We Talk to Teens About Sexuality, Values, and Health* (2014), and Jane Fonda’s *Being a Teen: Everything Teen Girls & Boys Should Know About Relationships, Sex, Love, Health, Identity & More* (2014). Most of these authors are formally educated, financially secure, and based in the United States, even though their individual backgrounds differ (Corinna is non-binary and queer; Vernacchio is a gay, American high school educator; and Fonda is an actor and activist). This shared positionality raises the important point about who

has the authority to educate teens about sexuality, especially considering the discomfort many adults feel in discussing sex. For example, in her article, “Directions of Desire: Reading the Adolescent Body” (2023), Lydia Kokkola remarks on the difficulties of adults speaking about the “sexiness of sex across the generation divide” (16). She writes, “The nuts and bolts of what might go where and what might happen as a result are easy to explain, but describing how to produce sexual pleasure and/or intimacy is embarrassing, in part, because it reveals so much about one’s own preferences” (16). Kokkola focuses on fictional erotica, or “smut”—texts with sexually explicit scenes—a topic touched upon in subsequent chapters, to emphasize how these stories are tools for teens to use to learn about pleasure.

In this first chapter, I am interested in how adults who write non-fiction manuals for teens inform their readers (young and old) about the pleasures of sex. To explore how texts for young adults address sexuality, I first compare sexual manual texts for adults and for teenagers in order to trace how the presentation of sex education manuals is shaped by audience objective. By analyzing differences in tone, language, and content alterations, I clarify how cultural constructions of adolescence influence the framing of sexual agency and pleasure. For example, adult sexual manuals, such as *The Joy of Sex* (1972), focus mainly on pleasure and sexual positions, whereas texts for young adults, such as *Will I like It?* (1976) and *Making Sense of ‘It’* (2018), centre on whether teens are ready to have their sexual debut and how to nourish themselves as sexual beings. That being said, *The Good Vibrations Guide to Sex* (2002) by Cathy Winks and Anne Semans is a unique text for adults that includes a section called “Sex Over a Lifetime,” which contains information about sexuality from childhood to adolescence, midlife changes, and senior sex (42-57). In their segment about teens, Winks and Semans “applaud”

their teen readers’ “quest for accurate sex information” but also advise that there are “aspects” that they encourage the reader to find in other resources specifically published for teens, such as *Deal with It* (1999) and *Changing Bodies, Changing Lives* (1980) (43). Winks and Semans inform that these books “discuss physical and emotional changes, deciding if you’re ready to have sex, relationships, dealing with peers and parents, and contraception” (43). They also note that “The Web is also a terrific source of information, and [they] highly recommend websites like *Sex Etc.* and *Coalition for Positive Sexuality*¹⁰” (43). One of the most sex-affirmative features in this section is their “Teens’ sexual bill of rights,” which they define as follows:

1. Teens have the right to appreciate their own and each other's bodies.
2. Teens have the right to know how things work.
3. Teens have the right to know that sex is about pleasure.
4. Teens have the right to know that sex is more than intercourse.
5. Teens have the right to realistic expectations.
6. Teens have the right to make responsible choices.
7. Teens have the right to sexual equality.
8. Teens have the right to sexual diversity.
9. Teens have the right to consent.
10. Teens have the right to resources. (45)

Winks and Semans’ bill of rights is unprecedented in relation to the other texts explored in this chapter. With this bill, the authors clearly state that teens have agency in knowledge and choice over their bodies, a first in texts about sexuality. They believe in the importance of respecting

¹⁰ As of August 2025, *Sex Etc.* is still an active site, whereas *Coalition for Positive Sexuality* is not.

the “teenager’s fundamental right” when they are making decisions about sex (43). They also acknowledge that “not all teens are emotionally ‘ready’ for sex, but neither are plenty of adults. There is no magical age at which sexual maturity sets in; a great many teens possess the ability to negotiate safe and consensual sex, and will do so whether they have adult ‘permission’ or not” (43). In other words, nothing mystical happens when a person reaches the established threshold of adulthood; Winks and Semans situate sexual maturity in the demonstrated ability to navigate consent and safety in intimate encounters. This idea is quite radical even in the early twenty-first century, in that Winks and Semans support teenage sexual agency in a historically sex-nervous country like the United States. Their position highlights the movement towards sexual agency that has taken place in under 60 years (from the 1940s to the early 2000s), one that has moved from the tendency to blame women if husbands are not sexually satisfied (as I discuss below) to the insistence on the importance of sexual agency, whether a person is a teen or a seasoned adult. Additionally, this is the only text that mentions that adults, as well as some teens, might *not* be ready for sex. Ultimately, the year in which someone is born does not signal whether that person should or should not be deemed “ready” to have sex; rather, to be sexually active and sexually agentive is a choice that a teen (and adult) must decide to make, as more and more sex-supportive adult writers of sex manuals are arguing.

This chapter title includes the phrase “from foreplay to outercourse” because this section explores the growth in language and content from the books that surfaced because of the sexual revolution (such as, *Will I Like It?* [1976], *The Joy of Sex* [1972], *The What’s Happening to My Body? Book For Boys* [1983] and *Reader’s Digest Guide to Love and Sex* [1998]), all the way to today’s contemporary texts, such as *S.E.X.: The All-You-Need-to-Know*

Sexuality Guide to Get You through Your Teens and Twenties (2016) and *For Goodness Sex: Changing the Way We Talk to Teens About Sexuality, Values, and Health* (2014). For some, foreplay is an outdated term in the sexual vernacular, and it may seem that studying these past texts will only serve to reinforce some outdated terms, such as virginity. However, it must be noted that today's texts are only available due to the precedent-setting work that these earlier manuals provided. In truth, these texts kickstarted conversations about sexual agency and the de-stigmatization of sex in general, and work as a point of comparison that can help map how language has changed, at least in American texts, in terms of educating about sex, over the past fifty years. Outercourse is the current term for what was once known as foreplay. While *foreplay* traditionally refers to sexual acts that precede what is often framed as "real" sex (i.e., penetrative vaginal intercourse), *outercourse* reframes these acts as complete and pleasurable sexual experiences. As Jane Fonda explains, outercourse "implies doing things that are pleasurable in and of themselves without penetration of any kind" (Fonda 118). A term like "outercourse" suggests that pleasure can be reached in other ways without leading to penetration. I selected this term with which to frame this chapter because it represents the important alteration that has taken place with regards to language about sexuality. As one might imagine, choice in diction has an extraordinary impact on how people think about their bodies. For instance, if vaginal-penetrative intercourse is the only way to characterize or define sexual debuts, then this discredits experiences of oral or anal sex. Therefore, this alteration in diction moves towards more inclusive conversations about being a sexual agent.

So what language is being used in today's teenage sexual manuals? Certain vocabulary still emphasizes the loss of virginity and the effect that choice can have on one's life, but there is

a movement among authors to value teen agency through the newer lenses they bring to sexual debut, such as Al Vernacchio's "pizza" metaphor (which I describe below). In this chapter, I investigate how sex manuals directed at teen readers compare to manuals made for adult readers and theorize how the language in these manuals promotes the growth of sexually agentive teenagers. As I argue, current sexual health manuals for teens are a productive foundation point for beginning to think about sexuality, emphasizing transformative understandings of teenage sexual agency.

That Was Then: Early Sex Manuals and Their Limitations

The literature about giving and receiving intimate pleasure changed over the course of the twentieth century, and the varying diction within sexual manuals highlights the ongoing transformation in how North American texts communicate about sex. In today's manuals for teens, much of the responsibility of pleasure is placed on oneself, especially through the act of masturbation; however, communication is a key element that these teen manuals also suggest should contribute to a more pleasurable experience for young people. Interestingly, today's manuals reflect similar ideas of pleasure that were shared in marriage manuals before the sexual revolution.

In contrast to the narrative of sexual progress implied by both pre-sexual revolution and contemporary teen manuals, scholar Jessamyn Neuhaus contends that post-revolution discourse constructed women's sexuality not as liberated, but as newly pathologized. For example, in her article, "The Importance of Being Orgasmic," Neuhaus argues that the "shift" between the pre- and post-sexual revolution texts "did not signal the textual 'liberation' of women's sexuality, but rather the construction of women's sexuality as problematic, neurotic,

and faulty” (450). Texts from the 1920s and 30s, such as Theodore H. Van de Velde’s *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique* (1926) and Oliver M. Butterfield’s *Sex Life in Marriage* (1937), emphasized the importance of the husband’s role in his wife’s orgasm (Neuhaus 454, 447); however, sexual health manuals from World War II and well into the 1950s and 60s (and, thus, prior to the sexual revolution) focus primarily on how it is a woman’s fault if she does not experience pleasure during intercourse (Paul Popenoe’s *Marriage Before and After* [1943] springs to mind). Popenoe places the guilt on women if they do not fix the “misfortune” of their displeasure and even blames them for their husband’s potential impotence (200). He writes:

Many a wife is frigid or partly so, thereby impairing her husband's satisfaction with marital relations. This sexual inadequacy of hers may not be exactly her fault—we'll call it her misfortune—but if it exists and she does not take prompt and energetic steps to improve it by consulting an expert, then she is certainly guilty of negligence. On the other hand, if her husband is wholly or partly impotent, that may be her fault too. (200)

Here, Popenoe frames women’s frigidity, or sexual disinterest, as the root cause of impairment in sexual relations between husband and wife. While he notes that this condition may be a “misfortune” rather than a fault, responsibility is nonetheless placed on women to correct it. It is therefore women’s obligation to fix this issue, particularly for the sake of their husband’s sexual satisfaction. The failure to do so is framed as a form of wifely negligence; women thus become both the issue and the solution. They are constructed as the problem through biological frigidity, and they are expected to exercise agency only if that agency is directed toward remedying male sexual dissatisfaction. Nothing here is said about the wife’s pleasure or needs. In contrast, in late twentieth-century sexual manuals for adults, such as *The*

Joy of Sex, pleasure is a joint experience—both partners contribute. In her 1992 study of sex manuals from the 1970s, Meryl Altman finds that most late-twentieth-century texts affirmed “a new frankness” in relation to sex and included a “break with the repression of the past” (117); the past, in this case, would be the 1940s and 50s. Altman’s argument is evident in Alex Comfort’s seminal text, *The Joy of Sex* (originally published in 1972), in which Comfort explains that his original mission was “to undo some of the mischief caused by the guilt, misinformation, and lack of information” about sex (6). Here, “mischief” refers to the harm produced by culturally enforced guilt and misinformation about sexuality. From before the American sexual revolution in the 1960s to today, parents, religions, and school systems (i.e., social, cultural and governmental mechanisms) all added, and continue to add, to this guilt—there has been a consistent lack of information about the joy or pleasure that sex can bring. Instead, teenagers were (and continue to be) taught fear: fear of infection, pregnancy, pain, and arguably of “losing their innocence.” Nonetheless, Comfort offers an important detail that is integral to this dissertation: he writes, “Humans are not just a collection of genes, not just a biological drive; we can feel, we can commit, we can love. Given that skill set, we can develop our potential in the sexual arena until we die” (274). Simply put, anyone who has been misinformed or has a lack of information about sexuality or sexual intercourse can gain new perspectives by reading sex manuals. There is thus room to grow in the open discussion of sexual intercourse and intimacy among young people.

Although this chapter demonstrates how early sex manuals are limited in their language with regards to themes and subject matter, it also clarifies that as the years progressed into the 21st century, sexual manuals achieve more nuanced approaches to discussions about sexual

intercourse and intimacy among young people. This chapter establishes the foundational work for the second chapter, in which I analyze fictional texts for young adults to demonstrate how the language about sexuality and sexual intercourse varies in comparison, and to analyze whether fictional texts talk about “it” any better. Below, I focus on five sub-sections in sexual health manuals and how these contribute to or limit teenage sexual agency; the categories are as follows: The Pressures of Virginity; Constructions of Innocence; Advocacy of Agency via Masturbation; Porn as Sexual Entertainment, not Sex Ed; and Contemporary Sexual Symbolism.

The Pressures of Virginity

Sex manuals from the latter half of the twentieth century reveal the persistent hold that ‘virginity’ has on sexual discourse, even when authors attempt to challenge the term. In 1977, British author Peter Mayle published a book called *“Will I Like It?”: Your first sexual experience: what to expect, what to avoid, and how both of you can get the most of it*. Mayle organizes his book into sections with sexual photographs, with two chapters dedicated to virginity, entitled “Is Virginity worth keeping?” and “The anatomy of a virgin.” Mayle believes that the concept of losing one’s virginity is an absurd notion:

How can you possibly *lose* something that requires deliberate and fairly accurate action by two people? You can give it, you can take it, you can share it, or you can keep it, but nobody we know has ever been careless enough to lose it. It’s an even stranger choice of words when you think of the importance that has been attached to virginity for thousands of years. (n.p.)

Fascinatingly, although Mayle argues about the absurdity of the concept of virginity, he still chooses to use the term and does not offer an alternative. In contrast, the authors of *Our*

Bodies, Ourselves (1973) explain that the concept of virginity is ingrained in the sexual vocabulary of people who grew up in religious homes: “Maybe virginity is a physical state but, much more important, it’s a state of mind. Those of us who grew up in religious families feel that to lose our virginity before marriage is to have sinned. We are no longer chaste, unsullied, pure white... like the Madonna” (27). Because of its popularization through religion, this term “virginity” is still widely used today, even in secular contexts; virginity is often tied to whether a person with a vulva has an intact hymen or not, or whether a person with a penis has had penetrative sex.

Contemporary sex manuals for teens continue to address virginity, but often do so by debunking myths about the body and reframing the conversation around sexual agency. In her book *Ready for It*, vlogger Chusita Fashion Fever explains to her teen audience, “The hymen is a thin membrane of tissue that is located *around* the vaginal opening—not *over* it, as some people believe. It also doesn't ‘break,’ though it may tear when you first experience penetrative sex, which can produce minimal blood” (23). This fact is important in dismantling North America’s patriarchal reliance on virginity. The examination of someone to determine whether they are still a virgin based on the structure of their hymen is not scientifically sound, and yet this myth persists in cultural discourse, reinforcing shame around sexual debut. By clarifying what the hymen is exactly and utilizing clear, impartial language, Fever works towards empowering teen sexual agency.

Like Fever, in *The Purity Myth* (2010), Jessica Valenti also interrogates virginity as a concept, claiming that traditionally, virginity was “about establishing paternity (if a man marries a virgin, he can reasonably be sure the child she bears is his) and about using women’s sexuality

as a commodity" (22). Today, Valenti goes on to suggest, virginity is more tied to women's morality: "present-day American society—whether through pop culture, religion, or institutions—conflates sexuality and morality constantly" (24). The term "virginity" today thus signals a moral divide: it identifies whether someone, most likely a woman, is being "good" (by not having sex) or being "bad" (by having sex and enjoying it). Thus, a "good" woman would be one who does not partake in sex before marriage and a "bad" woman is one who does, or so this moral reasoning goes. This ideology is limited and constricting, although disseminated especially in North American popular culture (below I discuss in further detail the concept of "slut anxiety"). I would suggest that virginity is a social construct that still affects young people directly because the term represents the dichotomy of "before" sex and "after" sex, and the moral and social implications involved in such temporalities. I would also highlight the power implications involved in the use of this term. Derek Kreager and Jeremy Staff, in their study "The Sexual Double Standard and Adolescent Peer Acceptance" (2009), explore the common American notion that "boys and men are thought to receive praise and positive attributions from others for non-marital sexual contacts, while girls and women are believed to be derogated and stigmatized for similar behaviours" (par. 1). They found "that increased numbers of sexual partnerships were positively associated with boys' peer acceptance but negatively associated with girls' peer acceptance" (par. 39). Because boys and men are celebrated when they have sex, and women are scrutinized and judged, this term works to keep gender inequities in place. This line of thinking is made clear in *The Purity Myth*. For Valenti, the American virginity movement "is a targeted and well-funded backlash that is rolling back women's rights using revamped and modernized definitions of purity, morality, and sexuality"

(23). Valenti describes the “virginity movement” in “The Virginity Movement, Rebranded” (2009) as:

Composed of antifeminist think tanks like the Independent Women’s Forum and Concerned Women for America, abstinence-only organizations, religious leaders and legislators with regressive social values... the virginity movement is much more than the same old sexism; it’s a targeted and well-funded backlash hellbent on rolling back women’s rights using modernized notions of purity, morality and sexuality. Its goals are mired in old-school gender roles, and its primary tool is young women’s sexuality. (What better way to get people to pay attention to your cause than to frame it in terms of teenage girls’ having, or not having, sex? It’s salacious!). (par. 5)

“Nothing else matters” if women focus on this fear of losing their virginity and keeping their morals (and bodies) pure and clean (Valenti 24). As Valenti suggests, if young teens concentrate on staying “pure,” they are putting a lot of energy and time into the activity of being morally and sexually “clean.” This action alone reduces teens’ bodies to their sexual status and reinstills the fear that a body can be morally damaged. Overall, virginity operates as a cultural tool that constrains adolescent sexual agency: it reduces teens’ bodies to moral symbols, enforces gendered norms, and keeps sexual knowledge under adult control. In contrast to this restrictive label, some contemporary feminists (such as Dr. Tara Suwinyattichai or Dr. Tara, as she is popularly known) choose to frame people’s first experience of sexual contact as a sexual debut. Dr. Tara runs a TikTok account and a podcast called Luvbites, and believes that using the expression “losing your virginity has such a negative connotation.” She encourages people on

the platform who view her post to change their language (“When was your seggsual¹¹ [sic] debut?” she asks). In the texts under exploration in this chapter, however, sexual debut is an empowering phrase that is not mentioned once; loss of virginity remains the term of choice to refer to a person’s first penetrative sexual experience.

This chapter begins with a quote from Alison Macklin’s teenage sexual manual, *Making Sense of ‘It’*, in which she still uses the term “virgin” but points out that identifying as a virgin is subjective and a label that one can *choose* to use or not. That Macklin emphasizes that it is an individual’s choice to use “virgin” to describe themselves is groundbreaking for sexual education. Instead of being the term one must use to describe becoming sexually active, it becomes a choice whether to use the term or not. Macklin ultimately promotes a person’s agency in how they choose to define themselves. Her section, “What does it mean to be a virgin,” urges the reader to accept that they have a choice in what terminology they may employ to define their sexual experience and asks them to think about why they are using the term in the first place:

I’m not saying you can’t use the term *virgin*, but I am asking you to think about what using that term implies and how it affects how you perceive yourself. Society and different cultures have stigmatized virginity in various ways... If a female loses their virginity outside of marriage, they are considered dirty, impure, and shameful.

Sometimes, if a female has had sex outside of marriage, she is even labeled a ‘slut.’ (122)

¹¹ Dr. Tara uses the word ‘seggsual’ instead of ‘sexual’ on *Tiktok*, most likely to avoid removal of her post from the website. The fact that she needs to do this is evidence of continuing censorship of healthy sexual content.

“Virgin,” then, is not a term to be used lightly, although in the teenage sexual manuals surveyed in this chapter it is still widely accepted in the lexicon of teenage sexual health. Macklin wants her readers to reflect about why they use this term to define a part of their identity, and what effect that term can have on a person when they believe they have “lost it.”

Similarly, in *For Goodness Sex* (2014) by American educator Al Vernacchio, the writer imparts to his readers (his book’s audience includes parents *of* teens, different from Macklin who is writing *for* teens) that “What’s most important is that *they* know what *they* mean by virginity, and that they’re sure they know the definition of virginity of any potential sexual partners” (189). Macklin and Vernacchio are aligned here, then: both encourage young people to define virginity for themselves because “losing it” could mean different things to different people. For example, Vernacchio defines virginity as “‘not being involved with another person’s body with the purpose of achieving sexual pleasure’” (189). For Vernacchio, then, oral and anal sex are also acts that result in “losing one’s virginity” (189), because they are pursued for sexual pleasure, just like penis-in-vagina intercourse. Importantly, Vernacchio reframes virginity as a flexible concept that individuals can define for themselves, empowering teens to understand and navigate their own sexual experiences on their own terms.

Comparably, Nikol Hasler, producer of the late 2000s *Midwest Teen Sex Show* (a satirical internet show about teenage sexuality), writes candid teenage sex manuals that speak to the intersectionality of today’s youth. While Comfort’s *Joy of Sex* presented photos and drawings of white bodies, this limited perspective of sexual bodies is not present in Hasler’s manuals. Instead, Hasler includes a wide range of drawings that represent her diverse readers. Moreover, openly inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community, she writes that a sexual debut occurs when lesbians

have oral sex or “finger” one another, whereas for gay males “it [sexual debut] may be oral or anal sex, giving or receiving” (Hasler, *Teens* 60). Hasler makes her more liberated opinion about virginity very clear, explaining that phrases such as “lost it,” “gave it away,” and “deflowered” are “old-fashioned expressions that came to be [in North America] during a time¹² when sex was a very taboo subject and people believed, out of ignorance, that if a woman had sex she lost her innocence or integrity” (62). Hasler clarifies that when one becomes sexually active there is no “losing” or “taking” involved, and that having sex does not make someone “less valuable” (62). As in Vernacchio and Macklin’s texts, Hasler includes evidence from real teens in her book, one example of which is particularly meaningful in this context. A teen confesses to Hasler that her mother told her that she (the mother) would be able to tell when her daughter started having sex, as her body would “start to change and [she] will get more curves” (71). From a peer, she also “heard that [she] will smell different” (71). The idea of her body changing (growing breasts, for example) excites her, but she asks Hasler: “How can I stop my body from changing when I go all the way with my boyfriend?” (71). This question speaks to many of the assumptions and prejudices that shape contemporary adult-youth conversations about virginity and acts of sexuality: not only does this perspective show that a mother is trying to scare her daughter about having sex, but also that the teen writer has acquired misinformation from others, as she believes that even her scent would change. Hasler-refutes these “myth[s],” confirming that the body does change because of puberty but not because one loses their virginity (71). Both Hasler and Valenti reinforce a vital point for their young readers: someone who is sexually active is not

¹² In this dissertation, this earlier “time” represents Popenoe’s 1940s and 1950s when sexual guilt was the norm See: Paul Popenoe’s *Marriage Before and After* (1943)

lesser or “different” than someone who is not. Their reasoning suggests that the term and state of virginity work not only to label someone as being sexually active biologically, but to assert the moral importance of this activity (and to imply that people’s worth is tied to whether they are sexually active or not). Importantly, the authors suggest that this term carries too many negative connotations and should not be used in contemporary contexts.

The movement towards non-judgemental language also occurs outside the texts discussed thus far in the chapter. Take, for example, The Pleasure Project, an organization that employs advocacy educators worldwide, which works to transform language about sexuality so that it is more agentive and pleasure-based; the organization offers training materials that expand sexual education into one that is sex-affirmative.¹³ For instance, The Pleasure Project has a tool kit that includes a wide variety of materials about pleasure and how to achieve it. The pages feature many different bodies (genders, ages, races, level of ability), and the website unlike any of the other published books under study in this section. Most importantly, the authors discourage use of the phrase “losing one’s virginity,” replacing it instead with the concept of “sexual debut.” In their section “Let’s get it on!” the authors include a two-columned chart that recommends terms that one may use “Instead of these words.” For “losing virginity,” for example, they recommend using the phrase “gaining a new sexual experience or sexual debut.” Even for “foreplay,” which I have labelled as intercourse in this chapter, the authors write, “foreplay suggests that intercourse is the ‘real thing’. Use ‘non-penetrative sex’ or ‘get each other excited’” (117) instead. The concept of sexual debut gives newly sexually active adolescents, and even adults, autonomy as sexual beings. A “debut” signals a new beginning,

¹³ See: <https://thepleasureproject.org/>

whereas a “loss” indicates a disappearance or a defeat. The incorporation of this new term and concept into the vocabulary of sexuality champions an individual’s choice to explore the intimate parts of themselves, and perhaps the embracing of the sex-positivity that comes with that transformation in language.

Constructions of Innocence

Not surprisingly, much misinformation about sexuality can be attributed to adults (parents, educators, politicians, etc.) who attempt to preserve a child’s perceived innocence. To be sure, as mentioned in the introduction, innocence is a term that is socially constructed. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC),¹⁴ children are defined as those below the age of 18.¹⁵ Apart from Article 40 that deals with criminal law and the presumption that someone is “innocent until proven guilty” (par. 5), there is no statement that children are innocent or should be thought of as such. For example, in the preamble to the UNCRC, the treaty declares that “a child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society and brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity” (par. 8). This preamble frames young people as active participants in their own lives, entitled to freedom and, with that freedom, the ability to make informed choices, including choices about learning about their sexual selves and making decisions about their own bodies. This learning is not a one-time event but a gradual process that happens in developmentally

¹⁴ The USA has signed the UNCRC but has not ratified the document, as of July 2025.

¹⁵ The age of consent for sex in Canada and within most American states is 16 years old. Thus, a 16-year-old teenager is still considered a child, according to the language of the UNCRC document, but within their country, is legally of age to have sex. Age of consent, then, is an important legal device imposed by mechanisms that signal when a teen is mentally able to consent to sexual activity, whether or not that is in fact the case.

responsive ways throughout childhood and adolescence. This idea is evident in political activist Jane Fonda's book *Being a Teen* (2014), in which she addresses the issue of sexual education: "There is no evidence that talking about the realities of sex encourages a person to have sexual intercourse" (ix). Instead, as even more recent sex manuals affirm, having comprehensive information only helps teenagers to be prepared for the moment when they begin to explore their sexuality. Peggy Orenstein shares in *Boys and Sex* (2020) that young men want to have open and honest conversations about sex with their parents that "go beyond the classic don'ts: don't have sex, don't get anyone pregnant, don't get a disease, don't be disrespectful" (181). Orenstein's work confirms that youth are looking for honesty and guidance, and in the absence of such conversations at home or at school, many turn to media, including mainstream films and pornography—genres created for entertainment, not education, as I discuss below.

According to Childhood Studies theorist Karen Wells, children and adolescents are "social agents or actors" (1), and the young person as seen through this lens is recognized as someone who is "rational, self-knowing and independent" (2). Wells expands on the child as a social agent/actor further:

Children are conceptualized within Childhood Studies as agents who are constrained by the social structures that they are situated within but who do not passively succumb to these structures; they are agents or actors and they make society as much as society makes them. From this perspective the expert is no longer the psychologist, the teacher or the sociologist, but children themselves. This shift in the epistemology of childhood (in how we can claim to know what childhood is or who children are) privileges first-

person accounts and participatory research over experiments, surveys and observation.

(1)

To Wells, and as seen through the lens of Childhood Studies, children are agents who are not only affected by the world, but shape the world as well. This lens establishes children as agents in their own lives, and discredits the prevalent assumption of the child as being wholly innocent. Certainly, innocence is a social construct that can coexist with multiple forms of agency; for example, a young person may be arguably “innocent” in lacking sexual knowledge/experience, but still have the agency to act autonomously in different aspects of their life.

Moreover, scholars (such as Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley) also criticize the interpretation of childhood as a time of innocence, noting that this label assumes that children are not aware of the world around them. Bruhm and Hurley, for example, note that the “dominant narrative” for children is that they “should stay innocent of sexual desires and intentions,” and that even if they have such desires, these desires would be assumed to be heterosexual (ix). Similarly, Vanessa Joosen remarks that “constructing child characters as ignorant and averse to sexuality may contribute to depriving actual children of their agency as sexual and sexualized beings” (113). Western cultural discourse about children as sexual beings construes this tendency as one that is abhorrent, as children are assumed to be without sexual feeling. These assumptions allow no sexual agency for children, and Joosen argues that this deliberate contrast (of children as innocent and adults, by implication, as being all-knowing) ensures that adults remain in a position of power in which they see themselves as superior to young people (126).

Interestingly, while children have been constructed as innocent creatures since the nineteenth century, adolescence has often been framed in even more negative terms by sociologists and psychologists. Arsenio F. Silva and Rachelle S. Savitz observe that “typically teenagers appear in our cultural talk as synonymous with crazed hormones, as delinquents, deficiencies, or clowns—that is, beings not to be taken too seriously” (1). This depiction of teens as unregulated has deep historical roots, most notably in the work of G. Stanley Hall and his influential study *Adolescence* (1904). Hall wrote within a Victorian cultural context shaped by sexual repression and anxieties about moral development, and his work helped establish adolescence as a period of instability.

In “G. Stanley Hall’s *Adolescence*: Brilliance and Nonsense” (2006), scholar Jeffrey Jensen Arnett distinguishes between what has endured and what has been overstated about Hall’s ...?. Certainly, Arnett argues that Hall identified several features of adolescence that remain relevant; for example, that adolescence is “a time when depressed mood is more common than at other ages” (187). But the author notes that Hall “is responsible for the myth that ‘storm and stress’ is a universal and inevitable part of adolescent development” (186). This “myth,” as Arnett describes, is a popular notion of adolescence, even though Hall only speaks about it briefly in his book. Although Hall addresses “storm and stress” only briefly, Arnett notes that the concept has had an outsized influence, shaping popular and academic understandings of adolescence despite later research demonstrating its limitations.

Framing adolescence as a period of turmoil reinforces the idea of young people as inherently troubled and in need of regulation. Within this framework, sexuality becomes a particularly charged site of adult concern. Critics such as Jen Gilbert and Steven Angelides note

that actively limiting sexual knowledge in response to these anxieties often contributes to cycles of miseducation and shame about sexuality in American society. Gilbert, in “Risking a relation: sex education and adolescent development” (2007), argues that the urge of some adults to extend innocence into teenagerhood is ongoing; however, she emphasizes that many researchers work to critique this mentality: “...in relation to adults, [youth] are socially constructed as deficient, dangerous, in need of protection or caught in time. In championing the interests of youth, this work has insisted upon young people’s humanity, capacity for love and pleasure, and ability to take responsibility for their own and their partners’ bodies” (48). Despite such affirmations of youthful capacity, cultural narratives continue to frame adolescent sexuality through fear and stigma. Comparably, in the introduction to his book *The Fear of Child Sexuality* (2019), Angelides argues “that the routine public articulation of fear, anxiety, and shame in mainstream media scandals in the face of signs of childhood sexuality frequently serves a particular function: to place the agentive sexual child or adolescent under erasure” (xi). Thus, by encouraging shame and fear about childhood sexual agency, adults diminish that part of a child or adolescent’s identity.

Scholars continue to examine childhood innocence, investigating how labeling children as “innocent” reinforces rigid boundaries between childhood and adulthood. Amia Srinivasan, in her book *The Right to Sex* (2021), argues that through the lens of innocence, adults’ “[calls] to protect... are based on a fantasy of childhood that does not and never did exist—a childhood untouched by the world of adults and adult desires” (47-48). In fact, children and teens are already a part of that adult world—they can perform a search for the word “sex” on Google and see images, videos, and gifs that may then lead them to sites that are meant for people over 18.

As I have discussed, there is no distinct line to cross for children and adolescents when they move from the world of childhood into that of adulthood. This ideology of childhood innocence is, as Srinivasan explains, a “fantasy” (47). In many cases, as Angelides notes, “children’s agentic sexual subjectivities are simultaneously acknowledged and avoided (although sometimes just avoided)” (xi). And when children and teens are reduced to “tropes of innocence and immaturity” because of their age, Angelides claims that this act of reduction can be “counter

and sometimes even harmful” (xii). Take, for example, the boys in Peggy Orenstein’s interviews. Since many of them did not have conversations about sex with their parents as teens, they “turn[ed] to porn, at least in part, for sex education, even as they claim[ed] to know that its content [was] about as authentic as pro wrestling” (43). In this case, the nervousness and subsequent abdication of the responsibility of speaking to one’s child about their sexuality because an adult may deem their child to be “too young” or “too innocent” to have these conversations, leads the teens to seek out information from other sources. And if teens are turning to porn for their education about sex, then porn becomes a how-to guide, rather than a source of entertainment. In short, through an unwillingness to engage in discussion, adults perpetuate this construct of childhood innocence and the ensuing cycle of harm, where a lack of guidance leads teens to seek education in porn which then leads to misinformation about sexual health and pleasure. Gary F. Kelly, in *America’s Sexual Transformation* (2011), notes that “any hope of preserving the presumed ‘innocence’ of childhood for long, if indeed that innocence involves relative ignorance about sexuality, is mostly a vain hope” (17). There is no innocence to preserve; framing adolescent sexuality in terms of agency, rather than innocence,

acknowledges that children and teens are always active participants in learning about and negotiating their sexual lives.

Pleasure, as a guiding principle for youth sexuality, remains a critical but underdeveloped focus in American sex education, as I have been arguing. Kelly, an established sexologist and educator, argues that America's sexual transformation needs to focus on pleasure and diminish the guilt that has spread throughout American culture. He believes that America has "not yet implemented the ways to permit our youth to integrate, without guilt or self-deprecation, their perfectly normal sexual needs and behaviors into their personalities and relationships in healthy and responsible ways" (22). He lists the following questions about what needs to be done to transform how young people think about sex:

How do we help kids understand the power of sex in their lives while still feeling good about themselves? How do we begin to accept the legitimate pleasures of sex and leave old, unfair, guilts and uncertainties behind? How do we as adults manage the confusion, risks, and sexual constrictions that our own lack of good sex education has wrought?

(22)

One of the possible answers to Kelly's questions would require the transformation of the language that authors use to speak about sexuality. Current sexual manuals (such as Al Vernacchio's *For Goodness Sex* and Cara Natterson and Vanessa Croll Bennet's *This is so Awkward*¹⁶) are working towards the alteration of the language that is available about sex that

¹⁶ In this contemporary manual, each chapter explores the topic at hand (i.e. porn) from a scientific perspective before moving to a sociological perspective rooted in data gleaned in interviews with test subjects. The authors model a perspective that seeks to balance scientific and sociological information, responding to outdated approaches from the past.

Kelly imagines youth. Unlike other sexual health manuals for teens under study in this chapter, Kelly clearly states his hopes that parents and educators will raise considerate humans who “care about what kind of people they are and hope to be good partners and parents in the future” if that is what they choose to do (124). He reinforces that no one is perfect or “entirely sure of themselves” and that even though “the relationship between sex and love is complex and confusing... [this relationship] can be one of the most pleasurable and moving aspects of their lives” (124).

If contemporary sex education struggles to affirm the pleasures of sex, it also inherits a long history of policing childhood sexuality through extreme and often harmful interventions. In their work on childhood sexuality, R. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes write that they believe, “once sexuality is realized in the body of a child it becomes cause for concern and adult intervention. As a result, the only viable outcome becomes adults taking action in the child’s best interests” (391). A disturbing example of acting in a “child’s best interest” is an account that Gayle Rubin provides in a footnote in *Thinking Sex* about nineteenth-century children: “to protect the young from premature arousal, [some] parents tied children down at night so they would not touch themselves; doctors excised the clitorises of onanistic little girls” (2196). Rubin’s example highlights the preoccupation and extraordinary actions adults performed to control young people’s sexuality, and the damage that subsequently provoked (i.e., the child’s memories of being tied down at night, and the physical mutilation of the clitoris). Together, these examples illustrate how adult anxieties about childhood sexuality have historically justified extreme interventions, shaping a legacy in which children’s sexual experiences are policed rather than understood.

Another example of this method intended to “protect” children would be Valenti’s own account in *The Purity Myth*, a journalistic memoir that includes her experience as a teenager in high school. When her mother discovered a used condom wrapper, she “remarked that if [she] kept having sex, no one would want to marry [her]” (18). Valenti’s mother denied what she said for years, but then “finally sheepishly apologized” (18). At the time, her mother most likely believed that she was acting in her daughter’s best interest, that she was intervening in her child’s life to protect her from getting hurt emotionally/physically or becoming promiscuous. But this approach only made Valenti feel “no longer ‘good’” (18), as she described it. Because her mother saw her sexuality as being out of control, Valenti was no longer perceived as innocent, just as the nineteenth-century onanistic little girls were perceived to be “abnormal” in the eyes of their parents and doctors because of their “inappropriate” behaviour. Although these accounts may seem unique, they represent a larger conversation about child sexuality, and the accompanying feelings of shame and guilt, feelings that many of the sex-positive writers in this chapter are attempting to counter. Winks and Semans, for example, support the healthy development of childhood sexuality:

Anyone who remembers masturbating or playing doctor as a child knows that children are sexual beings. Unfortunately, many adults mistakenly view children as sexless, so when a child demonstrates delight in his or her body or feelings, adults respond with anxiety or suspicion. This stems in part from Puritan notions that innocence is a sexless state, but also from a tendency to project adult sexual feelings onto children. While children don't necessarily masturbate or look at naked people with the same intentions as adults, they do touch themselves because it is pleasurable, and they do look because

they're curious. Too often these typical manifestations of child sexuality make adults uncomfortable at best and fearful at worst. (42)

Winks and Semans note that adults are “uncomfortable” with their child as a sexual being. Moreover, this fear may stem from a parent worrying that their child would act on their sexual urges, and that they might start to have sex earlier than their parent would hope for them.

In their self-help text for parents, *Everybody's Doing It* (1993), American authors Andrea Warren and Jay Wiedenkiller write about their anxiety when their 16-year-old daughter, Alex, started to have sex. They did their best to prevent her from seeing the boyfriend that they did not approve of, but ultimately, Alex needed the space in which to work through her own feelings. Warren and Wiedenkiller asked Alex to write them a letter about what she needed from them, and she expressed the following thoughts:

... as soon as you found out, you acted like it was your body, your responsibility, and definitely your conscience. You always said I could talk to you about sex, but I knew if I tried, you would flip... You thought the only way for things to get better was for me to go back to being an innocent 14-year-old. But people change. (196-97)

In this example, Alex had to work against her parents' discomfort and their fear that she would get pregnant, contract an infection, etc. because she was in an intimate relationship. What becomes clear in Alex's letter is that Alex has grown and has decided to experience her sexual world, and that her parents are uncomfortable with this change. By including Alex's letter and responding thoughtfully, the authors highlight her agency, demonstrating that teens can navigate their sexual lives actively, even in the face of adult discomfort and intervention.

Alex's experience illustrates a tension that extends beyond the individual family: parental discomfort with adolescent sexuality is not only personal but culturally shaped. Because this project examines predominantly Western¹⁷ texts, it is important to note that different cultures within this category hold contrasting beliefs about sex and adolescence. For example, in Amy T. Schalet's 2011 study that compares American and Dutch parental attitudes toward teen sleepovers with sexual partners, Schalet reports that Americans were more likely to say no, while Dutch parents were more likely to "engage in a cultural process of normalization," attempting to teach their children about sexual readiness, so that they could self-regulate when they decided they were ready (17). This does not mean that all Dutch parents are permissive or that all American parents are restrictive, but rather that the broader cultural scripts differ. These differences illustrate how these cultural scripts shape parental approaches to adolescent sexuality: in the U.S., the script emphasizes protection and restriction, framing teens as needing oversight, whereas in the Netherlands the script emphasizes autonomy and trust, framing teens as capable of self-regulation and responsible decision-making. According to Egan and Hawkes' research, American parents tend to "protect" their children more intensely and would disallow the sleepover to curb any possibility of sexual relations in their home and therefore in their children's lives, whereas Dutch parents are more likely to encourage sexual autonomy. Another key difference is that "unlike their American counterparts, who are often skeptical about teenagers' capacities to fall in love, [Dutch adults] assume that even those in their early teens

¹⁷ For the purpose of my project, countries considered a part of Western civilization include "Europe as well as any countries whose cultures are strongly influenced by European values or whose populations include many people descended from European colonists—for example Australia, New Zealand, and most countries in North and South America" ("Western Countries 2024" par. 2).

do so” (17). However, not all parents are comfortable with the sleepover prospect, Dutch or American.

Parental squeamishness about sex, and/or their readiness to acknowledge their children as sexual beings, can perhaps help to explain how a term like “virgin” remains a popular noun to designate a person who has yet to be “involved with another person’s body with the purpose of achieving sexual pleasure” (Vernacchio 189). In *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality* (2013), Lydia Kokkola writes that “Anglophone society regards [first having sex] as a life changing experience: ‘the loss of virginity’, ‘popping the cherry’, ‘the end of innocence’ and so on. These expressions signal an activity that is a one-off event that does not allow for a return to a pre-sex state” (8). For many parents, the idea that their children are moving from a “pre-sex state” to one where they are sexually active is an uncomfortable realization. Natterson and Bennett explain, “Many adults tell us they feel completely at home with only half of this [sexual health] conversation; some describe being raised in families where the topic of sex was forbidden, leaving them overwhelmed on both fronts all these years later” (212). Natterson and Bennett’s *This Is So Awkward: Modern Puberty Explained* (2023) is certainly working to be more inclusive, to give sexual agency to their teen readers and to open the minds of parent readers as well. The authors use a conversational style and structure in each chapter, which follows a consistent format throughout the text: beginning with a science-based section, a “what’s changed over the past 20, 30, 40 years” segment, it then moves into a “how to talk about it” section that equips parents with language to discuss a particular topic with their children, and concludes with a final portion that features testimonies by young adults for teens to read directly. These personal accounts provide teens with concrete, relatable perspectives, enhancing their understanding of

the subject matter. Overall this text overall addresses more contemporary topics such as mental health (154), “youth sports overspecialization” (194), and “hookup culture and porn” (211) in comparison to texts from the past (like Madaras and Madaras’ *The “What’s Happening to My Body?” Book for Boys*), with more inclusive language that they include to encourage parents and young readers to employ a more sex-affirmative lexicon. For example, Natterson and Bennett explain that the purpose of the book is “to define the new normal and offer language for some of the hundreds of tiny conversations that have replaced The Talk of yore” (x). Because puberty “starts younger, takes longer, and unfurls with social media and cell phones in the mix... what used to be a sometimes painful and sometimes laughable but mostly cringey middle school dash has become a slog lasting many years” (ix). In their purview, puberty and the experiences entailed in the process are ongoing; the authors offer new types of symbolic language to use in these ongoing conversations. For instance, in their chapter “Sex, Hookup Culture, and Porn,” the authors discuss how the “linear path” of the sexual “bases”¹⁸ is now outdated. Instead, they propose a new image: “Today’s hookup culture has almost no linearity—the steps through sexual exploration can feel less like a game of baseball and more like Mr. Potato Head, with different pieces placed in unexpected spots, his mouth sitting where his ear should be” (216). This simile reflects how teen sexual experiences today often defy culturally enforced scripts, even the time-worn baseball metaphor. Natterson and Bennett emphasize instead the fluidity and variability in teen sexual encounters, conditions that can feel destabilizing for adults accustomed to more conventional models.

¹⁸ I go into more detail about these metaphorical bases later in this chapter. The popular baseball metaphor regarding sex includes, for example, first base as kissing and a home run as having penetrative sex.

Another technique that adults employ to keep teens away from exploring their sexual selves is by encouraging a fear of losing their innocence and, by extension, a worry about being perceived as promiscuous. Jill Nagle speaks to this trouble by coining the phrase “compulsory virtue”¹⁹ which emphasizes the good girl/whore binary, and demands that girls and women abide by proper behaviour so that they are not mistaken for whores (Nagle 5). In a contemporary context, compulsory virtue could possibly include abstaining from having sex with multiple partners to avoid being considered a whore. The worry over teenage girls being considered “whores” if they dress a certain way or start to have sex is a part of an old tradition that attempts to keep women pure and that curtails their power (Nagowski 156).

A young person’s apprehension about starting to have sex dovetails with the “slut anxiety” that is part of contemporary patriarchal culture. “Slut anxiety” occurs, mostly in heterosexual contexts, when a teenage girl is oppressed by a nervousness about the potentially negative impacts of having sex, i.e. of not being accepted by their parents, of being judged by their peers, or of being labeled promiscuous. One of the ways to avoid this label is to refuse to participate in sexual activity and to uphold this “compulsory virtue,” remaining sexually inexperienced. “Compulsory virtue” and “slut anxiety” are topics discussed in the teenage sexual manuals under examination in this chapter and in the fictional young adult novels in Chapter Two of this project. In his sexual manual, for example, Vernacchio tells of one of his students who asked him how to “*face your classmates after someone called you a slut on*

¹⁹ Nagle adapts theorist Adrienne Rich’s term “compulsory heterosexuality” which roots itself in its own binary of lesbianism/heterosexuality, signalling that women must be heterosexual and abide by heterosexual rules or else they will be seen as “dykes” (5). Both compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory virtue are entrenched in value judgments that limit agency.

Facebook” (8, emphasis in original?). In fiction too, characters worry about being labeled a slut; in Melvin Burgess’ YA novel *Doing It* (2003), one of the characters asks, “How could you say that someone was a slut if they were kind to you and happy to be with you?” (103). Sluttiness is a label that speaks not only about someone’s sexuality, but also about the person’s moral character. Both examples indicate that teens worry about being labelled as promiscuous, an effect of the current socio-cultural teachings of sexuality.

This fear-based conditioning works to limit the sexual agency of teens, particularly girls, by controlling how they are permitted to express sexual desire. Yet, authors of contemporary sex manuals attempt to push back against this negative conditioning and support teen sexual agency through masturbation, which is a private and self-directed form of sexual exploration. By advocating for masturbation, these texts offer teens a model of sexuality not rooted in relational sex, but in bodily autonomy, as argued in the next section.

The Advocacy of Agency Via Masturbation

Each of the contemporary writers studied in this chapter includes a section on masturbation in their texts, and for the most part, these sections encourage the agentic teenager to explore the intimate parts of themselves. Egan and Hawkes write specifically about the agentic child, arguing that children are sexual citizens and that this should be an accepted ideal known inside and outside the home. They maintain “that the private sphere should not and cannot be the only space for promoting the sexual agency of children. Placing the recognition of children as sexual agents outside the home requires the creation of a more social theoretical approach to the issue. Children’s sexual agency should not be a private affair” (396). For Egan and Hawkes, the sexuality of a young person is not a private issue; instead, they

advocate for policies, literature, even the way people speak about sex as needing to change to help children assume agency over their own bodies (396). This shift is made by choosing language that supports children as sexual agents, pushing aside “fear and anxiety” to acknowledge that there are some children who, for example, masturbate. Egan and Hawkes caution that using “proscriptive terms,” such as “healthy,” “normal,” and “proper,” only brings into question what assumptions these words connote. (For example, the writers of *The Pleasure Project* suggest that, instead of using the word “promiscuity,” one might use the phrase “having more partners” (117), as promiscuity has a negative connotation). Fascinatingly, some of these sexual manuals, such as Heather Corinna’s *S.E.X: The-All-You-Need-To-Know Sexuality Guide* (2016), acknowledge that masturbation is the first sexual act that a child or teenager can take that solidifies that their body is theirs and does not “belong” to their parents; through the act of masturbation they come to have agency over their bodies (84-85). However, as I have discovered in the language that the authors utilize, this shift is still rooted in power dynamics that govern the relationships parents have with their young people.

We see the complexity of parent-child relationships in Tara Roberts’ edited collection of memoirs written exclusively by writers of colour, *What your mama never told you: true stories about sex and love* (2007). The individual authors’ stories about sex and intimacy are directed at teens and emphasize teen agency. Advertised as “big sisters sharing their secrets,” Roberts begins with a poetic declaration in her introduction:

We exorcise shame and guilt from our vocabularies and reclaim the pieces of our sexuality that have been locked away. And we declare in big, roaring voices that you have a right to know your body intimately, fully, and unapologetically, and that you

should be encouraged to savour every crevice, every delicate fold, every delicious smell.

(xii)

This opening makes a powerful appeal to teens to move away from feeling shame and guilt about their sexuality, and to work towards accepting their sexual bodies. Roberts' collection works to confirm that teens have agency, and that this agency can start with first knowing themselves fully through the act of masturbation. Likewise, Heather Corinna supports young adult agency by including necessary statements about fantasy and desire, encouraging sexual agency in thought as well. Corinna writes, "*All* fantasy is okay because it only takes place in our head... Thoughts are not actions and do not somehow make us act on them just because we have them" (84). Corinna notes that some people "may fantasize about being with someone incredibly inappropriate or dangerous, about being raped, about sex with a family member, or about sexually manipulating someone. No matter what your fantasy, it's not going to be a problem as long as you understand the difference between fantasy and reality and don't get all hung up about it" (84). Corinna's discussion is striking because it validates fantasies that would be considered unacceptable, dangerous, or criminal in reality. Her approach does not fully remove the binaries of "good" and "bad," but it repositions teens as agents capable of distinguishing thought from action, showing that moral judgment applies to behaviour, not cognition. In this way, her text affirms sexual agency by giving young people permission to explore and reflect on their inner desires without shame, while maintaining a clear boundary between fantasy and ethical conduct. For Corinna, a young person's body and sexuality is their own (85); in their text, they make sexuality a powerful part of one's identity and confirm that it's never "too late" for "self-love" (85).

Just as Corinna affirms the legitimacy of fantasy as a space for teens to exercise sexual agency, contemporary sexual manuals highlight masturbation as a concrete practice through which young people can learn about their bodies, desires, and boundaries while challenging social stigma around solo sex. Corinna, for example, challenges negative cultural associations about masturbation: “In general, a sexually satisfied person—and most people who are happily masturbating are—is not a loser. People with partners masturbate; people without partners masturbate” (82). Masturbation is a valid form of sexual satisfaction, as they argue. Similarly, Vernacchio and Hasler position masturbation as beneficial for stress relief and as a foundation for future sexual communication (Vernacchio 183); Hasler calls masturbation “the greatest love of all,” highlighting, like Vernacchio, that masturbation helps with stress and prepares individuals for future communication with a partner (47), and suggests that understanding one’s own pleasure is central to sexual agency. Hasler also addresses the fact that media often portrays masturbation as “a big joke” as the masturbating character is frequently represented as either a “total dork or freak” (48). In response to these negative portrayals, Hasler encourages a reader to “feel free to poke, stroke, tap, and wiggle in whatever ways you would like until you discover what feels the best to you... The only real rule is: Do whatever feels good” (50). Like Corinna, Hasler legitimizes sexual fantasies, normalizing that having “nothing like reality” thoughts are more than okay; one of her examples is “the Phantom of the Opera kidnapping you and doing naughty things to you in his lair” (53). While Corinna and Hasler work to normalize fantasy and masturbation, they do so by using derogatory terms such as “naughty” or “inappropriate.” These words, though reframed as acceptable in the context of fantasy, retain their moral and cultural resonance, signaling that the ideas remain socially transgressive. This

approach may be strategic: by acknowledging the “forbidden” or risky aspects of sexual thoughts and behaviours, these texts engage with the appeal of the taboo while guiding teens to explore sexuality safely and reflectively. In this way, the authors both legitimize agency and maintain a sense of the dangerous or exciting side of sexuality, rather than fully erasing the good/bad binary.

Unfortunately, despite attempts to normalize masturbation and fantasy, the need for this effort points to a lingering cultural discomfort in America. The authors of these sex manuals clearly state that masturbation is normal, whether one chooses to self-pleasure or not, yet this insistence that masturbation is a healthy, “normal” action confirms that many readers may still think that it is a dirty or sinful thing to do. In *It Doesn't Have to be Awkward* (2021) (which she co-authored with her father, Dr. Drew Pinsky), Paulina Pinsky encourages the reader to **“Go masturbate! I know, I’m going to upset some adults with that statement. But really, masturbation is a key part of knowing your body. You should never feel shame for it”** (269).²⁰

Whereas the Pinskys encourage teens to masturbate, Jane Fonda refers to the anxiety that masturbation can bring, although she ultimately confirms that masturbation is harmless: “Not all people masturbate and your family may not approve, so you need to be sensitive to their feelings. But you (and they) need to know that there is absolutely no medical evidence that masturbation can cause mental or physical damage!” (117). Interestingly, Fonda’s language is ambivalent. While she ultimately reassures teens that masturbation is harmless, she also instructs them to “be sensitive” to their family’s feelings, implying that familial approval remains a relevant concern. This caveat introduces a subtle tension: while the text affirms teen sexual

²⁰ In their book, Dr. Drew Pinsky’s comments are in regular font while Paulina Pinsky writes in bolded font.

agency by normalizing masturbation, it simultaneously acknowledges and defers to adult authority, suggesting that exercising agency may still require negotiation with social or familial expectations. In this way, Fonda both validates masturbation and highlights the lingering cultural anxieties such as “compulsory virtue” or “slut anxiety” that teens must navigate.

The lack of celebration of a young person’s growth into their sexual selves is not uncommon, especially in a Western context, as most parents are hesitant to recognize their children as sexual beings. Hasler, in *Sex: An Uncensored Introduction* (2015), writes that parents feel anxiety about their children, initially when they run around on the playground and eventually when they start to contemplate sex: “They will worry about you contracting an STI, getting pregnant, and having your heart broken. Some will even worry about what God or the neighbors think. Regardless of what exactly they worry about, they worry, and they don't stop worrying. That's their job, they just don't get paid for it” (160). Here, Hasler emphasizes that parents will feel a range of emotions if/when their child starts exploring their sexuality. The text does not articulate that it is not a child’s responsibility to take that worry away from their parents or to shoulder that anxiety. Even Vernacchio, whose book is sex-supportive—as he encourages parents to consider their teens as sexual beings (not sexually active necessarily, but as humans discovering their sexualities)—includes varying information about self-pleasure. For example, Vernacchio does not specifically advise teens to masturbate, unlike Pinsky above. Vernacchio, clarifies, “I’m not suggesting you direct your son or daughter: ‘Go to your room, fantasize, and pleasure yourself.’ That would be way outside most parents’ and kids’ comfort zones. And certainly I, as a sexuality educator, would never say that to a kid” (187). On the other hand, he does encourage his female students “to go home and get a mirror” so that they can

examine their vulvas and “[get] to know the sensitivity... what parts respond best to touch? What’s too much sensation?” (180). Although he clarifies that “there’s no shame in a teenager examining herself and learning about her body” (180), masturbation remains a difficult topic, even among sex educators. While few parents will advise their child to masturbate or to have sex with someone, these sexual manuals show how to initiate conversations about these topics. For the most part, these critical resources about textual sexual education generally support the agency of teens, giving them the information to remove the stigma about masturbation and encouraging them to explore their bodies. Porn, however, is a different matter, as the section below clarifies.

Porn as Sexual Entertainment, not Sex Ed

In *This is so Awkward*, Natterson and Bennett report that “the average age for first porn viewing is 12 years old among boys; girls are not far behind... Most people who work in porn education estimate that by the senior year of high school, 85 to 95 percent of teens have been exposed” (218). Many teens turn to porn, or what Corinna calls “sexual entertainment” (128), to learn about sex. But just as romantic comedies are not meant to be blueprints for how to fall in love, porn is not a how-to sex guide for its viewers and readers. Corinna defines pornography as “any material that is used or intended to arouse sexual desire in people. Although many people use the word *pornography* to refer only to explicit visual material—such as photos, illustrations, and videos—pornography can also be textual or performed” (128, author’s emphasis).²¹

²¹ In Chapter 3, I explore audio erotica, which is aural storytelling with an emphasis to increase sexual desire in the listener. In “Distinct Emotional and Cardiac Responses to Audio Erotica between Genders” (2023), Gao et al. use the terms visual erotica and audio erotica; I use the term porn for visual, filmic sexual content.

Interestingly, Vernacchio, Hasler, Srinivasan, Orenstein, Pinsky and Pinsky all include commentary about porn, but deal with it quite differently. Srinivasan's book includes the testimonial of a porn star named Stoya, who shares that she "didn't want the responsibility of shaping young minds. And yet, thanks to this country's [America's] non-functional sex education system and the ubiquitous access to porn by anyone with an internet connection, [she has] that responsibility anyway" (47). Indeed, Stoya sometimes loses sleep, as she puts it, because of this responsibility. Srinivasan's students echo Stoya's sentiments: "they blame inadequate sex education for the authority that porn wields over them and their lives. In their view, porn has the power to teach them the truth about sex not because the state has failed to legislate, but because the state has failed in its basic responsibility to educate" (62). Similarly, in *Boys and Sex*, Orenstein found that boys wished an adult had spoken to them about porn, as many experienced it as "damaging" (52). For instance, one interviewee, Mason, described porn use as becoming "a compulsion" (51); he would watch it secretly in the back seat of the car, even with his mother present. Orenstein observes that while it was unclear whether the "porn obsession itself [was] the primary issue or a preexisting personality trait... what was important, though, and consistent, was that [the boys she interviewed] believed porn had been damaging in ways that no adult had ever discussed with them" (52). Taken together, these texts reveal how authors address pornography and highlight the content gaps in sex education, particularly the lack of adult guidance about the realities and limitations of porn.

Although not a teen read, *Want Me* (2021) is a memoir that describes one person's navigation of her own sexuality, especially in relation to porn. When she was a teen, sex writer Tracy Clark-Flory turned to porn to learn about sex. Although her parents had told her that "sex

was a beautiful and spiritual act that took place between two loving and equal adults... [her] dad would describe it as ‘two star systems colliding in outer space.’... at school, the message was presented differently” (13). She observed that the school’s approach to sex was to focus more on the sexual reproduction system than anything else. Clark-Flory would eventually find her father’s porn on his computer and establish a successful career writing about sex, working towards the creation of optimistic narratives. Now writing in her late thirties, she affirms that porn “provided [her] with personas to try on, awakened [her] own fantasies, and sparked an appreciation for the glittering range of human sexuality” (277). Clark-Flory balances the positives of her learning experience with the reality of some of the material. Keeping in mind that male “perspectives and pleasures” fuel the creation of porn and that ultimately porn is a capitalistic business, she found “pockets of the industry that spoke more comprehensively to [her]” (277). These “pockets” included porn sites of the indie, feminist, queer, and kink variety (78), which taught her, for example, “that giving a blow job could be an erotic, instead of obligatory, experience—and that a man could feel the same about going down on a woman” (79). The emphasis here is on pleasure, on sex where both partners are “mutually enthusiastic” about sex, and that sex “could be creative, fun, theatrical” (79). In effect, Clark-Flory’s book is a multi-layered reflection on porn, from an adult who experienced the erotic fantasy world to find what fits for her. Her book proves that porn’s omnipotence is not only due to its economic value in the industry, but also to the pleasurable value that it brings as well. As Srinivasan notes, “Whatever the law says, porn is going to be made [sic] bought, and sold” (62). And because it is being made and sold, the importance underlined in these writers’ works is that although porn is not meant to be educational, it undoubtedly is, in some capacity. “Although it is not the

medium's rightful responsibility," Clark-Flory asserts, "porn is teaching people—young people, especially—about sex" (169).

Critics are divided about the effects of porn on young people in particular, and there is still little empirical research that has been done about this topic. Although "adolescent porn watching has been linked to 'gender stereotypical beliefs' and 'greater experiences with casual sex'... a 2019 study found no significant relationship between adolescent porn watching and psychological well-being over time" (Clark-Flory 169). In their study "Adolescents and Pornography: A Review of 20 Years of Research" (2016), Jochen Peter and Patti M. Valkenburg report that while some scholars have found that there is no "clear result" about whether porn affects "adolescents' sexual attitudes and behaviours," other researchers see a negative association (509). Peter and Valkenburg acknowledge that the research they examine "tends to have a negativity bias, focusing primarily on the risks and dangers of adolescents' pornography use rather than on opportunities and potential positive implications of pornography use, such as sexual pleasure" (527). Evidently, as their research proves, education about porn focuses on the negative impacts on young people, rather than noting the "potential positive[s]" of teens using porn to learn more about sexuality. This is an avenue of inquiry that goes undervalued, as I show in my participatory research in Chapter Three. In thinking about viewership alone, *MediaSmarts* records that in 2014, "35% of students in Grade 11 have looked for pornography online" ("Pornography-Overview" par. 5). Although there is minimal data about teen viewership, the studies that are available make it clear that the viewing/consumption of porn is trending upwards in terms of being societally accepted by adults. Andrew Dugan, at American analytics company *Gallup*, reports that in 2018, 43% of Americans believed that porn was "morally

acceptable,” and confirms that this statistic has been on the rise since 2011 (par. 1-4). Though there is an ongoing attempt by a Utah-based campaign called Fight the New Drug to label porn as an addictive drug,²² a group of sex educators (ranging from educators in sex therapy and social work), argue that porn does not affect the brain in the same biological way as a drug does. Parker and her colleagues, for example, oppose the idea that porn acts as a drug, using scientific study:

Claiming that pornography affects the brain ‘like a drug’ and that ‘cutting back can lead to withdrawal symptoms’ is false. Drugs introduce chemicals into the brain. There is not a single study that demonstrates what neurochemicals are released in the brain when watching porn, nor that these neurochemicals are any different from those released while eating chocolate or watching football. (par. 5)

The group ultimately promotes that students should learn “about the positive and negative aspects of porn” (Parker et al., par. 9).

Likewise, Peggy Orenstein’s *Boys and Sex* speaks directly about how American boys engage with sex, and her interviews with young adults support the claims of teens having “negative associations” with porn. For Orenstein, sites (like Pornhub) shape “young people’s erotic imaginations... long before they’ve engaged in so much as a good-night kiss” (43). Orenstein questions what “impact [porn] may have on desire, arousal, behaviour, sexual ethics, and [boys’] understanding of gender, race, and power in sexual expression” (43). Scientifically, the impact porn has on the above factors is still not clear, but the prevalence of porn watching

²² Fight the New Drug uses tobacco addiction as an example of addiction to prove that porn has the same effect on the brain. They argue that both tobacco and porn light up the reward center in the brain, making the user want more. See: fightthenewdrug.org/how-porn-can-affect-the-brain-like-a-drug

among young people confirms that because of gaps in their sexual education, many teens are turning to porn as a form of sex instruction. There are inherent difficulties to this. For example, if a teen were to watch videos with women having multiple orgasms in under five minutes, they might believe that this was real and then attempt in their own intimate relationships to have sex the way they see on screen. The flaws of this approach are obvious: the scenarios in porn are not “realistic” per se. They are governed by requirements of the entertainment industry and the creating team’s creation of particular “fantasies.” Instead of attempting to vilify the porn genre, sex educators (such as Heather Corinna) suggest that comprehensive information should be made available to teens so that they can understand the broad effects of porn usage and make their own informed decisions about their viewership.

For some, the private act of self-pleasure and the distance allowed in the visual consumption that one experiences while viewing porn can be appealing, which is a reason why this genre continues to be popular. Orenstein writes, “Porn never rejects you, never makes demands of you, never wants you to talk about your feelings” (*Boys and Sex* 49). Porn offers safety and exploration from a distance. Orenstein sees porn as potentially protecting the viewer and keeping them emotionally safe from real-world rejection (49); Clark-Flory focuses more on how porn lets her interrogate certain social and political problems from a “comfortable distance” (80). Clark-Flory can write that because she is actively self-reflective, but what about the teens who do not have her vocabulary or experience to do so? Gender relations, the portrayal of race and power dynamics in intercourse, as represented in porn, are topics that can go unaddressed with young people, as shown in *Boys and Sex*, for example. In her article “The U.S. Will Never Ban Porn,” journalist Christina Cauterucci responds to anti-porn activists who

preach that porn is “bad for women” (par. 1). She argues that porn actually has the ability, if produced by women and trans people, to provide teenagers with healthy visual examples of sex. Cauterucci notes, “If you’ve ever wondered or heard someone ask, ‘How do lesbians have sex?’ you can imagine what a queer teenager might gain from lesbian porn made for and by women and trans people” (par. 9). For Cauterucci, porn produced by women and trans creators can offer healthier representations of sex than the mainstream industry typically provides. Porn watching may be problematic if people are viewing from a distance, in private, without the foundation of understanding the medium. Yet one of the struggles of having a healthy relationship with porn is due to the stigma that persists around the topic.

Take, for instance, the twentieth-century sex manuals under investigation in this chapter, which, apart from *The Joy of Sex*, barely discuss porn. In their revised edition of *The What’s Happening to My Body? Book for Boys* (2000) by Lynda Madaras and Area Madaras, originally published in 1983, the authors do not include information about pornography, even though pornographic films had become widely available in video stores, cinemas, and online, with the porn industry thriving as a “hugely lucrative online venture,” as journalist Michael Brooks reported in *The Guardian* (par. 9). Although Madaras and Madaras include information about masturbation (153) and fantasy (157), porn is not addressed. In *The Joy of Sex*, however, there is a notable shift in terminology: the first edition used the term “pornography” but in the second, the author explains that he now employs the term “erotica” because of how highly available it had become at the time of publishing (in 2000). The author does not distinguish a definition difference between porn and erotica. The *Reader’s Digest Guide to Love and Sex* (1998), which is also a text for adults, notes that “erotica portrays sexual activity in a subtle and sensitive

manner and has, or aspires to, some artistic and literary merit” (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn 73). I find that porn and erotica are often used synonymously, yet the difference is palpable. In *S.E.X.*, Corinna dedicates a section of their sexual entertainment section to defining the difference between erotica and porn:

Sometimes, media or material intended to sexually arouse people is called *erotica* instead of porn. Often, things classified this way are less sexually or visually explicit than, for instance, what you might think of as *hard-core* porn, or they may aim to be more subtle, artistic, or literary. Some people define erotica as suggestive, and porn as directive. Some people say that’s a bunch of hooey, and *erotica* is just a word people use because they don’t want to call their porn what it is. (I propose both schools of thought are right sometimes and wrong other times). (129)

Here, Corinna confirms that the differentiation between porn and erotica is often particular to the person. Ultimately, these words—porn or erotica—simply represent material meant to arouse the user, while Corinna insists that it is up to the user (“you”) to decide whether they partake in erotica or porn (133). While Corinna encourages free choice with vocabulary, it is important to consider that this emphasis on personal interpretation may be complicated in different social settings. For example, a parent may feel that their young teen reading erotica is the same as engaging with porn. For the purposes of this dissertation, I use “erotica” and “porn” as analytically distinct terms, while acknowledging their frequent overlap in popular discourse. I define erotica as sexually explicit material that relies on language through imagination and narrative to evoke arousal. By contrast, I use porn to refer primarily to visual media designed explicitly for sexual stimulation, where arousal is generated through graphic representation

rather than narrative development. This distinction allows me to examine how YA texts engage with sexual content differently depending on whether desire is mediated within the texts through narrative forms (as in *Loveless* where the main character reads fan fiction to masturbate) or through visual consumption (as in John Green's *Looking for Alaska*).

In the contemporary sex manuals explored in this chapter, such as *It Doesn't Have to Be Awkward*, there is an emphasis that porn is a performance and that the material does not translate to real life. Dr. Drew Pinsky and Paulina Pinsky first emphasize the fantasy nature of porn, clarifying that it is a "performance" and an "accessible resource... but the physical features and mechanics of sex scenes are not representative of real life, with all its imperfections and emotions. Your sexual relationships are not scenes in a movie and you are not actors!" (272). The Pinskys do not deny that teens are watching porn and may use it for pleasure or for information, but seek to emphasize that porn is not grounded in realism. Jane Fonda also reinforces the cinematic qualities of porn and cautions viewers to interrogate what it is showing the viewer: "If, by some chance, you do watch porn, try to remember that it is not real, not a documentary. There is a script and editing... Step back from mainstream media and see which are the good parts and which are not. Doing this is sort of like getting vaccinated against the negative parts of the culture" (29). Fonda's comparison here highlights the importance of teen agency, and also raises an unresolved question about how young viewers are meant to distinguish between what she calls the "good parts" of porn and its "negative" or "adverse elements." While Fonda does not explicitly define these categories, her language suggests that "good parts" may include the acknowledgment of desire whereas the "adverse elements" refer to porn's frequent reliance on sexism, racism, unrealistic bodies, power imbalances, and

scripted performances that prioritize spectacle. Importantly, Fonda's vaccination simile does not require teens to reject porn completely but rather asks them to adopt a critical stance toward it.

A select number of these sexual health manuals work to destigmatize sexual entertainment and porn. Hasler, in both of her books, makes it clear that consuming pornography is not something to be ashamed of, which contradicts the prominent assumption that watching porn makes you a "creep" (163). In *Sex: A Book for Teens* (2010), she addresses the taboo nature of porn directly—"There's a lot of stigma about porn being bad for you, that it will warp your sexual perspective or turn you into a creep, but that's not necessarily the case" (163). In response, she asserts that watching porn "can be a healthy habit as long as you are not overusing it (watching it all the time)" (163-64).²³ Overusing porn could lead to several issues, as the authors of *This is So Awkward* argue; Natterson and Bennett do suggest that becoming dependent on porn to masturbate may trigger dependency, most often in boys and men. Potential problems with "porn addiction" can include "erectile dysfunction, inability to orgasm without porn, disconnection from real-life partners, and a need for more and more extreme versions of visual stimulation" (228). The two do clarify that "Everyone deserves to know certain parts of the body feel good when touched [and that] there is nothing wrong with masturbation" (228). The authors encourage parents to have different conversations with their kids, without judgement, and include conversations about why porn is concerning and how porn affects body

²³ Alarcón et al. describe the overuse of online pornography as being associated with "financial, legal, occupational, and relationship trouble," and define it as encompassing "feelings of loss of control and persistent use despite these adverse results" (par. 8).

image (227).²⁴ Similarly, Hasler notes that porn is a capitalistic enterprise, and she addresses the unrealistic expectations that young viewers can come to about the performers' body types:

... it is important to understand that your partner is probably not going to look that buff or skinny (and be so waxed and hair-free!). (A lot of plastic surgery, makeup, and retouching goes into making mainstream porn actors look the way they do, and you should love your partner's body for the way that it looks naturally). (163-64)

By highlighting that porn is a capitalistic enterprise, Hasler points to the fact that sexual entertainment is produced with commercial incentives in mind; this is a medium where fantasy is profitable and so certain sexual scripts, bodies, and gender roles are recycled. Ultimately, Hasler shows that while porn is entertainment, its aims are not only for personal pleasure but are oriented in commerce. Porn, therefore, can distort the realities of what young people expect out of real-life intimacy.

Relatedly, although not speaking about pornography directly, Gary F. Kelly questions, "Why should anyone be kept from any information about human sexuality? Why don't we all have a right to learn everything we can about some sexual topic that has come to our attention? Are there things that we really shouldn't know until we've reached a certain age, and how could such a prohibition be implemented now anyway?" (17). These questions relate directly to this discussion about porn, and about sexuality and sexual experience in general. The interviewees in *Boys and Sex* express frustration because no one taught them how to navigate the porn world. What if they were told, as Hasler suggests, the following information: porn does not

²⁴ Notably, the authors do not mention erotica, but as of January 2026 there is little research on adolescent readership of erotica.

make you creepy; porn is entertainment (as opposed to a how-to video); mainstream porn, as you see on Pornhub, is mainly created by men; and porn can be healthy in moderation²⁵ (Fuller and Kleiman-Reck par. 1). These insights emphasize that access to direct information about sexual content can help adolescents approach porn (and erotica, for that matter) with more critical awareness, less shame, and more agency. Seen through a sexually agentic lens, this approach would enable young people to be equipped with a comprehensive mental toolbox to engage with sexual media responsibly and with pleasure. This outlook answers Kelly's questions by foregrounding that we do "all have a right to learn everything we can" about our sexualities, without shame (and censorship).

Finally, Heather Corinna includes a more neutral perspective on porn in their sex manual, *S.E.X.*, arguing that it is the person's choice whether to indulge in sexual entertainment or not. Corinna emphasizes that opinions can change. For example, "if your sex life includes other people, now or later, and porn is part of your sexual life or theirs, that's something you can talk about. That talking might just be a yay—like talking about porn you both like or want to explore in your sexual life together—or about hard feelings or conflicts" (133). As they mention, if the viewing of porn is an aspect of someone's sexual life, communication between or among partners would be helpful to discuss how to work it into a couple's life. Corinna relates using media, sexual or otherwise, to the "the choices we make with eating: if we eat nothing but junk food, we're going to get sick or feel like crap a lot of the time" (133). The best move is to make

²⁵ Rather than defining moderation quantitatively, psychological research characterizes "out-of-control" pornography use through users' experiences of psychological distress and a perceived lack of control over their consumption (Daspe et al. 343).

“mindful” choices, as she puts it, and “eat foods that support our well-being and health” (133). Corinna’s metaphor of porn as junk food illustrates that porn is best consumed in moderation.

Texts like Corinna’s, Hasler’s *Sex: A Book for Teens*, and Natterson and Bennett’s *This is So Awkward*, represent more contemporary and comprehensive sex manuals that work towards destigmatizing conversations about sexual entertainment and stress teen agency when adolescents are choosing whether to use porn or not. Linked together, these manuals show that discussions about pornography in sex education can model approaches that integrate critical thinking and openness to pleasure, qualities that align with broader goals of fostering sexual agency. This framing also underscores one of the central arguments of this chapter: that the language used to discuss sexual media can either reinforce shame or expand the possibilities for informed, self-directed sexual decision-making.

The Garden Made New: Contemporary Sexual Symbolism

One of the more sex-affirmative aspects of these contemporary teenage sexual manuals is their employment of new analogies with which to speak about consent and pleasure. As shown below, this movement from “hitting first base” to language that is more inclusive of all genders and identities offers young people an agentic perspective when deciding to become intimate with others. However, there are examples, as in Hasler’s text, where traditional frameworks are still used that recycle patriarchal ideologies about sexual intercourse. For example, Hasler’s first edition includes a detailed section on which “base” is which, making use of the extended baseball metaphor. As a relationship deepens, according to this time-worn metaphor, a person progressively “hits” each “base,” with the assumption that the ultimate “home run” is having penetrative sex. First base includes “kissing, usually French kissing”;

second base “can include general groping over clothing” and licking/touching breasts; third base “is all about bare genitals” which can include “fingering, mutual masturbation, and any sort of hand job” (Hasler 84). She makes it clear that for third base, “gay and lesbian couples may consider [that] to be [the] home [run]. HOME RUN! This means you scored” (84). To “score” means that someone has “oral sex, vaginal sex or anal sex” (84). This metaphorical language suggests that sex is a game, which Vernacchio argues “isn’t just sexist. It’s homophobic. It’s competitive, it’s goal-directed, and it’s unlikely to result in the development of healthy sexuality in young people. It’s also just plain negative... There’s nothing in the baseball model about pleasure or intimacy or love” (54). Vernacchio’s critique of the baseball metaphor draws attention to these limitations, particularly its tendency to frame sex as competitive and outcome driven. However, the metaphor is not entirely devoid of pleasure or intimacy; games are played for enjoyment, and the thrill of “scoring” can mirror the excitement of sexual discovery. What the metaphor lacks, rather, is a language for negotiation, consent, and emotional connection, elements that do not map easily onto a model built around winning. In this way, the continued reliance on the baseball metaphor reveals the tension between emerging sex-positive frameworks and the persistence of familiar cultural scripts that shape how sexuality is imagined and explained.

Vernacchio prefers his own metaphor, which he calls the pizza method: “Unlike baseball, whose schedule and rules are dictated from the outside, you have pizza when *you* want pizza. You eat it because you’re in the mood for it... That ability to make a deliberate decision about our desire is a huge factor in developing healthy sexuality” (55). The pizza method is not a game, but rather a “shared experience” because a person wants someone who also has a

craving for pizza. And when that person orders pizza, “You talk about it. You talk about what you want; you talk about what they want; you may even negotiate” (55). He then goes on to suggest that while some participants might want pepperoni, others might want mushrooms (55-56), suggesting that different people have varying sexual preferences. The pizza metaphor thus offers a contemporary revision in framing how moving from one sexual activity to another type of activity is more about desire and choice, rather than competitive play, which suggests that sex is a game someone must win. This transformation in metaphorical language, from the baseball to pizza metaphor, presents more agentive language for teens to use to make “deliberate,” active choices in their sex lives.

Vernacchio’s pizza metaphor underscores the importance of desire, fantasy, and pleasure. While some people may enjoy oral or anal sex (or pizza!), the metaphor suggests, others may not. In her book, *Chusita Fashion Fever* remarks that “many heterosexual guys are scared about wanting to be penetrated anally [sic]” (142). She confirms that fear and worry are not necessary, that “wanting to enjoy your body by experimenting” can be a “most pleasurable experience” (142). There is no shame in this choice, *Fashion Fever* affirms, and no pressure. Mutual interest and clear communication thus form the foundation of the pizza method. This metaphorical approach is similar to Pinsky and Pinsky’s “TCB framework.” The TCB framework happens “when the people in them successfully balance a powerful trio of key ingredients: **trust, compassion, and boundaries**” (7, authors’ emphasis). These three “ingredients” resemble the pizza method as well. Trusting someone to tell you their desires and wants, being compassionate in how you respond, and making it clear what you want, all boundary-setting behaviours, are integral to healthy relationships, as they argue. These frameworks (the pizza

metaphor and the Pinskys' TCB framework), are applicable even in a casual relationship, where there does not necessarily need to be a long-term commitment, encouraging dialogue about desires and boundaries between and among all parties. And even though Fonda opines, "The goal is to wait until you have a committed relationship with a trusting partner with whom you can freely communicate" (121), there should be open communication even if there is not a committed relationship, as more recent manuals also affirm. Pinsky and Pinsky address sex without commitment in their framework:

... love isn't the only reason to have sex. And you do not have to be in a committed relationship to have sex. (And by sex, we mean not just intercourse, but anything you define as sex. It could be a super-hot make-out session with all your clothes on. The same rules still apply.) **It feels a bit scandalous telling you that. However, we don't want you to confuse casual sex with being treated poorly. Even sex with someone who is not your steady partner needs to have mutual consent, trust, compassion, and healthy boundaries as well as the spark of mutual passion. And respect. Mutual respect.** (268, authors' emphasis)

Some people, whether in a relationship or not, may have desires that they want to explore in a safe, consensual experience. The pizza method or the TCB framework provide the language for participant(s) to communicate about experiencing sex that differs from a reliance on the outdated baseball metaphor. These two frameworks thus offer a substitution to the baseball metaphor, in turn encouraging agency.

Emily Nagoski's sexual manual for adults, *Come as You Are* (2015), is also a text that offers sexual symbolism that adapts to a contemporary context and illustrates the need for

more unbiased information on sexuality. Peggy Orenstein characterizes the text “as definitely great for college students and for bright high schoolers as well” (Nagoski 1). Orenstein suggests that those “bright” young adults who are ready to learn about their relationship with their body and with other’s bodies can find answers in Nagoski’s material. In her contemporary sex manual, Nagoski acknowledges the many ways that young people learn about their bodies socially. This passage summarizes some of the societal expectations and understandings of the people she alludes to in her work:

... many of us were raised in cultures that say our own sexual bodies are disgusting and degrading, and so are the fluids, sounds, and smells those bodies make, as are a wide array of the things we might do with our own bodies and our partner’s. ‘Avoid sex! Sex is gross, as well as dangerous!’ (169)

Nagoski’s exploration here signals the expectations that American culture instills, the idea that bodies are “disgusting” and “degrading.” For Nagoski, in the “Judeo-Christian ethic, bodies are low and spirit is high, animal instincts are low and human reason is high, and very often women are low and men are high. Sex draws attention downward to the base, the animal, the contemptible, and it therefore triggers the disgust response” (168-169). Nagoski’s observation shows how cultural and religious frameworks insist that bodies are low compared to the spirit, and thus bodily desire, like sex, may trigger “disgust.” By framing sexuality as inferior, these ideals constrain sexual agency and help explain why sex-positive texts that affirm bodily pleasure and choice are necessary.

Nagoski establishes three new metaphors (the garden, brakes, and maps) to rework her readers’ ideas about sexual pleasure by moving them away from feeling disgust and

championing a reader's sexual agency. Her book is about pleasure (and is marketed towards women, interestingly), but the author states that men can use its science-based research as well. She notes that William Masters and Virginia Johnson's work on the sexual response cycle (excitement, plateau, orgasm, resolution) missed "desire" (45);²⁶ as such, desire becomes key for Nagoski. Desire must precede excitement, she reasons. Corinna's text also includes desire as preceding excitement and arousal (70). Desire occurs in the brain: she writes, "learning to recognize the contexts that increase your brain's perception of the world as a sexy place, and having skills to maximize the sexy contexts, is key to increasing your sexual satisfaction" (Corinna 77). Desire can be understood as a foundational sexual impulse that motivates an individual to pursue what they want or crave sexually. In this way, desire acts as an initial force that drives sexual agency, prompting the agent to recognize and act upon their own needs and preferences. Nagoski's reframing of sex—from being culturally constructed as disgusting to being embraced as pleasurable—empowers individuals to acknowledge their desire without shame or stigma. This validation of desire is crucial, especially given how cultural narratives often suppress or stigmatize sexual desire, particularly among young people. Thus, freely recognizing and expressing desire becomes an essential part of experiencing sexual agency, as it allows young people to take ownership of their sexuality rather than being controlled by external judgments or internalized shame.

²⁶ Masters and Johnson were an "American research team" who published *Human Sexual Response* (1966), "the first comprehensive study of the physiology and anatomy of human sexual activity under laboratory conditions—much of it the result of actual research observation of individuals engaged in sexually stimulating activity alone or with a partner... the book was a best seller and helped change people's attitudes toward sex" (par. 1-3). See: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Masters-and-Johnson>

Earlier in this chapter, I explored how the phrase “deflowered” was no longer empowering when speaking about one’s sexual debut. Nagoski also offers the analogy of a garden to speak about one’s growing sexuality. Everyone starts life with a garden, she reasons, “a unique plot of rich and fertile soil” (39). As the years go on, families and cultures plant seeds and as people reach adolescence, they start to remove what is “unwanted,” such as the weeds of a “sex negative culture full of body shaming, and thriving on our unworthiness and our negative beliefs” (39). Nagoski’s metaphor is imaginative, as it draws a reader in through symbolic language to see their brain as a fertile plot of land. Cultural ideals, negative and positive, “[sneak] under the fence and [invade] like poison ivy” (157). This simile shows that cultural ideas can get inside a person’s brain and can result in “slut anxiety” for some, for example. But like any pesky weed, with a comprehensive plan, poison ivy can be eradicated from the garden, if one decides to work on its removal, as Nagoski suggests.

In addition to the garden metaphor, Nagoski characterizes desire as having an accelerator and brakes, thus employing a vehicular metaphor: when a person’s brain experiences disgust, they hit the brakes. Desire is halted; arousal is interrupted. In contrast, when adversity is absent, and pleasure is key, one accelerates forward. This information is not clearly emphasized in the sexual manuals for teens; desire is not emphasized, outside of Corinna’s work. These figures of speech are arguably empowering as they foster agency: one can tend to a garden or decide where to “drive” their car—there is an emphasis on choice here.

Finally, Nagoski uses the image of a map to describe how one understands their sexuality. What society and parents instill and what people learn themselves through other sources such as peers or the Internet, materializes as a map that we use to navigate life. Nagoski

shares that a woman she spoke with learned everything about sex through porn, but when life was not matching up to her map, she came to believe that she was “broken” (286). Nagoski writes:

Sometimes, for some people, having a sexuality that doesn't match the map doesn't just mean you're different, it means you're a failure. A freak. 'Abnormal.' Diseased, disgusting, inadequate, all these terrible words that mean we are not normal. We tie our identities to our sexuality, our sense of whether we're a 'good woman' or a 'good girl'.
(303)

The power in Nagoski's idea of sexual scripts or maps is that people can change their maps. And while “it may be the single greatest obstacle standing between women and their own optimal sexual wellbeing” (304), to change the maps, to notice the truths and lies that one was told about their sexuality, is “so worth it, because at the end of the tunnel is the ultimate reward: you” (305). The difficult work that must be done to change the map, as Nagoski explains, is a worthwhile journey, and I argue, an agentic one because it pushes people to embrace their sexual selves.

Previously, I explored the problems with the term “virginity” and the good girl construct through Nagle's concept of compulsory virtue, which assumes that virtue is necessary to be considered a “good” girl. Similarly, Deborah L. Tolman, in *Dilemmas of Desire* (2018), highlights how American boys are deemed “normal” when they are recognized as “burgeoning sexual beings,” while girls are systematically desexualized (5). People are “disturbed when forced to face the possibility that girls, too, might be engaged in the process of sexual maturation that involves more than developing breasts and getting their periods” (8). Tolman's work, often in

collaboration with Chmielewski, confronts the same assumptions that Nagoski critiques—the persistent cultural messaging that women are unworthy of sexual pleasure, which can lead to a broken sexual subjectivity (Nagoski 39; Tolman and Chmielewski 5).

Tolman defines sexual subjectivity as “a person’s experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being. Sexual desire is at the heart of sexual subjectivity” (5-6). Yet nearly sixteen years after *Dilemmas of Desire*, Tolman and Chmielewski find that girls’ sexual subjectivity continues to be treated as a problem. The sexual double standard persists, reinforced through binaries such as “‘passive’ female sexuality” versus “‘uncontrollable’ male sexuality,” or framing girls as either “good girls” or “sluts” (200). These rigid binaries, which Nagoski evocatively calls “poison ivy” (157), stifle language that affirms pleasure and agency, ultimately undermining the development of sexual subjectivity.

Moving Forward: Sex Manuals for the Changing Present

The language of sexuality is continually evolving, as I have argued, and contemporary sexual manuals increasingly frame teenage sexuality as agentic and rooted in personal autonomy. These works emphasize that sexual experience can be explored without shame, and that pleasure is central to healthy sexual development. Within this context, sexual fantasy emerges in these works as a valuable space for authors and readers to imagine narratives free from stigma. For example, in an anecdote about a sexual, voyeuristic experience that Clark-Flory in *Want Me* did not find pleasurable, the writer shares a metaphor that “one person’s sexual spa day is another person’s house of horrors” (Clark-Flory 171). Her point is clear: not every fantasy

is for everyone. Crucially, she does not shame the people involved in the act, recognizing that sexual desire is subjective.

Another important aspect of these sexual manuals is teenage testimony; by adding their voices, adult authors create space for teens to be heard. For example, Orenstein's work in *Boys and Sex* provides an opportunity for boys to share their thoughts without judgement, like the interviewee who is "utterly indifferent to even the most graphic sex and violence. Nothing in porn is shocking or weird to [him]. It's entertainment, like an action movie" (59). These teenage testimonies attest to the real-life experiences from young people who are learning about sex today. (The final chapter of this dissertation will also provide crucial testimony from young people about sex). In *This is So Awkward*, the authors end every chapter with a subsection called "FROM PEOPLE JUST OUT THE OTHER SIDE," which includes testimony from teens and those in their early 20s about the issue or experience addressed in that chapter. This is a fundamental inclusion because the authors give space for young people to share their views, ultimately facilitating their voice and agency. In their section about "Sex, Hookup Culture, and Porn," the authors include S.H.'s (he/him) experience of sex. S.H. expresses his discomfort when his mom asks him if he has "*a thing for petite girls*" (232, authors' emphasis). S.H. explains that he "feel[s] more comfortable discussing the health aspect [of sex] but often feel[s] awkward talking about other aspects of sex with [his] parents" (232). These two statements illustrate the significance of teenage voice and agency for readers; here, S.H. not only expresses his feelings but also asserts boundaries—while his mom is curious about his sexual desires, he chooses not to share with her, instead telling the reader that "certain aspects of sex" (232) are just not comfortable topics for him to discuss with his parents. The inclusion of teen testimony

challenges adult-dominated narratives and centres the young adult voice, an essential inclusion that stresses the narrative of sex as shameless and empowers young adults to be in the “driver’s seat” of their sexuality, rather than passive passengers.

Contemporary manuals also explore the pleasure of sex and the agency that comes with pleasure. Pleasure, whether from emotional intimacy, sexual intercourse, kinks, etc., is tied to sexual agency, which develops as young people grow into their sexual selves. In examining contemporary texts, it is apparent that not one is the perfect exemplar for teaching about sexuality; however, these texts do provide a constructive foundation to what is a lifetime of learning about one’s sexuality because the authors put the learning in a young person’s hands. Each one speaks about pleasure in its own way, guiding the way for the young person to know that enjoying sex, whether on their own or with someone else, can and should be pleasure-based. For example, in their book, Heather Corinna cites the “fifteen key domains of healthy sexual development identified in the *International Journal of Sexual Health*” (4). The sixth on the list is agency (“young people learning that they are in control of their own sexuality and of who can take sexual pleasure from their bodies”), while the twelfth is “awareness and acceptance that sex can be pleasurable” (3). These “key domains” establish empowering groundwork for how to think about a young person’s body in relation to their sexuality.

Furthermore, each author in this chapter writes from the perspective of their own generation of learning—each tends their own garden, as Nagoski would say, cultivating useful flowers alongside deeply rooted, harmful weeds, recognizing that what is a flower for one person may be a weed for another. Take, for example, one of Nagoski’s experiences of a sex-supportive mother. A man told Nagoski about his first time ejaculating and how he ran to his

mother, thinking he was “broken” because “this white stuff came out of [his] penis while [he] was rubbing it.” His mother “calmly explained what had happened, that it was normal, and how to deal with it in the future” (170). Nagoski told this story to her friend, who was mortified because she had grown up in a sex-illiterate home. Similarly, Tolman shares another story of a man whom she met at a dinner party, who was proud that his teenage son was sexually active and getting “plenty of experience” (4); but when speaking about his teenage daughter, he feared that she would be “sexually victimized” (5). One of his children has agency, which he celebrates, while the other he frames as a victim. Where do we go from here?

As this chapter has argued, many contemporary sexual manuals adopt increasingly inclusive and sex-affirmative approaches. Evidently, texts are continuing to move towards more specified and inclusive sexual education, such as including sections about pleasure and addressing LGBTQIA+ sexualities. Changes in language have also occurred, as exemplified by Vernacchio’s pizza metaphor and Nagoski’s garden metaphor. Corrina’s text functions as an almost comprehensive, at-home textbook for parents and teens alike. There is no single groundbreaking source that gives adolescents all that they need to know about sex, but when compared with their twentieth-century predecessors, these works have established a strong foundation for a more empowering understanding of sexuality for young people across America. By interrogating cultural constructs such as virginity and innocence, and by examining how masturbation and porn can facilitate agentive moments for teens, this chapter has shown that there is ongoing progress that is being made towards a deeper, more nuanced understanding of teen sexuality.

The next chapter turns to fictional young adult literature (YAL), exploring how depictions of pleasure, desire, and agency—particularly in representations of masturbation, porn, and sexual debut—can in turn help reduce sexual shame and foster sexual agency among teens.

Chapter 2

“She talked me through it”: Sexual Content in Young Adult Literature

I wish I had a boyfriend. I wish he lived in the wardrobe on a coat hanger. Whenever I wanted, I could get him out and he'd look at me the way boys do in films, as if I'm beautiful. He wouldn't speak much, but he'd be breathing hard as he took off his leather jacket and unbuckled his pants. (1)

- Jenny Downham, *Before I Die*, 2007

There are few secrets I won't share with just anyone. One is the fact that I have HIV obviously. But there's also the fact that I didn't know how to masturbate until one of my old friends taught me. We locked the door and she pulled up pictures of the guys from *The Vampire Diaries*. Then I lay down on her bed, with a blanket over me, and she talked me through it. (58)

- Camryn Garrett, *Full Disclosure*, 2019

Introduction

In *Radical Children's Literature* (2007), Kimberley Reynolds writes about adult authors' "reluctance" to include sexual content in children's literature (116). She notes, "Children's literature provides a curious and paradoxical cultural space: a space that is simultaneously highly regulated and overlooked, orthodox and radical, didactic and subversive" (3). This space is especially subversive when an author includes sexual content. As I explored in Chapter One, many young adults seek out texts to learn about sex because they lack comprehensive knowledge, either because of the limits of their school's sexual education programs or because they receive limited or no information about sex from their parents. As Reynolds reports:

Research has shown that when it comes to learning about sex, reading is highly valued by young people. Unlike lessons in school or conversations with their parents, they can choose when they want to engage with the facts and issues... [and] can consult repeatedly to ensure that the content has been understood. (117)

Reading provides a safe space, as Reynolds argues, in which to inquire about topics that may be uncomfortable or unattainable outside the pages; a reader can access a text, reflect on the information, and return (if they so choose) with new inquiries.

This second chapter looks at fiction and the strategies that authors use to write about masturbation, pornography, and sexual debuts, texts that feature sex as a wide-ranging experience. I choose these three topics as they are prevalent in American popular culture (songs, films, etc.,) and are also common in young adult fiction. I argue that the sex-affirmative coded texts work to bolster teen autonomy and, in doing so, position adolescents as sexual agents. Importantly, these novels also show that agency is not only exercised in action but promoted through representation; by openly depicting and discussing topics such as porn, masturbation, and sexual choice, texts create space for readers to imagine and claim their own sexual subjectivity.

In examining representations of sexual content in YA, I trace the genre's evolution from mid-twentieth-century cautionary tales to contemporary narratives that foreground adolescent sexual agency. By sexual agency, I mean not only the capacity to consent, but also the ability to experience pleasure, make sexual choices, and negotiate intimacy in ways that reflect vulnerability and self-knowledge. It is the authors' creation of sexually agentic characters that allows readers to explore pleasure vicariously, make sense of sexual choices, and reflect on

intimacy in ways that foster their own emerging sexual agency. Where earlier YA texts foregrounded fear, reticence, or shame about sexual activity, more recent texts situate pleasure at the centre of adolescent sexual experience. In doing so, these texts resist the didacticism of early YA literature and instead highlight the possibility of adolescents as knowledgeable, agentive sexual beings. I begin with a brief account of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), which is considered the text that began the YA canon (Hilton and Nikolajeva 7) and then move to present-day novels, such as L.C. Rosen's *Jack of Hearts (and other parts)* (2018) and Camryn Garrett's *Full Disclosure* (2019). I trace key thematic movements in scholarship about sexual content in YA to demonstrate how representations of sexuality continue to foreground teen agency. By shifting away from depictions of sex as inherently risky towards narratives of pleasure, contemporary YA novels expand definitions of sexual agency, showing how adolescents navigate sexuality as part of their growth and as a meaningful site of intimacy.

Background and context of YA Literature

Young Adult literature is a rich field of study. In addition to providing entertainment, scholars have highlighted YA novels as a site for critical examination and have continuously proven that YA literature can be studied through literary, social, and educational lenses. Victor Malo-Juvera and Crag Hill, editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Young Adult Literature* (2026) “define young adult literature as a literary work that meets the majority” of the following conditions:

1. Young adult literature is generally written for and marketed to readers 12–18 years old. This may include genres such as fiction, memoir/nonfiction, poetry,

and drama, as well as other literary forms such as graphic novels, and multigenre texts.

2. Young adult literature features a protagonist aged 12–18.
3. The protagonist starts and ends the text as an adolescent.
4. The point of view typically is the protagonist's, embodying their interiority and reflecting her/his/their public-facing presentation.
5. The protagonist experiences an increase in self-efficacy, but she/he/they have not acquired the agency and responsibility associated with adulthood.
6. The major conflict present in the text reflects the lived experiences of adolescents: for example, identity formation, friendships, romantic relationships, and/or separation from parents.
7. The writing may include adult language, may depict sexual experiences, and may describe acts of violence not appropriate for younger readers. (xxi)

What does it mean then to be an adolescent? The World Health Organization defines adolescence as a “phase of life between childhood and adulthood, from ages 10 to 19” (par. 1).

While there is inconsistency here between start and end dates from different sources, with adolescence ranging from 10 to 19 and young adult literature including a protagonist of the ages 12-18, for this dissertation, this general period of time plus or minus a year of two is what is under study.

Notably, in the introduction to their book, *Contemporary Adolescent Literature and Culture: The Emergent Adult* (2016), Mary Hilton and Maria Nikolajeva report that with psychologist G. Stanley Hall's coining of the term “adolescence” in 1904, American society

“distinguish[ed] a separate age between the onset of puberty and mature adulthood” (2). With this creation came the construction of how to mark adolescence categorically; Kent Baxter argues, “the history of the discursive category of adolescence has been a self-perpetuating and never-ending dance between the ‘real’ and the ‘ideal’ adolescent, where the constructed image of one has served as cultural repression of the other” (13). As Baxter indicates, a polarization has developed between the “real,” lived experience of adolescents and the imaginative, hopeful representations of adolescence created by adults.

With “adolescence” as an identity category newly coined, books aimed at young adolescents began to emerge before the Second World War, with protagonists embodying “childlike innocence, total asexuality, and an athletic devotion to the outdoor adventure cum mystery quest” (Hilton and Nikolajeva 5); authors such as Arthur Ransome and Enid Blyton, popular writers of this period, created characters who demonstrated a “childlike innocence” (6). However, Hilton and Nikolajeva explain, “Writers who had survived the war as children and young adults themselves began to reject the sentimental tradition and the invisibility of teenage interiority in twentieth-century literature for the young” (6). They write that *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947) “opened a genuine autobiographical space where the different experiences of blitz, evacuation, and in her case hiding, betrayal, separation, and death, could be articulated within a new, more cynical, young adult sensibility” (6). The authors do not mention that Frank’s father, Otto, removed references to Anne’s exploration of her sexuality before publication (O’Toole par. 5), an intriguing example of the adult anxiety explored in this dissertation around representations of sexual content in YA writing. Frank’s text led the way for British authors—

such as Jill Paton Walsh's *The Dolphin Crossing* (1967) and *Fireweed* (1970)—to “[problematize] the inner lives of their older characters, and existential ideology” (6).

Michael Cart's *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* (1996) remains one of the few books that historicizes the YA genre from its approximate beginning (around World War Two, as mentioned above) to the present day. While his account is often more descriptive than analytical, his overview identifies larger patterns in YA, such as the inclusion of sexual content. Cart's study references literature of “today,” such as Printz Award book winners *Jellicoe Road* by Melina Marchetta (2009) and *Going Bovine* by Libba Bray (2010),²⁷ which he marks as important texts. He includes a chapter specifically about sexual content and another dedicated to LGBTQ+ literature. Cart argues that up until novelist Judy Blume's *Forever...* (1975), books that included sexual content focused on “the (usually dire) consequences” of characters having sex (144). Cart, for example, cites Henry Gregor Felsen's *Two and the Town* (1952), a novel in which the main characters have sex, get pregnant, and need to give up on their dreams (142), as a type of cautionary tale. This tradition of featuring sex as leading to trouble is still echoed in many novels today. While Cart identifies the dominance of cautionary tales, my own reading of Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005-2020) demonstrates how this narrative tendency continues in twenty-first century bestsellers. When Meyer's protagonist Bella in *Breaking Dawn* (2008) finally consummates her relationship with her vampire husband Edward, she gets pregnant and almost dies (Meyer 463). Sexual pleasure for Bella only exists after she becomes a vampire, and even

²⁷ “The Michael L. Printz Award annually honors the best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit, each year”: see <https://www.ala.org/yalsa/printz>.

then, she suffers from her new position as an immortal being. This plotline reflects a broader cultural tendency in YA to subordinate sexual pleasure to sexual shame or grief.

Blume's *Forever*, however, is the first text to emphasize the pleasures of sex for its protagonists. Cart writes, "Not only do Blume's protagonists, high school seniors Katherine and Michael, have sex, they (shudder) enjoy it, and the reader gets to watch the explicit action!" (144). Although the two break up at the end of the novel, there is no major consequence for Katherine who enjoys having sex. Blume, along with YA novelist Norma Klein in *It's Okay If You Don't Love Me* (1978), significantly resist focusing on shame in "'this very natural physical and emotional reality'" of life (Cart 144), and, significantly, their novels paved the way for subsequent writers to speak about sex in an open fashion and to begin "the important work of investigating other, less savory aspects of sex—notably its perversion by the interjection of violence in the form of rape and sexual abuse" (145). The sex-positive strand of YA that Blume and Klein initiated can be seen today in novels like L.C. Rosen's *Jack of Hearts (and Other Parts)* (2018), where queer teenage characters openly discuss and experience sexual pleasure without narrative punishment. While "sex as trouble" persists in texts like the *Twilight* series, YA has expanded to accommodate agentive, affirming depictions of adolescent sexuality.

The authors under study in this chapter published novels over 30+ years after Judy Blume's *Forever*. *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2001) by Ann Brashares is the oldest text in my study. As mentioned in the introduction, the texts I focus on are centred on consensual sexual experiences. Although there are important novels that discuss sexual assault and abuse, such as Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999), I concentrate exclusively on novels that feature consensual depictions of sex to uncover representations of pleasure, as, historically, undesirable

consequences of sexual activity have been more prominent in literature and criticism.

Scholarship continues this negative discourse. Catherine Ashcraft, in her article “Ready or Not...? Teen Sexuality and the Troubling Discourse of Readiness” (2006), asserts that girls are often “given frequent instructions on how to say ‘no’” (329). She cites Michelle Fine’s work which claims that girls do not know “what to do if they wish to say ‘yes’”. This lack of information reinforces dichotomies between ‘bad’ girls who want ‘it’ and ‘good’ girls who do not” (329). Echoing Peggy Orenstein’s question, “What happens after yes?” (“What Young”), my chosen texts feature moments of “yes” in which characters are not deemed “bad” for having sex or sexual thoughts, even if the sexual experience leads to pain—which in turn highlights teen sexual agency, as I demonstrate. For example, in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2001), although Bridget’s sexual debut leads her into a deep depression, she finds a renewed strength at the end of novel with the knowledge that her friend, Lena, will help her work through the hurt (290). Although her actions bring her pain, Bridget’s choice to have sex is an example of sexual agency, and the novel underscores how this choice, albeit difficult, contributes to her character development and participates in a broader shift in YA that recognizes adolescent sexuality as complex and agentic.

Critical discussions in scholarship on YA are wide-ranging, but much of the work done about children’s and young adult literature focuses on topics of agency and innocence. In “The Hermeneutics of Recuperation: What a Kinship-Model Approach to Children’s Agency Could Do for Children’s Literature and Childhood Studies” (2016), Marah Gubar critiques prevailing approaches that divide children from adults and, instead, proposes a kinship model for thinking about agency. She explains, “The categories ‘child’ and ‘adult’ carve up the human community

neatly into two separate and unequal classes of people. Yet most of us likely would agree that growth is actually a messy continuum, an ongoing process that involves losses as well as gains” (294). Although Gubar does not speak specifically about innocence, the idea that the child has agency is key in her kinship model, which acknowledges the continuities between children and adults while also allowing for age-related differences in how that agency might be expressed (300). First, Gubar distinguishes between two flawed models when studying children: the difference model, she argues, is one where ““adults have one kind of agency; children have a different kind”” (297); the deficit model is when ““adults have agency; children have less of it”” (298). Both the difference and deficit models view children through a negative lens (291, 298). She then offers a kinship model, which is a “theoretical model of what it means to be a child” (292); according to this model, “children and adults are fundamentally akin to one another, even if certain differences or deficiencies routinely attend certain parts of the aging process” (299). Utilizing this method means “insist[ing] first and foremost on how alike younger and older people are. Only after emphasizing this elemental similarity do they acknowledge—using obstinately tentative language—the possibility of age-related differences and deficiencies” (300). Seen through a kinship model lens, then, a teenager is one who has similarities to an adult: teens—like adults—experience sexual desire and may want to have sex either casually or through relationship-building. I emphasize the kinship model here because of the examples in YA that emphasize the teen as a sexual agent; I consider these books through a kinship lens so that the sexual desire felt by adult and teenager is something that they share.

Similarly, Tison Pugh, in *Innocence, Heterosexuality, and the Queerness of Children's Literature* (2010), speaks directly to the problem of the “presumed innocence of sexuality in

children's fiction [which] often entails the rejection of aging and the perpetual celebration of childhood" (1). Pugh argues that the "tension between innocence and sexuality renders much of children's literature queer, especially when these texts pointedly disavow sexuality through celebrations of innocence" (1). More specifically, for Pugh, queerness functions less as an identity marker and more as a methodological lens: it highlights how children's literature disrupts conventional ideas about sexual normativity and challenges assumptions that children should be nonsexual. In this sense, queering involves examining how texts subvert established cultural codes rather than labeling the child or text as literally queer. These disruptions destabilize expectations that children should remain innocent and nonsexual and thus create space for adolescents as subjects of sexual agency rather than as deficient or incomplete versions of adults. Through this lens, adolescence emerges as a liminal, "queer" space—neither fully child nor fully adult—where sexual agency is already present, rather than deferred to adulthood. Read alongside Gubar's kinship model, which emphasizes the fundamental continuities between children and adults, Pugh's analysis suggests that the queering of childhood literature allows us to recognize adolescent sexuality as complex, active, and meaningful. Sexual agency, then, is not postponed until adulthood but is enacted within adolescence itself, in tension with societal expectations of innocence.

However, discourses of innocence persist even when adolescent sexual agency is acknowledged. Elizabeth Marshall, in *Keywords in Youth Studies* (2012), notes that "protecting youth from 'a loss of innocence' translates in public and private spaces to regulating sexual activity (safe sex/abstinence) and/or media, violence, and drug/alcohol abuse" (296). She argues that "it is more constructive to think about innocence as a relational term that gains

meaning in its pairing with ‘experience.’ Through experience rather than reaching a particular chronological age, youth lose their innocence” (295). By analyzing contemporary literature for young adults, Pugh and other YA scholars are increasingly examining sexual agency while challenging the idealized model of the innocent child/teen and the regulatory discourses it sustains.

In his article, “A History of Young Adult Literature” (2026), Chris Crowe notes that Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* (1942) is “sometimes heralded as the first YA novel” (2), but that “most scholars, however, consider 1967 to be the birth year of YA literature due to the publication of three refreshingly realistic novels: Ann Head’s *Mr. and Mrs. Bojo Jones*, S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*, and Robert Lipsyte’s *The Contender*” (2). I am aligned with Hilton and Nikolajeva, who argue that J.D. Salinger’s 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye* “founded the young adult canon” (7). A novel about 16-year-old Holden Caulfield, the narrative tracks the teen’s foray into the adult world and the mental turmoil this movement brings. I choose to initiate the young adult canon with *The Catcher in the Rye* because while originally published for adults, the novel introduces an adolescent protagonist as an agentic sexual being, an aspect that *Seventeenth Summer* omitted. For example, in his journey towards self-understanding, Holden decides to hire a sex worker, but ultimately decides not to have sex with her (125). This moment is significant because Holden is not positioned as an innocent child who is corrupted by adult sexuality, but as a young person actively navigating his own sexual boundaries. His ability to change his mind foregrounds the complexity of his sexual agency: as Salinger’s novel argues, it involves both the right to pursue sexual experience and the right to refuse it. While an uncomfortable experience, Holden’s decision demonstrates that agency lies in the process of

negotiating desire and consent, even when that negotiation leads to hesitation or refusal. *The Catcher in the Rye* offers an early example of YA fiction in which the protagonist momentarily asserts control over his sexual experience. Yet, as later scholarship reminds us, such instances of agency are often curtailed by the rhetorical role YA plays as an adult-authored genre. To work towards an idea of teens as agentive, scholars show how teens have been controlled societally by larger institutions, as shown in Roberta Seelinger Trites' text, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2004). Trites applies Michel Foucault's explorations in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) to speak about how adolescent literature is "often an ideological tool used to curb teenagers' libido as it is some sort of depiction of what adolescents' sexuality actually is... the character's sexuality provides him or her with a locus of power, [which] needs to be controlled before the narrative can achieve resolution" (85). Trites asserts that because adults write YA, often represent the teen as lacking sexual autonomy by the text's conclusion. For example, many teen narratives like Virginia Hamilton's *A White Romance* (1987) feature sexually active teens who then have their sexual agency taken away at the end when sexual experience produces a negative outcome like a teen pregnancy (Trites 85). For Trites, then, narratives that focus on teenage sexuality frequently feature the teen protagonist at a loss by the end of the novel, teaching that teenagers are not meant to have control over their bodies and lives the way that adults do.

Michel Foucault's work on sexuality examines how societies structure and regulate sexual behaviour. In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1976), he critiques the "repressive hypothesis," which assumes that Victorian-era sexuality was simply suppressed through the policing of speech—that is, social norms dictated how, when, and with whom people could talk

about sex (18). Foucault rejects this notion, arguing that rather than repressing sexuality, society produced and managed discourses about sex, creating frameworks through which sexual behaviour could be classified, examined, and regulated. Institutions, authorities, and cultural practices—such as medicine, psychiatry, education, and law—disciplined sexual behaviour by monitoring, diagnosing, and intervening in people’s private lives, making sex both a matter of public concern and a mechanism of social control (25, 30-31).

Foucault notes that these discourses often intensified attention to particular behaviours, such as children’s masturbation, which were no longer simply private matters but became sites for moral, medical, and legal evaluation. As he writes, these sites “radiated discourses aimed at sex, intensifying people’s awareness of it as a constant danger, and this in turn created a further incentive to talk about it” (31). Power, then, organizes, incites, and produces ways of speaking about sexuality that shape individual behaviour.

Building on this, Leo Bersani emphasizes that Foucault’s thesis demonstrates how power functions by producing multiple sexualities: through the classification, moral evaluation, and distribution of sexual behaviours, individuals can be approved, disciplined, marginalized, or normalized (81). In other words, modern sexual discourse, particularly concerning children, does not silence sexuality but instead creates new ways to regulate and control it, highlighting the productive dimension of power in shaping sexual norms and subjectivities.

YA fiction, I argue, can be read as one such site of sexual regulation. Because the genre is written largely by adults for adolescents, novels articulate adult ideals. YA novels actively participate in discourses that bolster certain expressions of sex (such as abstinence) while stigmatizing others (such as casual sex and the repercussion of pregnancy). Thus, YA fiction

participates in broader power dynamics that define adolescent sexuality through adult expectations. By focusing on texts that challenge these dynamics, sexual agency and pleasure become the centre of more “authentic” representations of adolescence, as I argue.

As discussed above, sexual content in YA has been critically examined for over twenty years and updated, as teenage experiences have become more varied, diverse, and accepted by literary critics and the broader North American public. In her article, “‘Just be Careful’: Sexual Desire and Autism in YA novels” (2022), Audrey Coussy explores how neurodiverse characters desire to have sex in contemporary novels, such as *Marcelo in the Real World* (2009) and *The Half-life of Planets* (2010), which is a contrast to past novels like *The Silent Boy* (2003) and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) that have emphasized the seeming “disinterest” of sex among autistic characters (15-16). Similarly, other contributions to the critical discussion of sexuality in YA explore LGBTQ+ characters and novels, especially in relation to these texts as performing as supplements to sex education. In “Queering Sex Education: Young Adult Literature with LGBT Content as Complementary Sources of Sex and Sexuality Education” (2012), Robert Bittner discusses the problematic state of American sexual health education for teens, arguing that “there is a need for texts that are both educational *and* pleasurable” (359). Bittner argues that “the YA novel... becomes a site for safe and unmediated interrogation of sex-related ideology and information” (360), as exploring sexuality through fiction is “much less intimidating for young people than a classroom setting or a one-on-one talk with parents or other adults who harbor the idea that sex and sexuality must be spoken of in whispers” (360). As emphasized in Chapter One, sexual health manuals and YA texts can both function as educational tools that fill gaps in North American sexual health curricula.

I situate my argument—that contemporary YA novels depict adolescent sexuality through pleasure and agency—within existing literary analyses of YA to demonstrate how close readings of form and content can reveal teen empowerment. Literary scholarship, like Rebecca Foote’s “‘I Am Unhide-able’: Conditions of Visibility in *The Poet X*” (2024), illustrates how analyzing literary techniques such as verse form, multimodality, and textual layout illuminates how protagonists exercise agency. For example, Foote investigates how the multi-modality of Acevedo’s novel (the book is set in verse and the poems are also available on YouTube) not only improves the protagonist’s visibility as a poet in the novel, but also “has helped to shift LatinX young adult (YA) literature toward a politics of inclusion and register of empowerment” (2). Foote’s article examines the text through an educational lens, but she offers literary analysis of the poems to measure their effect within the novel; for example, Foote analyzes a scene in the book where Xiomara’s mother, Altagracia, reads Xiomara’s journal and then burns it. A subsequent slam poem called “Verses,” written in alternating English and Spanish, “reveals the dual-facing relationship between Xiomara and Altagracia, poetry and prayer, collaborator and competitor. The placement of their words on opposing margins establishes the hostility, a textual representation of bodies and words in conflict, which is magnified in a close reading of the scene,” Foote argues (14). Foote’s method, examining how literary form shapes character empowerment, parallels my approach to sexual agency: by attending to narrative strategies, language, and structure, I trace how YA texts represent adolescents as making autonomous sexual choices. For example, the poem “There are Words” (329), follows directly after Xiomara decides not to have sex with Aman, as she is not ready. In this self-reflective poem, Xiomara understands that the choices she has made will influence the rest of her life; she writes, “today

I've made decisions / I will never be able to undo" (lines 17-18). In reflection, Xiomara reveals that she is in charge of her life: "I think of all the firsts I've given to this day, / and all the ones I chose to keep" (lines 12-13), demonstrating that her body and desires are hers to navigate. Just as Foote's analysis shows empowerment through literary form, I argue that YA novels position sexual decision-making as a site of agency: teens navigate social, cultural, and relational pressures while asserting control over their sexuality. Xiomara's refusal to conform to expectations—those of her mother, her boyfriend, or cultural scripts about Latina femininity—underlies my broader argument about how contemporary YA positions adolescent sexuality as both agentive and complex.

Bryan Gillis and Joanna Simpson's study *Sexual Content in Young Adult Literature: Reading Between the Sheets* (2015) is the only published monograph currently available that specifically examines YA and sexual content through a thematic and sociocultural lens, rather than a literary one. The study maps historical trends in sexual representation in YA and offers practical reading recommendations for educators, parents, and librarians rather than advancing a sustained literary or theoretical argument. Chapters include "Adolescent Identity Development" and "A Brief History of Sex Education in American Schools." The authors highlight books for their ability to depict sexual content in ways that develop character and narrative realism. They offer book recommendations, such as *manicpixiedreamgirl* (2013) by Tom Leveen (126) because of its "effective use of believable teen dialogue and actions [that] develop rich characterizations [which enable] readers to make sense (as Tyler does) of life, love, and sex" (129). The selections the authors make for realistic (and emancipatory) YA fiction "all represent extraordinary examples of how the most accomplished authors use sexual content in their work

to develop the complexities of character, progress and enrich a story, and create verisimilitude” (126). They also describe Melvin Burgess’ *Doing It* (2003) as an “amazing novel” because of the text’s use of multiple perspectives: “the alternating viewpoints help readers experience the physical and emotional effects of sex from perspectives both female and male” (138). Yet, while Gillis and Simpson’s work foregrounds sexual content as an important aspect of YA, the text remains primarily descriptive and does not interrogate how sexual content performs cultural work, or how it contributes to evolving ideas of adolescent sexual agency. Although Gillis and Simpson attend to certain formal features, including dialogue and shifting perspectives, their analysis remains primarily descriptive and stops short of examining how literary form itself produces meanings about sex, pleasure, and agency. I build on their findings to argue that sexual content in YA is not just thematic but literary: attention to form, narrative structure, and stylistic choices is essential for understanding how novels convey the complexities of sex, including pleasure, shame, and agency, and for appreciating how readers internalize these depictions.

The study of sexual content in YA cannot be undertaken without considering work by eminent scholar Lydia Kokkola. Kokkola’s groundbreaking work about teen sexuality, *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality* (2013), speaks about carnal desire and its appearance in YA fiction. She writes, “Carnal desire is as basic a human need as the need for physical shelter. Nevertheless, it has been singled out and reviled as though it were antithetical to all that we value in childhood” (*Fictions* 23). Kokkola addresses the cultural fear of adolescent sexuality, and the widespread need to control it, by utilizing Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* and the ways in which Western ideas about sexuality rely on notions of deviance to elevate “normality” (37). Kokkola’s

contributions are vital because they shift the scholarly conversation about adolescent sexuality in YA away from exclusively moral, developmental, or risk-based frameworks and toward questions of desire and pleasure. Her 2013 monograph was the first to argue that depictions of adolescent carnality are central to YA, situating these representations within larger cultural projects of regulation and control. A decade later, her 2023 article pushes the field even further by reimagining masturbation not as an embarrassing or supplemental topic but as a legitimate way for teens to orient themselves toward their own pleasure and self-knowledge. In “Directions of Desire: Reading the Adolescent Body” (2023), Kokkola turns to Sara Ahmed’s idea of queer phenomenology to observe how masturbation enables teens to understand sexual desire. Kokkola’s aim is “to suggest that fiction encouraging onanistic desire may enable teenage readers to orient themselves towards their own pleasure, which might be more valuable than orienting themselves towards a sexual partner” (17). Kokkola argues that the desire to masturbate is “a form of sexual orientation” (17); rather than focusing on socially recognized sexual identities, such as those represented by LGBTQ+ labels, she emphasizes the individual experience of desire itself and how this desire functions as a form of “way-finding” for the self (18). In other words, Kokkola shifts the analytic lens from identity categories to the phenomenology of desire, highlighting how teens can explore pleasure and sexual agency independent of socially coded identities. This intervention is particularly important for my project because it frames masturbation as an act of agency, not deficiency, and opens critical space for analyzing how YA can make pleasure itself visible or palpable as a meaningful part of adolescent subjectivity.

I have organized my analysis into three sections—masturbation, young people’s engagement with porn or erotic material, and sexual debut—to examine key aspects of teen sexuality that are both culturally significant and central to many young adult experiences. This structure not only mirrors the thematic scope of my first chapter but also allows me to explore how sexual agency manifests across these recurring topics in adolescents’ lives.

Ridin’ Solo: Masturbation in YA

In *Disturbing the Universe*, Trites explains how deviancy plays a major role in the adolescent engagement with sexuality, as represented in literature:

In many YA novels, teenage sexuality is defined in terms of deviancy—even when the message to the reader is a Judy Blume special: ‘Your masturbating/wetdreams/desire to have sex/(fill-in-the-blank) is normal.’ Such novels reflect cultural norms that tend to define teenage sexuality in terms of deviancy in an attempt to control adolescents; nonetheless, reassurances to teenagers that their actions are normal still start from the assumption that someone thinks their actions are not. (87-88)

Trites demonstrates Foucault’s power/repression dynamic here through “deviancy” or the movement away from what is considered the norm. The cycle then, seen through a Foucauldian lens, shows how sexuality is disciplined and regulated: norms define what is acceptable, adolescents push against these constraints, and reassurances of “normality” ultimately reinforce the structures that monitor and govern sexual behaviour. Trites offers the example of Judy Blume’s *Forever...* as a text that “tries to liberate teenage sexuality by communicating that curiosity about sex is natural, but it then undercuts this message with a series of messages framed by institutional discourses that imply teenagers should not have sex or else should feel

guilty if they do” (88). Trites claims that most YA texts assume that “the reader has a sexual naïveté in need of correction” (85). Yet this tension does not necessarily operate as an either/or binary. A novel like *Forever...*, for example, can both reproduce institutional discourses of guilt and simultaneously carve out space for more agentic depictions of adolescent sexuality. In this way, YA texts may reflect cultural anxieties while also quietly resisting them, offering readers moments of validation, recognition, or pleasure even within otherwise restrictive frameworks. This duality suggests that institutional discourses are not only repressive but also sites where challenges to dominant norms can emerge.

Many YA texts act didactically, attempting to teach adolescent readers what is right and what is wrong in the world of sexuality. This is clear in Molly Lee’s *Ask Me Anything* (2019), where the main character, Amber, launches a website called “Ask Me Anything” and gives advice about what is “normal” in teenage sexual development. Amber, for example, receives a question from a classmate who asks if he must perform fellatio every time he sees his boyfriend now that they have commenced an intimate relationship (125); she responds that “you *never* have to do anything. Especially when you’re not in the mood or don’t feel comfortable doing it” (126). Lee works through fiction to teach young adults about the intricacies of sexuality. The movement towards sex-affirmative scenes like this one in YA speaks to the effort of authors to balance the usual damaging representations of masturbation to include more wide-ranging examples of experience. Historically, representations of masturbation in young adult literature have been limited, and if included at all, are centered on the character questioning their relationship with self-pleasure or highlighting certain emotions such as shame, as in Elizabeth Acevedo’s *The Poet X* (2018). Recently, authors such as Camryn Garrett in *Full Disclosure* (2019)

and Molly Lee in *Ask Me Anything* (2019) have included masturbation scenes that are either impartial or sex-affirmative, in the process modeling broad examples of teenage sexual freedom.

Sex-affirmative experiences for teen readers, especially in terms of masturbation, are becoming more standard in contemporary YA to show how the act can be pleasurable rather than guilt-ridden. Garrett's *Full Disclosure* is an example of what diverse moments in YA can look like, where readers can learn about shameless desire and respectful boundaries that Kokkola discusses in her "Directions of Desire" (17). *Full Disclosure* offers a diverse range of characters, reflecting a clearer illustration of American culture: Simone is Black and has two dads in a happy marriage, a stark contrast to Judy Blume's *Forever...* where all the characters are White. The novel's protagonist, Simone, and her two friends, speak candidly and with encouragement about sex. Each girl in the trio is unique: Simone is HIV-positive and looking to have healthy, sexual experiences; Claudia is asexual, gay, and has a girlfriend; and Lydia is bisexual and in a long-term heterosexual relationship. The three of them decide to buy sex toys together: while Simone buys one for herself, Claudia buys one for her girlfriend, Emma (45). Later, when she is at home and begins to masturbate, Simone has an orgasm with her "small but mighty" new toy (83). She describes her voice as "breathy like a porn star's" and feels her eyes "bulging" (83). She recognizes the difference in using a toy instead of her hand, and she finishes within five minutes, "groaning into [her] pillow" (83). The diction around Simone's arousal and subsequent orgasm is excitative. Using the word "bulging" to describe her eyes' movement and describing the final "groan" into her pillow, Garrett emphasizes the pleasure Simone feels in this private moment. Simone is not interrupted, nor does she feel shame. Furthermore, the comparison of

her sounds to those of a porn star indicates that Simone is a consumer of sexual entertainment and Garrett suggests that this is an exciting comparison for her. Garrett's depiction of solo sex is the most sex-affirmative when compared to the other texts in my corpus. Although there is no explicit description of Simone's actions, this scene is unique in that the protagonist has a shameless experience of masturbation.

Similarly, Lauren Myracle offers a very brief masturbation scene with her narrator in *The Infinite Moment of Us* (2014) as an example of agentive desire, emphasizing the move to sexual agency in YA. Myracle's novel embodies the "resistance" that scholars Mark A. Lewis and E. Sybil Durand speak about in their article, "Sexuality as risk and resistance in young adult literature" (2014). To these authors, risk represents "how thematic messages present in YA texts work to monitor and restrain adolescent sexuality by explicitly linking sexual thought and action with severe and dangerous consequences. [Resistance] disrupts normalized understandings of adolescent sexuality by providing instances of youth both fully aware of and unashamed of their sexual thoughts and acts" (39). *The Infinite Moment of Us* represents resistance through its "unashamed" illustrations of sexuality. A narrative about two teens, Wren and Charlie have recently graduated high school and have begun an intimate relationship. Myracle writes clear sex scenes that establish the sexual agency of the two characters. Although Wren's masturbation scene remains unfinished by the end, the scene is full of pleasure and desire. For example, while waiting for her friend to finish showering, Wren begins to touch herself and think of her boyfriend, Charlie: Wren "closed her eyes and touched her breasts. She pulled down the collar of her shirt and grazed at the swell of them. She touched herself beneath her bra. Her nipples hardened. She thought of Charlie, and she crossed her feet at her ankles and

rolled onto her side. God, she wanted him" (167). Her physiological changes push her to masturbate and desire Charlie even further. Although Wren eventually stops masturbating, she experiences no negative consequences; she is neither interrupted or shamed, and she expresses no feelings of guilt. She simply engages in the act and then moves on. Both *Full Disclosure* and *The Infinite Moment of Us* depict masturbation as a healthy experience. These texts work to normalize masturbation for young readers, implying that self-pleasure does not need to be an act of anxiety or guilt as it has been represented in the past.

Comparably, Jenny Downham's *Before I Die* (2007) foregrounds masturbation as a site of sexual agency, showing how Tessa, a teen with cancer, can participate in intimacy and experience pleasure even when her illness limits her physical sexual activity. The novel confronts the assumption that for cancer patients, their sexual identity is not important (Bentsen et al. 227), suggesting instead that not only are they capable of pleasure, they also desire it (222-223). In addressing assumptions and even stereotypes of illness, *Before I Die* resists the idea of a character defined solely by their sickness and instead balances sexuality and illness in the development of a complex character. Readers learn about Tessa enjoying her sexual life even when she is too tired to have sex because of the progression of her illness, highlighting how masturbation provides her a means to exercise sexual agency independently of physical limitations. In one instance, Tessa encourages her boyfriend, Adam, to masturbate in front of her:

'You could touch yourself.'

'In front of you?'

'I could watch.'

He blushes. 'Seriously?'

'Why not? I need more memories.'

'You really want me to?'

'I really do.'

He kneels up. I might have no energy left, but I can give him my gaze.

He looks at my breasts as he touches himself. I have never shared anything so intimate, never seen such a look of bewildered love as his mouth opens and his eyes widen.

'Tess, I love you! I really bloody love you!' (279)

Although she cannot touch Adam, she can give him her attention and still be an active partner in the sex act; she is still developing herself as a sexual being and taking pleasure in this as well, or so Downham's narrative suggests. Downham emphasizes Tessa's emotional vulnerability (and sexual agency) in this scene through the act of watching. It is not just Adam's physical attraction to Tessa as he "looks at [her] breasts," but also the emotional connection through their burgeoning love that allow him to bypass his initial shyness and consent to her request. Moreover, Tessa realizes that although she has had penetrative sex with Adam, this masturbatory experience surpasses in its intimacy through the language of the gaze. She comments, "I have never shared anything so intimate, never seen such a look of bewildered love as his mouth opens and his eyes widen" (279). The repetition of statements about looking and watching—"I could watch," "I can give him my gaze," "he looks at my breasts"—foregrounds how vision itself becomes a site of intimacy. Watching here is not passive but active, allowing Tessa to shape the encounter, to transform Adam's masturbation into a shared moment of

erotic and emotional connection. The pleasure she feels as she watches him and participates by watching is a remarkable intervention by the YA author that illustrates sexual subjectivity, where the protagonist is autonomous and agentic in the act of masturbation.

Other texts that I examine depict the act of self-pleasure in terms of anxiety, embarrassment, or shame, undercutting teen sexual agency. This link to shame may be due to the historical embarrassment about masturbation in Western societies. In *Sexual Content in Young Adult Literature* (2010), Bryan Gillis and Joanna Simpson write that regarding sexual education in American schools, in 1918 the U.S. Public Health Service standardized sex education and taught about “the dangers of masturbation and sex outside of marriage” (13). It was also a Victorian belief “that a man’s sexual behavior was key to his character. Engagement in impure activities such as masturbation would adversely affect his physical and mental health” (Gillis and Simpson 12). Although Katy Stein writes that while masturbation scenes in young adult literature have progressed over the past twenty years, “...the genre still largely depends upon adult-centered passive and normative ideologies to rein in, undermine, and contain any real progression” (426).

Elizabeth Acevedo’s *The Poet X* (2018) is an example of such a narrative that features a Latina-Catholic protagonist, who finds shame in masturbation. Acevedo interrogates cultural assumptions about the body and emphasizes the difficulty for a young woman navigating cultural expectations in relation to her own developing sexuality. The book follows Xiomara on her journey to become a spoken-word poet, fighting with her mother for her agency to live her life away from the Catholic church. In the novel, Xiomara shares a poem about masturbation, but she is worried that what she is doing is immoral:

In bed at night
 my fingers search
 a heat I have no name for...
 I feel such a shame
 settle like a blanket
 covering me head to toe.
 To make myself feel this way
 is a dirty thing, right?

Then why does it feel so good? (Acevedo 193-194)

As a Catholic, Xiomara has been taught that self-pleasure is a sin, and so although the reader is present for her masturbation, the scene is still clothed in a narrative of worry; symbols such as the night (a time of darkness) and a blanket (an item that covers) reflect both worry and protection, a complex state of concealment. Although Xiomara talks about masturbation as a “relief” and a “release” (194), she expresses her trepidation about feeling this way. Stein explains that when authors make a novel’s goal “to advocate for anxiety-free sex and sexuality, they inevitably and subtly acknowledge the prevailing societal nervousness regarding sexual activity” (421). *The Poet X* confirms this tendency. Although Xiomara is in her own private space, exploring her body, her anxiety emphasizes that there is still a “nervousness” in society around sexual activity, which the author is in turn capturing. Xiomara’s worry is a result of her religious upbringing and her mother’s belief that her body is sacred. For example, when Xiomara first gets her period and inserts a tampon, her mother finds out that she is wearing a tampon and hits Xiomara, saying, ““Good girls don’t wear tampons. / Are you still a virgin?”” (Acevedo 70).

The idea that a tampon could tarnish Xiomara's virginity is a deeply engrained cultural assumption that holds that any external items—fingers, tampons, vibrators—would violate a woman's sexually "innocent" body. Her mother's beliefs incite anxiety in her daughter pertaining to the act of masturbation. Interestingly, there is never a follow-up to Xiomara's question about the pleasure she feels when she masturbates. Instead, her writing becomes her main form of self-pleasure which transforms into a public pleasure when she starts sharing her poetry with the world. Stein asserts that the novels she examines about female masturbation, such as Meg Cabot's *Ready or Not* (2005) and Phylliss Reynolds Naylor's *Dangerously Alice* (2006), "fail to acknowledge the transgressive and empowering potential of masturbation, through which a character can recognize and locate her own identity and independence" (418). For Xiomara, this masturbation scene is a one-time shared experience of anxiety with the reader, something that she later explores with boyfriend Aman, never returning to self-satisfy in the text. This absence raises an important question about whether the narrative implies that once Xiomara has a sexual partner, she no longer "needs" to self-pleasure, or whether the text reflects a broader cultural discomfort with representing female masturbation as an ongoing and valid practice, even within partnered relationships. Either way, by shifting the focus from solo sex to partnered sex, the novel risks reinforcing the idea that masturbation is merely a temporary, shameful stage of sexual experience rather than an act of agency and (self)-pleasure.

In other cases, in contemporary texts such as *Ask Me Anything* (2019) and *Confessions of an Alleged Good Girl* (2022), authors actively try to write against the stigma of masturbation. This stigma is due to the ongoing "anxiety" that Stein writes about in "My Slippery Place"

(2012); she observes that “... despite the American sexual revolution and the work of scholars in gender studies which seeks, in part, to liberate sexual activity and sexuality from restrictive and troubling ideologies, female masturbation—and especially teen female masturbation—still inspires anxiety and even fear” (415). Stein argues that representations of female masturbation in YA either work to “defy or reinscribe contemporary anxieties about female sexuality and sexual activity” (416). Moreover, Stein asserts that “In many cases... characters learn about masturbation through authority figures such as parents, teachers, and older siblings, with the intention of preparing for sex—notably, with a male partner” (416). However, Molly E. Lee’s *Ask Me Anything* (2019) importantly features a parental figure (Amber’s mother) who teaches her daughter about pleasure solely for the sake of pleasure without considering a male partner. Amber’s mother is an erotica writer and a strong, unashamed example of a sex-supportive parent who donates money to Amber’s high school, even though her profession disgusts the principal. One morning, she tells Amber that she is researching a new sex toy, “The Smile Maker” (50). Amber stops her: “‘Oh God, Mom, *no.*’ [She] clenche[s] [her] eyes shut as if that would make [her] temporarily deaf” (50). While Amber’s mom feels no embarrassment in sharing information about sex toys with her daughter, Amber is clearly outside of her comfort zone. However uncomfortable as she is with sex toys, Amber appreciates her mother’s candid nature:

... not everyone had a mom like mine—willing and able to offer healthy advice on sex.

And, sure, Google had information, but there was a huge difference between reading an article and watching a video created by a total stranger and gathering advice from

someone you trusted. Someone who could understand you more than any clinical website or school lecture ever could. (52)

Amber's mother is one of the few adult characters in the books currently under study that exemplifies sex-supportiveness and moves away from the anxiety that Stein addresses. In a way, Amber's mom is comparable to one of the emancipated mother characters in Joya Goffney's *Confessions of an Alleged Good Girl* (2022), who works at a sexual health clinic and gives her daughter, Sasha, a strong sexual education. For example, when protagonist Monique is struggling with her vaginismus, a disorder that causes severe pain during penetrative intercourse, Sasha encourages Monique to explore her own body first through masturbation. To Monique's embarrassment, in front of their friend, Reggie, Sasha advises her to make time to masturbate. Mortified, Monique begs Sasha to "*not* talk about masturbation in front of the B-O-Y" (178). But Sasha is unapologetic. She expresses, "'Masturbation isn't some terrible thing. It's normal. It's *good* for you. I masturbate all the time, and I'm sure that idiot in there has his hands down his pants at least three times a day'" (181-182). Monique is shocked by Sasha's honesty, "shift[ing] [her] eyes, highly uncomfortable. [She] could never admit to masturbating. Not in front of her, and not even in front of Dom [her ex-boyfriend]" (182).

It is not surprising that Monique feels such shame about masturbation. In his text *Solitary Sex* (2003), Thomas W. Laqueur demonstrates how masturbation became problematic in the eighteenth century and remains so to this day. He writes, "The problem with masturbation was not that it was a species of sexual pleasure but that it wasn't. At best, it was false pleasure, a perversion of the real" (190). In other words, because masturbation was (and

is) a solitary act, it was perceived to be false—sexual pleasure was meant to be shared, he maintains. He also notes:

... masturbation threatened to overwhelm the most protean and potentially creative of the mind's faculties—the imagination—and drive it over a cliff... Done alone, driven only by the mind's own creations, it was a primal, irremediable, and seductively, even addictively, easy transgression. Every man, woman, and child suddenly seemed to have access to the boundless excesses of gratification that had once been the privilege of Roman emperors. (210)

Because masturbation is a private act, it is seen as dangerous, or so the cultural narrative reasons. The state, a parent, and/or a teacher cannot control a child's private fantasies and the physical pleasures that this solitary time could bring. Monique, in *Confessions of an Alleged Good Girl*, is thus an example of historical anxiety. She understands that masturbation should be and is a taboo topic but she has friends around her who argue against this puritanical outlook. The shame around masturbation is a centuries-old inheritance, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick corroborates: “the European phobia over masturbation came early in the ‘sexualizing process’ described by Foucault, beginning around 1700 with publication of *Onania*, and spreading virulently after the 1750s” (139). This historical context helps explain why authors like Goffney may choose to depict sexual shame: by acknowledging the embarrassment young readers often feel when discussing sexual matters with parents or other adults, these narratives validate and normalize the experience, offering reassurance alongside critique. Monique and her mother ultimately attribute the shame around sex and the high standards of remaining sexually inexperienced as some of the anxieties that provoke Monique's vaginismus. Once her mother

steps in to help her, Monique addresses the shame she feels about her condition, and by the end of the novel, looks forward to experiencing pleasure with her new boyfriend (354). In sharing her sexual woes, Monique therefore becomes an agent of her own sexuality, rebelling against the assumption that because she is a woman, she must suffer in silence about her sexuality. By depicting sexual agency, the author positions adolescent sexuality as a site of autonomy and self-knowledge, demonstrating that YA fiction can both validate pleasure and challenge shame.

It is not just teenage girl characters who can be uncomfortable with the topic of masturbation, as a survey of contemporary YA and scholarship proves. Sedgwick informs readers that “anxiety about boys’ masturbation motivated mechanisms of school discipline and surveillance that were to contribute so much to the late-nineteenth-century emergence of a widespread, class-inflected male homosexual identity and hence to the modern crisis of male homo/heterosexual definition” (139-140). This long cultural tradition about anxiety around masturbation and the subsequent identity “crisis” of male sexuality is present in Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2014), an epistolary novel that alternates between two narrators and features a sequence about a masturbation phobia. The main character, Aristotle, is uncomfortable after receiving one of Dante’s letters, in which Dante asks Aristotle if he masturbates (221). Aristotle expresses annoyance:

It really made me mad that he sent that letter. Not that he wrote it, but that he sent it. I was really embarrassed by the whole thing. *I am not interested in having a conversation about masturbation with Dante. I am not interested in having a conversation about*

masturbation with anyone. What the hell was wrong with that guy? (220; author's emphasis)

Aristotle, like Monique, is uncomfortable with the topic (and act) of masturbation. Even if the two characters masturbate, for them, this is a private, unspoken act. Aristotle's discomfort may also be linked to his growing and very secret love for Dante. Dante, however, shows that he is comfortable with his burgeoning sexuality, comfortable enough to broach the topic with a friend. The novel contrasts these two young men, who approach their sexual agency so differently. While Dante is curious and exploratory, Aristotle suppresses his sexuality whenever he can. For the former, pleasure is a potential to be shared, even in conversation, whereas for the latter, pleasure needs to be restricted. This book presents a tension between the private and public sexual self, and the shame that still exists culturally about sexuality.

Male masturbation is often seen in YA through a lens of fear rather than pleasure, which sidelines agency and reinforces anxiety. Trites notes that gay narratives frequently emphasize fear and repression instead of sexual fulfillment (*Disturbing* 108). She points to Francesca Lia Block's novel, *Baby Be-Bop* (1995), where the protagonist, Dirk, dreams of his deceased father accepting his sexuality, but even in this imagined encounter, the father frames homosexuality "in terms of fear, in terms of repression, not in terms of passion, or pleasure or freedom" (108). Because the focus is on fear, pleasure is dismissed, and the narrative, as Trites reads it, becomes more about "gay sex [not being] acceptable unless it is accompanied by love" (109). We see this fear in an even more contemporary novel, Tucker Shaw's *When You Call My Name* (2022), a novel set in the 1980s during the height of the AIDS crisis, when global anxiety dominated public discourse about this disease. When Ben's mother finds her son's stash of men's erotic

magazines, she confronts him: ““Do you have a death wish or something?”” (11). For Ben’s mother, her son is choosing to put himself in danger by being gay, but Ben’s sexuality is not his choice. Masturbatory pleasure for Ben, produced by reading the “stack of glossy magazines he’d found in the men’s room at the train station a year ago—*Honcho, Inches, Mandate*” (11), provides the impetus for his mother to kick him out of the house. The message here is that being gay causes trouble (death, in this case), rather than pleasure. For Trites, “sexuality is a source of power and pleasure for many adolescents in YA novels, yet more novelists are comfortable portraying sexuality in terms of displeasure than pleasure” (116). As I argue, this ideology is shifting in contemporary YA, as authors write more sex-supportive narratives.

If many earlier YA texts associated sexuality with fear, repression, or danger, contemporary authors are beginning to offer more complex and wide-ranging examples that centre pleasure and teen sexual agency. One way this shift is visible is through the expanding range of identities represented in YA. In Bryan Gillis and Joanna Simpson’s *Sexual Content in Young Adult Literature*, a study published in 2015, the authors do not mention asexual YA characters at all, hinting that representation and scholarship on this topic is still limited. They note that research tends to focus instead on “adolescents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, intersex, and questioning (LGBTQIQ)... develop[ing] in the same way as their heterosexual peers,” while also asserting that “homosexuality is still not embraced by American society as a whole” and often results in bullying (5). However, by 2021, this lack of asexual representation has begun to change. Alice Oseman’s novel *Loveless*, in which the main character is aromantic and asexual—meaning, she neither desires romantic relationships (a romantic relationship as one without sex) nor sexual relationships—is a truly unique

representation of a new trend. Interestingly, the novel offers an illustration of an asexual character who still enjoys masturbation, despite her disinterest in romantic and sexual relationships. Oseman's protagonist, Georgia, masturbates when she is in the "mood," as she puts it:

My usual masturbation situation was just whenever I was in the mood to read a smutty fanfic.²⁸ It felt like a safe, fun way to get turned on and have a good time. So I would just think about the characters in the fic I was reading. Whatever combination of genders that involved—I wasn't fussy, as long as the writing was good. (215)

Again, the author does not include a scene of the character masturbating, but they do include characters discussing masturbation. Georgia's insistence that "the writing [be] good" signals that for her, the quality of the narrative matters as much as the act itself. As I argue in Chapter Three, my own participants echo this sentiment, noting that good writing is central to their pleasure when using sexual texts for masturbation. Returning to Georgia, we see that when she realizes she does not think of herself in sexual relationships, even when masturbating, and finds the idea of "having to actually touch genitals with someone" as disturbing (19), it becomes clear to her that she is asexual. Masturbation here, borrowing Kokkola's words, gives Georgia the "consequent self-knowledge" (17) to understand that she desires herself sexually, but not others. *Loveless* therefore inserts asexuality into conversations about pleasure, a topic not generally discussed in YA scholarship.

²⁸ "Smutty fanfic" is sexually explicit fan fiction, fiction written online by fans of certain novels/television shows. The next chapter examines fan fiction in more detail. Georgia explains that she enjoys *Harry Potter* fanfic where characters Harry and Draco are lovers (8). In the original novel, both characters are heterosexual nemeses.

The above examples illustrate occurrences of masturbation in YA and the movement towards sex-affirmative representations of it. In “Directions of Desire” Kokkola reminds readers that “if we care about the readers of [YA], and do not want to ridicule their sexual maturation, then thinking in terms of minded hands²⁹ and onanistic reading offers routes forward” (27). Kokkola reminds readers that as teen readers reach puberty, the “onset of desire” occurs (18); fiction that teens can masturbate to, Kokkola posits, “is one of the safest ways for teenagers to explore their sexual desires, making descriptions of onanistic desire highly relevant for teenage fiction” (19). While Kokkola analyzes Leena Leskinen’s novel *Huhtukuun Puutarha* (*April Garden*) (2003), I offer Snadowsky’s *Anatomy of a Boyfriend* (2007) as an example, which charts the transformation of masturbation from being seen as an act that provokes anxiety to one that eventually offers useful learning moments for the characters. Although it cannot be proven that teens use this novel to masturbate, the clear descriptions of the masturbatory acts leave space for potential arousal. Snadowsky’s protagonist Dominique, who has never orgasmed and does not usually masturbate, is interrupted by her father knocking on the door the one time she tries to self-pleasure: “I jump, yanking my hand out from under the covers. ‘Dad?’ I blurt out, my heart pounding in my ears. ‘Don’t come in!’” (23). After Dominique breaks up with her boyfriend, she tries to masturbate again. While she describes the grunt she makes when she orgasms as if she had “just been kneed in the stomach” (251)—not the most pleasurable

²⁹ Here, Kokkola references scholar Anne Mangen’s work: “In reading research, the term ‘minded hands’ has been coined by Anne Mangen to capture the sense-making capacities of the hands” (“Directions of Desire” 26). While Mangen looks at reading on screen versus on paper, Kokkola adapts the phrase here to argue that masturbation is an activity using (although not always) one’s hands, and therefore those who masturbate can understand themselves better sexually by their hands.

description, but an orgasm nonetheless—her masturbation scene is factual, almost offering a step-by-step guide for the reader:

Almost instinctively, with my right hand I start to move the machine up and down, from the top of my pubic hair line to the sheet. It feels good everywhere, but I start narrowing in on one particular spot, right above my vagina. More tingles and pulses. My heartbeat quickens, and I hold my breath. Suddenly it's as if a huge passageway opens up down there and all my body's energy is racing towards it. Then, an eruption. My hips thrash up and down like crazy... (251)

Although Snadowsky does not use the term, the reader can discern that the “one particular spot” she refers to is the clitoris. Snadowsky is explicit in her sexual diction for the reader, refraining from euphemism to affirm the agency Dominique uses to give herself pleasure. Within Leskinen’s novel, Kokkola explains that “the more obviously erotic section depicting the orgasm itself combines touch, sound, and sight; it uses metaphors for the aura experience that are comprehensible for those who have not explored their bodies in this way either alone or with another person” (24). Above, we see Snadowsky achieve a similar description, with her focus on Dominique’s movements, her lack of breath, and her “eruptive” movement, all available to the reader to understand the masturbatory act. A sex-positive novelist, Snadowsky offers YA readers an agentive teen protagonist who achieves orgasm on her own terms, through masturbation, and utilizes sex-positive language to achieve this agency. The use of direct, precise, and unembellished language not only makes the experience tangible for the reader but also reinforces Dominique’s autonomy, normalizes self-pleasure, and models how sexual acts can be described in a way that is empowering rather than shameful.

As I have demonstrated, contemporary YA authors are actively working to include more comprehensive experiences of masturbation to account for a range of experiences that young people can have as sexual beings. The progression from Norma Klein's Jody, who does not enjoy masturbating, to Snadowsky's Dominique, who learns and enjoys self-pleasure, is a testament to contemporary literature and its push towards including representations of teens as agents in their sexual lives, even if their masturbation scenes are uncomfortable, shameful, or (increasingly) enjoyable. Teen sexual agency, and with that, the more frequent depiction of masturbation as pleasurable, emphasizes the importance of representing teens as in control of their bodies. "A knowledge of pleasure," as Foucault writes in *History of Sexuality*, "a pleasure that comes of knowing pleasure, a knowledge-pleasure," already exists within humans; sex "shines forth; it is incandescent," he affirms (77). Some YA authors thus show that masturbation is pleasurable for teens and that the act enhances their self-knowledge, in the process resisting adults who, as Trites argues, "frequently subject adolescent readers to very consistent ideologies that attempt to regulate teen sexuality by repressing it" (116).

Having shown that contemporary YA increasingly represents masturbation as pleasurable and a site of sexual agency, it is clear these novels present teen sexuality as a range of experiences rather than something to be feared or shamed. Masturbation scenes emphasize teens' control over their own bodies and their capacity to explore desire safely, building self-knowledge in the process. But private acts are just one way YA engages with sexuality; another is through characters' interactions with sexual entertainment. Moving from self-pleasure to porn, these texts show how teens think about, critique, and navigate desire in a social context,

revealing how YA fiction continues to model sex-affirmative approaches even when cultural anxieties about pornography persist.

“Right, ‘cause you never look at porn”: Sexual Entertainment in YA

Over the past twenty years, there has been an increase in references to pornography (porn) or sexual entertainment in YA literature, as I track below. Pornography, defined as “books, magazines, films, etc. with no artistic value³⁰ that describe or show sexual acts or naked people in a way that is intended to be sexually exciting” (“Pornography”), is addressed in various (and sometimes conflicting) ways in YA. In some texts, an author merely mentions the subject of porn, as in Molly Lee’s *Ask Me Anything* (2019), while in others like John Green’s *Looking for Alaska* (2005) characters describe porn in technical terms and offer their opinions about the genre.³¹ Gillis and Simpson, in *Sexual Content in Young Adult Literature*, mention that the sexual content in young adult romance, such as *The Infinite Moment of Us* (2014), which includes thoroughly described sex scenes, may be considered “pornographic,” but in order to be labelled as such, “it must be proven that the intention or purpose of the material in question is solely to arouse, with no concern for aesthetic or emotional feelings” (122). YA fiction distinguishes itself from pornography through its aesthetic and emotional qualities, including description of setting, characterization, tone, and the interiority of its characters. Whereas pornographic texts focus almost exclusively on sexual acts, Lauren Myracle’s novel (as but one of many examples) situates sex within a broader narrative arc of intimacy and emotional vulnerability, using metaphor and narrative perspective to frame sexual scenes as part of the

³⁰ Porn as an artistic form is a conflicted debate; for the purpose of this dissertation, the definition I have chosen states that porn does not have artistic value.

³¹ In a similar vein, Alice Oseman’s *Loveless* (2020) mentions erotica.

character development rather than as isolated acts of arousal. Gillis and Simpson argue that *The Infinite Moment of Us* is not pornographic because of its aesthetic and emotional aspects: the novel employs literary strategies that establish characterization, setting, tone, and emotional intimacy between characters. However, whether a text is considered pornographic or not is not the focus here. What is noteworthy is that Gillis and Simpson highlight what YA novels achieve: they use literary strategies to frame sexual content as part of an emotional and narrative experience, in contrast to the mostly visual and arousal-focused depictions of sex that teens often encounter in pornography. What they do not examine is YA fiction in which characters explicitly speak about porn, yet research confirms that teens engage with porn (see Orenstein; Hasler).

This section analyzes several instances in which YA novels explicitly reference “porn” whether through characters’ consumption of sexual media or through their discussions of what counts as pornographic. For the purposes of this study, I define “porn” in YA not as descriptive sex scenes within the YA novels themselves, but as the representation of pornography as an external cultural product that characters encounter, interpret, and negotiate. In this section, I argue that such representations illuminate how YA fiction frames teenage sexual pleasure and agency in relation to broader cultural anxieties about pornography.

In the novels under examination in this chapter, whose publication dates range from 2001-2022, only a select handful mention porn, indicating that the topic is still developing in YA. In the introduction to her book, *Stigma and the Shaping of the Pornography Industry* (2015), Georgina Voss explores how stigma is the set standard when discussing pornography (3). Voss explains that porn “has been framed as corruptive, corrosive, seedy, and immoral, albeit

capable of generating enormous profits and – somehow – driving technology innovation” (7).

This anxiety could be attributed to the work of anti-porn radical feminists of the 1980s, such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, who argued that porn promoted women’s oppression (Kurylo 72). Because of these negative associations about porn, it is not a surprise that “cultural anxieties” exist about the genre, as Claire Meehan finds in her research about porn and young people (3). In her article, “‘I wouldn’t want you talking to my kids!’” (2023), Meehan interviewed 106 school-aged students in New Zealand, ranging from 12-16 years of age, to hear about their opinions and questions about sexual media/porn (8). Meehan was not concerned that many of her subjects were underage because it was clear that they were consuming sexual entertainment and she believed that their insights on the topic would be useful. From her research Meehan confirmed that “While they did not use academic jargon, [the students] spoke at length about issues such heteronormativity, discrimination, inequality, gendered double standards and patriarchal expectations. They discussed being infantilised [and] receiving sex education that was de-eroticised” (9). Moreover, students also spoke about personal worries about their own viewership, such as:

concern about porn addiction, treatment of performers and of partners of those who watch porn. Many of the young men wanted to know if their use of porn was ‘normal’ while some young women spoke for the first time about watching porn. They discussed some of the barriers they faced when accessing information, advice or support about porn and related concerns. (9)

In her study, Meehan gave adolescents agency in their exploration of pornography, rather than criticizing, infantilizing, or acting as an educator to them. The students were “grateful” to be a

part of Meehan's study as "common criticisms were that teachers [don't] 'understand what they're going through', that they lacked credibility, the information they received was 'one-sided and anti-porn' and generally, they received too little information provided too late" (9). Meehan argues ultimately that "there is a need to recognize and include young people's expertise as the current thought that porn studies with young people is 'dirty work' does young people (and all of us) a disservice" (12). In foregrounding direct work with teens, Meehan generates crucial analysis about how teens think about porn and gives students a place to have their voices heard.

Because porn generally carries a stigma (especially if teens are involved), I have found in my survey of contemporary literature limited examples that address porn directly. In "Directions of Desire" (2023) Kokkola examines erotic writing (erotica) as opposed to porn. Erotica is a type of text "that can contain plot, more complex characters, and aim to move the reader in other ways than through titillation" (Kokkola 58). Porn, on the other hand, is made with the sole purpose to arouse, and lacks plot and more importantly, complex characters. In her introduction, Kokkola mentions that conversations around "the sexiness of sex" or pleasurable sex are "deeply problematic in today's information-saturated environments, where teenagers have easier access to pornography than to more realistic information about how sexual encounters might lead to satisfying experiences for all parties involved" (16). While Kokkola emphasizes the "sexiness of sex" (the portrayal of sexual pleasure as a stimulating, affirming experience), my focus is different. In the YA novels I analyze, sexual encounters are rarely depicted for erotic titillation; instead, references to pornography appear as part of the narrative context, shaping how teen characters understand desire, set boundaries, and navigate sexual

agency. In other words, these novels do not aim to make the reader feel aroused but use allusions to porn within the story as a tool for character development and exploration of self-knowledge of who/what the character desires.

A complex example of porn in YA is John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005), in which characters discuss and grapple with pornography in ways that reveal curiosity, discomfort, and social norms. Sexual content in the novel functions as a narrative tool through which the characters explore desire, intimacy, and negotiate sexual experiences. The novel follows a teen named Miles (Pudge) who goes to boarding school and falls in love with Alaska, a free-spirited young woman. Still popular and widely read, the novel was finally adapted into a television mini-series in 2019, with the scene in which Green's two characters, Pudge and Alaska, present in both the novel and film. Within the book, the two watching porn together in the novel reveals the characters' complicated relationship with the genre.³² After Alaska asks Pudge if he likes porn, Pudge relays to the reader that he "hadn't seen much porn, but the idea of looking at porn with Alaska had a certain appeal" (85), highlighting both his curiosity and openness to sexual exploration with her. Once they start watching their chosen pornographic film, *The Bitches of Madison County*, Pudge explains what he sees:

A woman crouched on her hands and knees while a guy knelt behind her. She kept saying "Give it to me" and moaning, and though her eyes, brown and blank, betrayed her lack of interest, I couldn't help but take mental notes. *Hands on her shoulders*, I

³² The television adaptation also features this scene, with Alaska portrayed as both annoyed and bemused that Pudge finds the film arousing because, as Alaska says in the series, he has "yet to unlearn [his] patriarchal ways of seeing" ("The Nourishment Is Palatable").

noted. *Fast, but not too fast or it's going to be over, fast. Keep your grunting to a minimum.* (87, author's emphasis)

This scene interrogates porn by framing viewership as simultaneously problematic and pleasurable, and also reveals Alaska's own discomfort with porn. Earlier in the novel, Alaska invites Pudge to watch porn, signaling curiosity and a willingness to explore sexual content; yet her responses throughout the scene demonstrate critical engagement. Alaska is not impressed by the film, criticizing the objectification of the woman on the screen, reminding her friend that it is not "a *man* and a *woman*. It's a penis and a vagina. What's erotic about that? Where's the kissing?" (88). With her question, Green highlights Alaska's insistence on emotional and relational intimacy as being central to sexual pleasure. The contrast between man/woman and penis/vagina emphasizes that Alaska also distinguishes between sex as transactional versus sex with feeling. She further critiques the film when she inserts herself into the critique: "This is what you make us do for money", she tells Pudge, as she acknowledges the societal and capitalistic dimensions of porn (88). Alaska's interrogation captures the simultaneous interest and disgust of her feelings towards porn. Even though she challenges Pudge's attraction to the film—she says, "Look me in the eye and tell me this doesn't turn you on, Pudge"—she ultimately voices that it is "healthy" that he is aroused (88). Through her language and perspective, Green conveys the emotional and moral dimensions of sexual curiosity, offering readers a model of critical engagement with sexual content.

Green's approach is in direct contrast to Garrett's *Full Disclosure* (2019); Garrett spotlights adolescent agency in her acceptance of teen viewership and sexual autonomy. Simone, the novel's protagonist, enjoys porn and assumes that her partner Miles does as well.

In a particularly unique scene for YA literature, Simone briefly comments on the variety of porn that is available and wonders what type of porn Miles watches. Simone tells the reader, “According to the extremely reliable resource of Internet porn, all kinds of situations can lead to sex: making salad, tutoring, playing soccer... the possibilities are endless. The question isn’t *if* Miles watches porn, but whether or not we watch the same things” (195). Here, Simone reveals to the reader that any regular daily activity such as “making salad” or “tutoring” can lead to sex, signaling that desire and fantasy can stem from any activity, just as porn demonstrates. Simone’s comment here is also reminiscent of Peggy Orenstein’s remark in *Boys and Sex* (2020), in which she explains that it would be foolish of her to even ask if the boys she interviewed watched porn: “I never asked a boy in my interviews *whether* he watched porn (nor, unlike with girls I interviewed, did I ask *whether* he had ever masturbated). That would have shot my credibility to hell. Because of course all of them—every single one—had. Instead, my question was when they first saw it” (44). While both authors clearly make gendered assumptions, what Garrett and Orenstein reveal is that watching sexual entertainment is common among young people, and more specifically according to Garrett, that Simone displays agency in her ability to watch and enjoy porn, and in her excitement that Miles does as well.

Porn is also mentioned in YA in relation to sexual expectations and how viewership can lead to self-knowledge. In *Full Disclosure*, Simone’s perspective on porn, such as that “all kinds of situations can lead to sex” (195), illustrates how teens may develop either healthy or skewed ideas about sex outside of sexual entertainment. In *Disturbing the Universe*, Trites argues that after a sexual experience in the novel *White Romance* (1987), “the protagonist ends up sadder and wiser, and the reader has been exposed to a very direct ideology: sexuality is powerful and

can hurt people” (85). Trites’ explorations of texts from 1985-1994 “share the same ideological message that sex is more to be feared than celebrated” (85). Since Trites’ publication, there are still examples of the sadness that sexual relationships can bring in fictional texts (as I explore below in relation to *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*), but there is also an acknowledgment that this sadness begets character growth, integral for adolescent development. For example, in David Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), a book about two teen boys kissing for 32 hours (inspired by real-life events), one of the subplots is about Cooper, a depressed teen who desperately wants to have casual sex with a man named Julian whom he meets online. When the two are alone and start to become intimate, Cooper reveals to the reader, “If this were porn, they’d be naked by now, they’d be blowing each other” (103). For Cooper, porn has created the expectation that casual sex is quick and impersonal. His surprise and disappointment when Julian communicates his needs to go slower highlight how porn shapes, and sometimes distorts, sexual scripts for teens. In this way, Levithan does not condemn Cooper’s engagement with porn, but instead uses it to show how teens navigate the gap between fantasy and reality—an act that is itself a form of sexual learning and agency. Both Garrett and Levithan highlight the acceptance of porn usage among their teen characters, and also the expectations (and the possible disappointments) that watching porn can generate. Sex is not described here in detail, but the novel reflects an acknowledgment that underage teens do watch porn, which is corroborated by Peggy Orenstein’s research (2016, 2022) and Claire Meehan’s studies (2023). Overall, Simone’s excitement in *Full Disclosure* in wondering if she and Miles watch the same type of porn, and Cooper’s disappointment in *Two Boys Kissing* that his one-night stand is not living up to his expectations, suggest that contemporary teens do engage

with porn by choice; both novels exemplify teen agency and resist moralizing about their use of porn.

The final novel that I examine that mentions porn is L.C. Rosen's *Jack of Hearts (And Other Parts)* (2018) which features the titular character, Jack, who is 17 years old, openly gay, and has multiple sexual partners throughout the novel. The text emphasizes his sexual agency through his openness with other characters and himself about his sexual life. While Antero Garcia notes in *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature* (2013) that texts centering LGBTQ+ experiences remain scarce in YA (90), Rosen's novel depicts a happy, openly gay teen, increasing representation of LGBTQ+ characters in contemporary literature. Like Lee's *Ask Me Anything*, Jack becomes involved in giving anonymous online advice to his peers who have questions about their sexuality. He answers a wide range of questions about anal sex, having vaginal sex for the first time, asexuality, etc. Porn is mentioned briefly by different characters, as when Jack's two friends, Jenna and Ben, discuss joining online dating apps. Ben does not want to sign up yet, as he is still 17 and does not "'like lying online,'" but Jenna retorts, "'Right, 'cause you never look at porn'" (51), as porn is for viewers over 18, insinuating that Ben already partakes in activities outside the appropriate age range. Jenna's sarcasm refers to the use of sexual entertainment by the teens. Jack's own experience with porn occurs when he is about to have casual sex with Ricky, and takes his phone to "'see what porn [Ricky] look[s] at'" (188). While the narrative tension surrounding Jack involves a stalking and blackmail plot, his engagement with porn is normalized by the narrative and celebrated as is his unabashed sexual exploration. By choosing when and how to access sexual material and use it to anticipate sexual encounters responsibly, Jack's experience demonstrates self-directed sexual agency. His consumption of

porn is not passive, but influenced by pleasure, curiosity, and informed decision-making, allowing him to explore desire safely and autonomously. In contrast to *Looking for Alaska*, where porn is framed as morally or socially problematic, *Jack of Hearts* represents porn as a legitimate, constructive component of teen sexual life, reinforcing agency by showing that engaging with sexuality—pleasurably and without shame—is a form of empowerment.

Overall, while there seems to be a limited representation of conversations about porn in these examples of YA, there is clear development in how porn is addressed, from the oldest text (Green's *Looking for Alaska*) to the newer texts, such as *Jack of Hearts*: there is movement from a more neutral/negative framing of porn in *Looking for Alaska* to a neutral/positive acknowledgement in *Jack of Hearts*. In these texts, the idea of sexual agency remains at the forefront; these teen protagonists can question porn as Alaska does (88), reframe why their realities are not lining up with porn narratives like in *Two Boys Kissing* (103), and even find pleasure from watching porn, as we see with Simone in *Full Disclosure* (195). By actively reflecting on, negotiating, and sometimes resisting or integrating the sexual content available to them, these characters exercise informed decision-making and autonomy over their sexual experiences. In this way, the widespread accessibility of porn in the real world is mirrored in contemporary YA, which increasingly portrays teen sexuality as an area for active engagement rather than passive consumption, highlighting the potential for adolescent sexual agency.

Building on the ways YA fiction engages with sexual entertainment, we can see a natural progression into narratives that depict teens' first sexual experiences. Just as characters negotiate pornography in their understanding of desire, sexual debuts in YA similarly explore agency and self-discovery in intimate encounters. Where porn references often create space for

reflection on desire from a somewhat removed perspective, sexual debut scenes place characters—and by extension, readers—closer to the physical and emotional realities of sex. In both cases, YA texts provide a framework for teens to engage with sexuality actively, modeling pleasure within culturally and socially mediated contexts, as I explore below.

“Never have I ever before”: Sexual Debuts in YA

In “august,” a pop track featured on Taylor Swift’s *folklore* album (2020), the song’s narrator shares the hushed excitement of having their sexual debut as Swift sings, “Salt air, and the rust on your door / I never needed anything more / Whispers of ‘Are you sure’ / ‘Never have I ever before.’” In these four lines, Swift, and co-writer Jack Antonoff, capture the intensity of the adolescent state: the sweetness of summertime for first love, a creaky old door that leads to the lovers’ bed, the emphasis on consent, and a vocalized confession that this is a sexual debut. Overall, the beginning of the song highlights teenage sexual desire. Since the beginning of her career, Swift has emphasized the high school romance narrative in her songs, as can be seen in her song “Fifteen” from *Fearless* (2008) and, more recently, in her *TORTURED POETS DEPARTMENT: THE ANTHOLOGY* (2024) with the song “So High School” in which she sings about falling in love in her thirties and suddenly feeling “bittersweet sixteen” again. I include Swift here to stress the impact of teen sexuality in her songs and the cultural fixation on sexual debut. We see this cultural fascination in academic scholarship as well, as in Jessica Valenti’s work in *The Purity Myth* (2010) and Peggy Orenstein’s *Girls & Sex* (2016) and *Boys & Sex* (2020). Scholars and artists alike are captivated by sexual debut.

Sexual debuts depicted in YA range from characters having oral sex for the first time to penetrative intercourse, and, only more recently, narratives move away from emphasizing the

predominantly negative consequences of this event for the sexually active teen character. In her chapter “Adolescence, innocence and power” (2013), Kokkola notes, “By associating adolescent sexuality with pain and punishment whilst adult sexuality is portrayed as a source of pleasure, adolescents are rendered deviant” (39). This deviancy has surfaced in YA as a norm, where teens who are sexually active are depicted as being prone to experiencing negative consequences for their actions, as Cart also explains (144). Authors then, as Kokkola finds, “are caught between the desire to represent adolescent sexuality as honestly and realistically as they can within a society where the dominant ideology is that adolescent sexuality is deviant” (39). One method that authors use to establish that sex has occurred is through the strategic omission of descriptive sexual material; rather than depicting the act in detail, they often hint at sexual activity while leaving the intimate details unwritten, as in Brashares’ *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2001). This omission acknowledges the sexual experience without dramatizing it, respecting both the characters’ (and readers’) agency and the limits imposed by societal norms. Over the last two decades, even if characters use clearer language to communicate their desires, the actual sexual scene is often left undescribed. For example, in Garrett’s *Full Disclosure*, Simone communicates to Miles that she wants to give him a blow job, not to “[pay] him back” after he performs cunnilingus on her, but because she “want[s] to make [him] feel good too” (198). Garrett does not provide a step-by-step detail of Simone pleasuring Miles; instead, she finishes the chapter with the suggestive phrase that describes Simone “pulling at [Miles’] zipper” (198). Here, Garrett omits descriptive sexual material, but the imagery hints that the characters are headed towards pleasure. Although there is no sexual description,

authors like Garrett depict sexual experiences that solidify teen agency because the teens decide to have sex and foreground pleasurable experiences without fear.

In this section, I explore examples of sexual debut from the last twenty-one years of YA fiction to argue that although sexual content remains mostly implied rather than descriptively written, there is a push to value teens' agency over their own bodies and the sexual choices they make, with authors featuring pleasurable sexual experiences.

Aughts, or 2000-2009 - A Time of Apprehension

The Aughts era of YA books that do not contain many (if any) sexual descriptions; instead, some of these novels only refer to sex obliquely or have characters talk in very general terms about sex. Even so, because sexual experiences shape how characters navigate relationships afterward, these texts grant adolescent protagonists a form of agency over their bodies by showing the characters actively managing the outcomes of their choices. This representation of adolescent sexual agency also connects to how readers engage with sexual desire in YA: Kokkola argues that reading about carnal desires—desires that are satisfied through the orifices such as the vagina, anus, and mouth—enables readers to think about “discourses of power” and how power is directly related to carnality (“Carnality” 99).³³ This issue is important because YA often teaches teenagers that sexual desire or action will irrevocably lead to pain and loss, as *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* demonstrates. Trites echoes this statement, noting that in YA, “... sex is more to be feared than celebrated” (85).

³³ While Kokkola does not include a formal definition of carnality in her text, it can be defined as “the physical feelings and wants of the body.” See <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/carnality>.

Foucault's work helps explain why sexual desire is tightly regulated and often feared in adolescence. As he observes in *The History of Sexuality*:

The separation of grown-ups and children, the polarity established between the parents' bedroom and that of the children... the relative segregation of boys and girls, the strict instructions as to the care of nursing infants (maternal breast-feeding, hygiene), the attention focused on infantile sexuality, the supposed dangers of masturbation...: all this made the family, even when brought down to its smallest dimensions, a complicated network, saturated with multiple, fragmentary, and mobile sexualities. (46)

This passage highlights how historical social structures positioned adults as authorities over sexuality, while children were taught to regulate and fear their own desires. Pleasure and power are intertwined rather than opposed, meaning adolescent desire can be empowering but always exists within a network of constraints (48). Within this framework, teen sexual agency is negotiated rather than absolute: adolescents can explore desire, reflect on their experiences, and make autonomous decisions about their bodies, yet their agency is always already shaped and limited by cultural norms and adult authority.

Early YA texts often portray sex as risky, reinforcing caution, as in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, whereas other texts illustrate a range of emotional and sexual experiences. In *Before I Die*, Tessa's first sexual encounter, a one-night stand, is consensual but not entirely enjoyable, diverging from what she expected and showing that sexual experiences can be complex and varied (27). Contemporary YA increasingly depicts moments of pleasure and desire alongside experiences that are awkward, disappointing, or challenging, illustrating how

characters negotiate intimacy and reflect critically on sexual encounters. This range underscores Foucault's point that sexuality is both a site of constraint and potential empowerment.

Before moving into more contemporary representations of sexuality in YA, I begin with Ann Brashares' *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2001) (*The Sisterhood*), which features Bridget experiencing penetrative sex for the first time. Although the act itself is not described, Brashares portrays teenage sexual agency through Bridget's sexual debut. Naomi Lesley, in "Too Good to Be True" (2011), positions Bridget as an "ideal youth," a teen with "outstanding promise and energy" (45). After having sex, she becomes "aware of her own fragility and transform[s] her from a superficially ideal youth to an authentically troubled (and therefore stronger) one" (48). By "authentically troubled," Lesley means that Bridget confronts realistic emotions and vulnerabilities through the sexual act, gaining self-awareness rather than remaining an idealized, flawless figure. This development reflects sexual agency, as Bridget navigates her emerging sexual experience and exercises autonomy over her feelings and choices.

Importantly, Lesley does not claim that texts from the Aughts typically depict a "fall" from ideal youth; instead, her analysis focuses on how her chosen texts respond to cultural anxieties about adolescence and sexuality. She observes that these works "incorporate and respond to popularized 'expert' fears and assumptions about youth" (34) and notes that "the assumption of adolescent turmoil was commonly supported by psychologists in the years following [Stanley] Hall's publication of *Adolescence*" (43), situating Bridget's transformation within broader historical and social discourses rather than suggesting a standard pattern for the period. This turmoil has historically bled into novels, as can be seen in *The Sisterhood*. The novel

follows four best friends as they are separated over the summer for the first time, and who “magically” find a pair of jeans that fits all four of their very different body types. Before parting ways for the summer, they write a set of rules for the pants. Rule number four states, “You must never let a boy take off the Pants (although you may take them off yourself in his presence)” (24). This rule celebrates the girls’ sexual agency since each must actively remove the pants themselves if they are looking to have a sexual experience. As Brashares’ Bridget, the sporty, tall, beautiful blonde friend of the group, establishes herself in Baja, Mexico at soccer camp, she falls for one of the 19-year-old coaches, Eric. Bridget becomes obsessed with having sex with Eric; although 15 years old, she tells Eric that she is 16 (the age of consent in her hometown of Bethesda, Maryland), and the narration follows her desire and subsequent heartbreak over losing Eric after having sex with him. Bridget’s desire forms the main conflict of her storyline; she fixates over Eric, but the consummation of their relationship causes her pain and turmoil.

When applying Kokkola’s discussion about the discourse of power to *The Sisterhood*, Bridget is quite firm in her claim that she was cognizant in the decision-making process to have sex, further cementing Brashares’ creation of an active sexual agent in Bridget. When Eric apologizes to her and takes responsibility for causing her pain, explaining that he should have known better because he is older, she retorts, ““It was my choice to come”” (224). The narrator, then, reflecting Bridget’s thoughts, proclaims, “How dare he take her power?” (224). Although mentally unwell after the experience, Bridget refuses to pass the responsibility for her actions off onto Eric. She does not blame her age for her pain or decision to have sex. Bridget’s experience functions as an example of agency as she does not paint herself as a casualty of physical intimacy. Eleanor Wood, a Young Adult librarian, explains, “Many contemporary novels

offer negative consequences for the girls who partake in sex, in the form of unpleasant or unwanted sex, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, or emotional turmoil” (par. 4). Although contemporary YA often depicts negative consequences for teen sexual activity as Wood describes, Bridget’s emotional response does not undermine her agency. Her feelings of mental distress after sex reflect a realistic complexity in sexual debut: even when teens experience confusion, discomfort, or sadness, they can still act autonomously and take responsibility for their choices. In this way, *The Sisterhood* models agency as the capacity to navigate desire, responsibility, and emotional consequences, rather than equating sexual experience solely with pleasure or harm. Even though pleasure is absent and Bridget becomes depressed, her ability to move forward demonstrates that sexual agency is about decision-making and self-awareness, not just positive feelings or outcomes.

Bridget’s sexual agency in *The Sisterhood* is shaped not only by her decision-making and self-awareness but also by her athletic, socially valorized body, which supports her ability to navigate desire and responsibility confidently. This connection between bodily autonomy and sexual agency resonates with Beth Younger’s analysis of female sexuality in YA, where body size and perceived physical fitness often influence how characters exercise control over their sexual lives. Younger argues that a thinner protagonist—who, like Bridget, occupies a more socially idealized body—is more frequently depicted as being “in charge of both her body and her sexual life” (48). By foregrounding the link between body and agency, Younger provides a framework for understanding how YA narratives grant or constrain sexual autonomy.

Younger’s argument can be applied to Jenny Downham’s *Before I Die* (2007), a YA narrative in which the main protagonist, Tessa, wants to have sex and exhibits agency to satisfy

her wishes, but seems only able to show such desire because she is soon to die, whereas her friend Zoey, who enjoys sex and is healthy, becomes pregnant. Younger reminds readers that “Young Adult fictions frequently depict female sexuality as a threatening force” (45). Tessa’s sexuality is framed as non-threatening because of her terminal cancer; the narrative thus permits her to engage in sex without consequences. Unlike Brashares’ Bridget, Tessa is dying of cancer and creates a “bucket list” so that she feels that she has lived fully. Tessa’s sexual debut occurs with a young man whom she meets at a club, and she romanticizes the moment before they start having sex: “Maybe we don’t have to have sex. Maybe we could just lie down and snuggle up, find sleep in each other’s arms under the duvet. Maybe we’ll fall in love. He’ll hunt for a cure and I’ll live forever. But no. ‘Have you got condoms?’ he whispers. ‘I’ve run out’” (23). The subsequent experience is disappointing. Tessa notices “lots of things while the red neon numbers on his radio alarm move from 3:15-3:19. [She] notice[s] that his shoes are on the side by the door. The door isn’t shut properly... He supports himself with his arms, moving slowly above [her], his face turned to one side, his eyes tight shut” (25). The subsequent experience, though brief and disappointing, emphasizes her choice and engagement with desire, even in the absence of pleasure: “This is it. It’s really happening. I’m living it now. Sex” (25). Afterwards, Tessa feels “lonely and [her] stomach hurts. Like she’s been opened up inside” (33). This pain echoes the feelings Brashares’ Bridget claims when she notes how “strange” she felt after her sexual debut (284). When Tessa speaks about how she is feeling, her friend, Zoey, remarks that Tessa is “‘taking it all too seriously... Sex is a way of being with someone, that’s all. It’s just a way of keeping warm and feeling attractive’” (Downham 33). Zoey is much more sexually experienced than Tessa; she shares with Tessa that her mother told her that “sex was only three

minutes of pleasure” (27). Although Zoey finds ways to have enjoyable sex by letting her sexual partners “think they’re great at it, [and] somehow it turns out all right” (27), her spontaneous sexual jaunts ultimately get her pregnant. She cries, “I’m so stupid. How could I have been so stupid? My mum’s going to find out now. I should’ve gone to a chemist and got the morning-after pill. I wish I’d never met him!” (166). Like Katherine’s friend Sybil in *Forever*, Zoey is healthy and thus physically heavier than Tessa, who is frail from her cancer. Zoey’s fuller body and sexual appetite must be “punished for her sexual activities (and her weight) with pregnancy” (Younger 50). Pleasure, for Zoey, is detrimental, whereas Tessa’s eventual sexual experience with her boyfriend, Adam, places pleasure at the forefront:

I’m not sure whose hand belongs to who. I’m Tessa. I’m Adam. It’s utterly beautiful not to know my own edges. The feel of us under our fingers. The taste of us on our tongues... It’s as if my heart springs up and marries my soul, as my whole body implodes. Like a stone falling into a pond, circles and circles of love ripple through me. Adam shouts for joy. (212)

Downham’s language here emphasizes Tessa’s active participation and bodily awareness, an act that she has control over, unlike her cancer. The description of “not knowing my own edges” and “circles and circles of love” signals her capacity to surrender to desire while still fully inhabiting her body and sensations, demonstrating a nuanced sexual agency that blends pleasure and emotional intimacy. This is Tessa’s quiet revelation (“like a stone falling into a pond”) that she is experiencing ecstasy, a true moment of sexual desire being fulfilled. For Downham, because Tessa is in an established relationship with her sexual partner, the experience is more enjoyable—emotional intimacy is an important part of her arousal and

pleasure. Neither Brashares nor Downham provide explicit sexual detail; instead, their narratives emphasize the emotional and transformative effects of sexual experiences. Across these texts, the focus is less on the mechanics of sex than on how young women navigate desire, responsibility, and self-awareness in their sexual debuts. Even when sexual experiences are disappointing or painful, the protagonists' ability to make choices and reflect on their experiences demonstrate a growing sense of sexual agency in YA literature during the Aughts.

Historically, as K. Paige Harden notes in "A Sex-Positive Framework for Research on Adolescent Sexuality" (2014), sexual debuts have been defined through a "risk framework" where "adolescent sexuality is viewed as morally wrong, inherently deviant, and socially problematic" (456). A sex-positive framework emphasizes how "sexuality is considered a normative and essential part of human development" (457). Harden also notes that heterosexual marriage after a life of abstinence "is not assumed to be the sole option for healthy sexual behaviour" and that "adolescent sexuality is conceptualized as having potentially positive aspects and consequences, including pleasure, intimacy, competence and well-being" (457). John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005) represents a sex-affirmative experience between adolescents in YA, which ultimately centres on the "positive aspects" of sexuality. Whereas *The Sisterhood* and *Before I Die* focus on the risks that sex can bring (i.e.. depression for Bridget, and pregnancy for Zoey), Green's protagonist Pudge experiences his sexual debut in a frame of growth: he has to learn about mutual pleasure. In his experience, Pudge asserts himself when he asks for help when the experience of trying fellatio with his girlfriend, Lara, is uncomfortable and awkward:

And then she wrapped her hand around it and put it into her mouth.

And waited.

We were both very still. She did not move a muscle in her body, and I did not move a muscle in mine. I knew that at this point something else was supposed to happen, but I wasn't quite sure what.

She stayed still. I could feel her nervous breath. For minutes... she lay there, stock-still with my penis in her mouth, and I sat there, waiting.

And then she took it out of her mouth and looked up at me quizzically.

"Should I do sometheeng?³⁴"

"Um. I don't know," I said. Everything I'd learned from watching porn with Alaska suddenly exited my brain. I thought maybe she should move her head up and down, but wouldn't that choke her? So I just stayed quiet.

"Should I, like, bite?"

"Don't bite! I mean, I don't think. I think—I mean, that felt good. That was nice. I don't know if there's something else."

"I mean, but you deedn't—"

"Um. Maybe we should ask Alaska." (127)

The repetition of the word "and" here emphasizes the nervous pointedness of the act for the two, which is also present in the passage's silence and stillness between the couple. This scene represents an honest description of sexual debut with real emotions such as anxiety, excitement, and mild fear. There is also the revelation that asking someone for help would not

³⁴ Lara is Romanian; the author signals her accent with the double "e."

be embarrassing, but useful to make the experience more pleasurable, a sure expression of agency. After this excerpt, Pudge and Lara find Alaska, Pudge's good friend and someone whom he loves, who then explains how to perform fellatio. The reader does not get a step-by-step guide; Alaska's instructions remain unwritten. For Pudge, "It [is his] first orgasm with a girl, and afterward, [he is] embarrassed and nervous, and so, clearly, [is] Lara, who finally broke the silence by asking, 'So, want to do some homework?'" (128). This scene features a relatively pleasurable sexual encounter with the two characters communicating about what to do and being patient with each other. Green highlights his adolescent characters' sexual agency and the result is pleasure, albeit with some mild "embarrassment" (128). By portraying adolescent sexual debut as a negotiated, communicative, and ultimately pleasurable experience, Green's novel exemplifies the shift away from risk-focused narratives toward sex-affirmative approaches. This move anticipates the broader adoption of frameworks such as the "life-course approach" (explored below) or sex-positive perspective in YA literature, which center sexual development as an educative and agentic process rather than a source of danger or shame.

By the end of the Aughts, YA literature increasingly embraces sex-affirmative narratives that frame adolescent sexual development as a normal and educative experience. Another term under a sex-positive framework is the "life-course approach," as psychologist Carolyn Tucker Halpern presents in her article, "Sexual and Reproductive Health: Priorities for the Next Decade" (2010), and Cheng et al. corroborate in "Sexual Subjectivity among Adolescent Girls: Social Disadvantages and Young Adult Outcomes" (2014). A "life-course approach" to sexuality emphasizes "development as a trajectory; its emphasis on interactive relationships of biological, behavioural, and social-contextual factors; and its focus on how those relationships may be

changed by variable timing and sequences of life experiences and transitions” (Halpern 6). In this framework, sexuality is understood as developing unevenly across individuals and over time, such that adolescents may arrive at readiness, curiosity, or desire through different pathways and at different moments. This stands in contrast to a risk approach, which, as Cheng et al. note, often leaves “many topics...off the table—such as how to confidently navigate and enjoy sexual activities” (517). Pleasure, then, becomes one sexual component of sexual development shaped by context. When applied to a YA novel, such as Daria Snadowsky’s *Anatomy of a Boyfriend* (2007), a life-course approach foregrounds teen agency by tracking development across experiences. Snadowsky’s protagonist, Dominique (Dom), engages in numerous sexual experiences with her boyfriend, Wes, before they break up. Dom learns much about herself through this sexual activity: she finds some actions “gross,” such as using saliva as lubrication for a hand job (115), and understands that she can only feel comfortable having penetrative sex once Wes declares that he loves her (154). Ultimately, her sexual debut is not pleasurable; Wes “shoves” himself into Dom “at full force” (154). As their relationship goes on, the two continue to have oral sex, with Dom giving Wes blow jobs (192) and faking an orgasm while experiencing cunnilingus. Dom even insists on using a dental dam although this is both of their sexual debuts (190-191). By situating Dom’s sexual experiences along a developmental trajectory, the novel exemplifies a life-course perspective: sexuality is not a single event, but an ongoing process in which emotional, social, and bodily factors intersect to shape self-knowledge. In this way, Dom’s sexual debut functions more as the beginning of her growth as a sexual subject, illustrating how YA narratives can depict sexuality as part of a broader developmental arc.

Overall, the Aughts era of YA positions teenage protagonists as agentive. While earlier texts such as *The Sisterhood* and *Before I Die* operate in a risk framework, as the decade continues, there is a clear move towards sex-positive representations of teen sexuality. Select novels, such as *Looking for Alaska*, portray characters on a path of growth that includes having a range of sexual experiences. This emphasis on sexual development continues into the 2010s and up to present day, where narratives increasingly highlight communication during sexual growth, as seen with Ibby and Sasha in *Sick Kids in Love* (which I discuss further below).

2010s to Today--Pleasure on the Rise

In *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality* (2013), Kokkola maintains that “the vast array of novels depicting teenagers who are or have been sexually active reveal that many adult writers are deeply concerned about the on-set of carnal desire, and connect these desires with the *sturm und drang* of adolescence” (12). Thus, sexual desire is paired with a teen’s emotional upheaval due to pubertal changes. Kokkola, however, warns against using fiction as a tool for sexual education. She clarifies that “the fiction [she] discuss[es] is not intended as sex education, even though it may well fit that role for some readers” (12). While I agree with Kokkola that YA fiction does not replace formal sex education or sexual health manuals, contemporary YA novels can be understood as a supplementary site of sexual meaning-making. Rather than offering factual instruction, these texts use characterization, plot, and narrative distance to explore desire, pleasure, consent, and agency in ways distinct from formal educational materials. In this way, YA fiction creates a low-risk imaginative context in which readers can consider sexual agency and intimacy through characters’ experiences, allowing meaning-making to occur without the immediacy or vulnerability of lived practice. This

distinction is important: sex education involves providing factual, practical information, while didacticism in YA fiction shapes those narratives into moral lessons or cautionary tales. The novels examined in this section are not designed to serve as formal examples of sex education, nor do they rely on the didacticism of earlier works that warned teens away from sex through narratives of punishment or fear. Concerns related to burgeoning teenage sexuality, such as pregnancy, are not the focus in this era. In fact, the following contemporary novels celebrate the “on-set of carnal desire,” as Kokkola describes. Consequently, many YA texts published from the start of 2010 to the present portray adolescent sexuality as a positive, pleasurable experience, and focus on teen sexual agency and sexual enjoyment as central aspects of adolescent subjectivity.

A contemporary novel that foregrounds teen sexual agency is Lauren Myracle’s *The Infinite Moment of Us* (2014). When Wren and Charlie start having a sexually intimate relationship, the narrator reveals how the two arouse each other through explicit diction. Charlie, for example, is completely in tune with Wren, and, even hearing her “almost moan” stirs his “cock” (116-117). The use of the word “cock” here is reminiscent of Jack’s usage in *Jack of Hearts* (216), which emphasizes the male protagonist’s ease with sexual language. The candor of the slang word suggests the sexually intimate relationship between the two and the pleasure that relationship brings. Moreover, the reader is told clearly how the two enjoy each other: Wren playfully sucking on Charlie’s finger (139); Wren giving Charlie a blow job, remarking how “really strange” it is, “mov[ing] up and down” (241). Here Myracle’s writing focuses on the character’s reflection, implying that Wren is growing in her sexual agency. Myracle’s focus on the characters’ feelings about their physical intimacy also emphasizes the

emotional aspect of sex. Overall, this text portrays adolescent sexual agency as healthy, and works against the common “portrayals of sexuality within YA literature [which] often reveal an adult desire to control this aspect of adolescent life and thought” (Lewis and Durand 41), as the characters are free to be sexual.

Moments of vivid pleasure were rare in YA before the 2010s, but as contemporary novels like *The Infinite Moment of Us* demonstrate, there is a movement toward including more sexually agentic characters. As discussed in “Sexual Subjectivity among Adolescent Girls: Social Disadvantage and Young Adult Outcome”, Simon Cheng et al. explore the “life-course approach” to sexual subjectivity in teen girls. Sexual subjectivity, defined as “the perceptions of pleasure from the body and the experience of being sexual” (517), is directly linked to sexual agency; it is through sexual agency that one gleans pleasure, they argue. In their studies, the authors utilize the ongoing American project hosted by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) “to examine teenage girls’ expectations of sexual subjectivity in navigating heterosexual interactions” (516).³⁵ (Interestingly, Add Health “excludes LGBT youth as subjects worthy of study” [538]; its findings are therefore limited to heterosexual girls). Of note in Add Health’s study is the scoring of what the girls’ “expectations of pleasure during intercourse” would be (522). The authors found that “Black and Latina girls report significantly lower expectations of pleasure during intercourse than white girls” and that “as parental education increases, so do expectations of pleasure during intercourse and self-efficacy” (525). Clearly,

³⁵ “The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) is a longitudinal study of a nationally [American] representative sample of over 20,000 adolescents who were in grades 7-12 during the 1994-95 school year, and have been followed for five waves to date, most recently in 2016-18. Over the years, Add Health has collected rich demographic, social, familial, behavioral, psychosocial, cognitive, and health survey data from participants and their parents.” See <https://addhealth.cpc.unc.edu/>.

then, factors such as race and education affect girls' ideas of pleasure. Broadly, the authors argue that "when girls' sexuality is constructed as a problem to be solved—rather than empowered—they are in a vulnerable position for claiming sexual subjectivity" (518). Thus, when a teen girl feels that being a sexual person is a problem, she is in a fragile state in terms of how she thinks about her body.

We see the idea of the body as a problem in *The Poet X*, where Xiomara believes her body is a source of trouble (21; 220); the fact that she is Latina is important when considering how Xiomara thinks about sex as well. Xiomara's Catholic and Latina upbringing reinforces the cultural scripts Cheng et al. identify as producing "lower expectations of pleasure" (525), shaping her tentative relationship to sexual pleasure. We see this nervous sexual subjectivity in her act of masturbation and later in her guilt about wanting to have sex. Acevedo complicates this framing by depicting Xiomara's sexual agency being achieved through her exploration of her erotic self through her writing. While Xiomara is still limited by the adults in her life (her mother, her church's priest), her insistence on writing and her rebellion in seeing Aman signal that she has moments of sexual agency. Applying Cheng et al.'s findings to fiction of the 2010s, then, I would argue that more recent YA texts, such as *The Infinite Moment of Us* and *Odd One Out*, generally seem to approach sexuality as less of a "problem to be solved" and more of an experience to enjoy. The language in these texts concentrates on the sexual excitement and ongoing pleasure of the characters, as they lean into their sexual agency.

Moments in contemporary YA also work to normalize sexual content in novels and, in doing so, support adolescent sexual agency by providing sex-affirmative experiences. The occurrence of more illustrative descriptions stands in direct contrast to the elision of such

content in texts from the Aughts era; instead, in more contemporary texts, pleasure itself is given narrative and linguistic legitimacy, forming a clear discourse that signals its acceptability and educative function. For example, in *Ask Me Anything* (2019), Molly Lee describes her protagonist's first experience of physical intimacy. Amber's narration focuses on her desire for Dean during their sexual debut, when Dean fingers her: "the hunger in his kiss, in his touch, unleashed that spring inside [her], and [she] gasped as [her] body trembled, tumbled, and sparked, until [she] could do nothing but fall apart in his arms" (220). Amber's experience with Dean is evidently pleasurable as she is aware of her bodily reactions, highlighting self-knowledge and the capacity to respond to desire, core aspects of sexual agency. Her collapse into his arms at the end of her orgasm also signals a representation of pleasure as a natural outcome, rather than something to be feared. This experience echoes Sonia Hartl's *Have a Little Faith in Me* (2019), in which CeCe orgasms as Paul fingers her: "My legs trembled and my back arched off the ground. Spots of light clouded my vision, and a strangled cry trapped in the back of my throat broke free. Then, as quickly as it had hit me, it was over, and a warm glow spread through my entire body" (286-287). Hartl foregrounds bodily sensation and response, describing the physical and emotional dimensions of orgasm—the tremble, the arching, the warmth—as central to the protagonist's experience of sexual pleasure and autonomy. Both Lee and Hartl focus on the body and specifically orgasm, marking a shift from the subtle or absent sexual content of earlier YA texts. Furthermore, the description of orgasm through pointed syntax, such as Lee's "trembled, tumbled, and sparked" (220) and Hartl's description of "a warm glow spread[ing] through [CeCe's] entire body" (287), does more than signal enjoyment; it establishes a discursive space in which adolescent sexuality can be openly acknowledged and

explored. By narrating pleasure in precise, body-focused language, these texts provide readers with models of sexual agency, showing that experiencing desire and responding to it is legitimate. By representing desire and bodily response in precise, embodied language, these texts invite readers to recognize pleasure as meaningful, rather than unspeakable or shameful.

The more explicit depictions of pleasure in Lee and Hartl signal not only a shift in YA narrative strategies but also a broader transformation in how authors negotiate what is considered appropriate for adolescent readers. Where earlier texts often elided or minimized sexual content, contemporary YA embraces bodily knowledge, desire, and affective experience as central to teen protagonists' agency and does it in terms of its language and content. This evolution in content parallels larger historical patterns in children's and adolescent literature: as Reynolds notes in *Radical Children's Literature* (2007), throughout much of the twentieth century, adults expected innocuous novels for young readers that adhered to an "unwritten code of practice: no sex, no violence, and no 'bad' language" (4). The emergence of sex-positive, pleasure-focused narratives in contemporary YA is thus a deliberate challenge to these long-standing restrictions, expanding the range of subjects and experiences available to adolescent readers.

Although contemporary YA now depicts pleasure and intimacy with unprecedented openness, certain practices continue to function as points of resistance within the genre. Anal sex is addressed in the sexual health manuals of Chapter One (see Hasler), but a review of YA criticism and scholarship on YA demonstrates that the topic remains largely unaddressed. A novel like *Jack of Hearts (and Other Parts)* (2020) is therefore significant to the corpus of YA fiction because of its open exploration of anal sex. When Jack writes about his first experience

of anal sex, he leaves out no detail. Jack relays this sexual experience to a reader: his thoughts on the initial pain of the experience, the communication with his sexual partner, and the realization that this sex act could give him pleasure:

So he bends me over the bed and drizzles some lube on my ass. I made him wear a condom, of course. And he starts pushing it in. And WOW, that hurts. I tell him to stop, it hurts, and he says he'll go slower. I say okay because he's already in, and I'm thinking, I'm gay, so this is something I have to learn how to do, right? So he slows down and pushes in, and eventually it starts to feel good—like, really good. He's hitting the right spot, nerve endings all aglow. (25, author's emphasis)

In this example, Rosen approximates the real-life attributes of anal sex: that it can be painful if one goes too quickly, but pleasurable with patience and communication. Although Jack's sex partner in the experience ultimately gets mad at Jack that the condom is covered in feces when he pulls out, Jack's memory of the event is overall a positive one in which he does not express shame (26). This scene illustrates the mutual autonomy and consent exercised by both adolescent characters during the sexual encounter. Jack is aware of his own pleasure, communicates openly with his partner, and negotiates the pace of the act, while his partner also demonstrates agency in responding and guiding the interaction. Whereas some YA books feature gay characters discussing having anal sex, such as Brian Sloan's *A Tale of Two Summers* (2006), Rosen provides a detailed depiction of a negotiated, communicative, and consensual sexual experience, emphasizing that both participants are active agents in the encounter. Instead of skipping over the literal messiness of anal sex, Rosen includes it, an unprecedented

description in YA and proof that YA has changed representations of teen sexual agency over time.

Not all texts published between the 2010s and the present day include sex that is descriptive. In fact, several texts continue to elide sex, but sexual enjoyment and pleasure are certainly present, which differentiates texts from this period from those of the past that were focused on risk. We see this pleasure in Hannah Moskowitz's *Sick Kids in Love* (2019) when the two main characters have intercourse for the first time. This illustration of pleasure, even when sex is not described, is a sex-affirmative example. In her article "Redefining Normal" (2013), Jen Scott Curwood explores how YA texts that represent relatable and unrelatable characters can create positive affect within the reader: "Finding sameness helps readers understand others' lived experiences and it builds a sense of shared humanity. Uncovering difference allows readers to interrogate social constructions related to normalcy and disability" (19). Moskowitz's novel does both: by depicting Ibby and Sasha as teenagers negotiating desire and vulnerability, she underscores their similarities with readers who also seek intimacy and pleasure. At the same time, their illnesses mark their difference, prompting readers to confront cultural assumptions that disabled or chronically ill teens are either asexual or undesiring. In this way, the text asks readers not only to empathize with the characters but also to reflect critically on the boundaries of "normal" sexuality. Like *The Sisterhood* by Brashares, *Sick Kids in Love* (2019) is another contemporary YA novel in which two teens (both non-terminally ill) fall in love and develop their sexual relationship. Isabel (Ibby) and Sasha have been dating for a few months when she asks him if the two should have sex, as she has been "wondering if it's something that [he's] thinking about" (270). She even expresses to Sasha, "It's okay if you're not" (270),

emphasizing the vulnerability and effective communication that exists between the two. Sasha's only hesitation is his nervousness about how "shitty" his body is compared to others, since he is living with illness and is disabled. In this way, Moskowitz provides a complex example of sexual content through her description of a young man who fears that his body will fail sexually because of his disability. Both characters are vulnerable in this scene, Ibby asking to have sex and Sasha confessing that he is nervous. The two end up having sex, but Moskowitz leaves the scene to the reader's imagination. Instead, she moves the narrative ahead and writes that Ibby's "legs are still shaky when [she] get[s] home that evening" and reminds herself to "*act normal, act normal*" when her father comes home from work (275, author's emphasis). The shakiness in her legs lends to the possibility that her first time was pleasurable as she still has residual feelings. Although her sexual debut remains unwritten, the narrative implies that it was satisfying. Moskowitz still emphasizes that pleasure is present, despite eliding their sex scene. In this way, Moskowitz resists the cautionary tone of earlier YA and contributes to the shift toward sex-affirmative storytelling: even when the act itself is elided, the text insists on centering pleasure, agency, and vulnerability as integral to adolescent sexual experience.

While Sara K. Day in "'He Couldn't Get Close Enough': The Exploration and Relegation of Desire" (2013) argues that contemporary YA novels "discourage the emotional and physical explorations of desire that would ostensibly 'ready' [girls] for further experiences of intimacy" (100), I would argue that in the ten years since Day published her monograph, texts do indeed encourage readers now to "ready" themselves for intimacy. We can see this in the playfulness of Nic Stone's *Odd One Out* (2018), which follows main character Jupiter (Jupe) wanting to have sex for the first time with Coop, and also encourages the reader to explore erotic language.

Stone is much less overt than Myracle in her use of language; in fact, she uses blank spaces to elide body parts. For example, when Jupe reminisces about her sexual experience, her thoughts are omitted for the reader: “Coop’s hands on your _____, and your hands on his _____ and his mouth on your _____ and your _____ on his _____” (235).

The omission of body parts invites the reader to fill in the blanks. The absence of language can symbolize the intimacy between the two characters—their sex is private—and yet the missing words point to the meaningfulness of the moment. What body part did he touch? Where was his mouth?. The lack of information invites the reader to fill in the missing details through imagination, and in doing so affirms the reader’s agency as an active participant in meaning-making. Although the experience is not complete for the reader, the excitement of the word play emphasizes the pleasure in this scene, and foregrounds the overall theme of YA texts from the 2010s to the present-day: that pleasure can be the focus of the teen sexual experience, and that by engaging with these texts, readers can open themselves to exploring sexual intimacy.

Coming to a Close

Overall, consensual sex in YA literature published from 2001 – 2022 seems to be mostly positive, with texts that feature multi-layered characterizations of emotional growth and that move towards affirming teen agency. In this sense, agency is not only about consent but also about recognizing pleasure, making choices, and narrating sexual intimacy as part of adolescent growth. Dom’s sexual debut in *Anatomy of a Boyfriend* offers information about how consensual sex can be physically painful if there is a lack of communication. Rosen’s *Jack of Hearts* pushes this further: in a bold statement to close his book, Jack finally fulfils a fantasy of having a threesome and tells the reader to “fuck off” if they do not approve of him being himself (337). A

depiction like this is unparalleled in my research of YA and again emphasizes the leaps that this genre has taken when discussing teen sexuality. Crucially, it suggests that sexual agency in YA today is no longer confined to avoiding risk or overcoming shame but extends to the unapologetic pursuit of pleasure, even in forms (like threesomes, masturbation, or porn) that remain culturally fraught. By representing such moments as being a part of adolescence, contemporary YA normalizes pleasure as central to sexual development and offers readers discursive tools for imagining intimacy as complex, agentive, and theirs to claim.

While some texts, like *The Poet X*, emphasize guilt and social constraints, others, like Rosen's *Jack of Hearts*, depict characters who relish sexual pleasure. Even when sexual experiences are not graphically described, contemporary YA frequently offers sex-affirmative portrayals that foreground character growth, informed decision-making, and bodily awareness. In comparison to early-2000s YA, which often implied sexual activity, contemporary texts present sexual content more clearly in terms of language, plot, and character development.

In Chapter Three, I turn to online writing spaces such as *Wattpad* and *Archive of Our Own*, where teens themselves take up this narrating power. If traditionally published YA demonstrates a growing willingness to portray adolescent pleasure within the parameters of publishing, fan fiction and other online writing show us what sexual agency looks like when young people write their own stories that fall outside of adult gatekeeping. This next chapter focuses on how young people specifically address topics like masturbation, porn, and sexual debuts with the ability to write and publish this material freely.

Chapter 3

“Liberating and Freeing”: Young People Reading and Writing About Sex

Preface:

While Chapter One explored sexual health manuals tailored to teens and adults, and Chapter Two examined the representation of sexual content in YA literature, Chapter Three builds on my exploration of sexual content in texts for teens by looking at how young people write and publish literature online. By means of a few case studies that I conducted with York University students, I address the many ways in which they consume sexual media (particularly fan fiction) online, while comparing how they respond to commercial YA literature. This chapter presents findings from my focus group research to argue that fan fiction facilitates open engagement with sexuality across age groups, particularly through fantasy-driven and community-based practices. At the same time, participants’ discussions indicate that fan fiction functions primarily as a space of exploration rather than sexual instruction. Although online environments offer young people increased agency to engage with sexual content, my research demonstrates that this agency is accompanied by the need to interpret and reflect on the emotional consequences of such engagement.

Fan fiction (fic/fics) is a genre of writing that “is clearly written in response to or adapting a specific source text” (Finn and McCall 27). While fan fiction is a popular genre online and is usually generated “in response” to a source text, other writers produce original fiction as well, which centres on their own created characters and plot. Within my focus groups, my participants discuss both fan fiction and original fiction. While fandom “prizes qualities more often derided and refused in traditional academic circles: emotion, self insertion, and subjectivity” (Finn and McCall 28), these qualities are available in online original fiction as well.

What, then, makes fan fiction so attractive to young readers? In Eleá's "Fanfiction and Webnovelas: The Digital Reading and Writing of Brazilian Adolescent Girls" (2012), the author explains that in her study about girls and fan fiction, Eleá found that when asked about fan fiction, the girls stated that fics represent teens' lives more authentically than books, that fan fiction is a preferred genre because "'they're made to us and by us,'" as one writer put it, and that it is enjoyable to encounter language that is "'simpler, direct, [with] slang'" (76). Moreover, Eleá notes that "grammatical errors, abbreviations, and lack of accents are customary on scraps left by adolescents," reflecting a general indifference to formal editing practices (78). Because fan fiction is often content-based rather than concerned with editorial accuracy, for Eleá's subjects, producing and posting content is more important than having a published post that is free of error.

There are many websites on which teens can publish fan fiction, such as *Wattpad*, *AO3*, *Teen Ink*, and *Tumblr*, and research is ongoing about teens and fan fiction. For example, Allison McCracken has written about the importance of youth publishing on *Tumblr*. In "Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement" (2017), she reports, "For many youth, Tumblr has become an alternative, tuition-free classroom, a powerful site of youth media literacy, identity formation, and political awareness that often reproduces cultural studies methods of media analysis" (152). *Tumblr* is a blogging website and "is whatever you want it to be," as its creators specify ("*Tumblr* is a website" par. 5). On this website, creators can share any type of material

(besides visual porn).³⁶ Countless types of fan fiction, such as femslash and crossover fics³⁷ (to name a few), are available for people aged 18+, as creators affirm that they do not interact with minors for legal reasons; they note this rule in their profiles with the acronym “MDNI” (Minors Do Not Interact). In truth, minors *are* engaging with this material. Eleá remarks, “The use of fake profiles for the reading and writing of such stories is commonly associated with the need to feel freer and to express fantasies” (79), where perhaps the writer’s “parents and friends may not know about it” (83-84). For Eleá, when fantasies are shared online, they can be elaborated upon by readers (84). In this way, “learning about sex” becomes a “collective process, conducted among the peer group” (84). Through their sharing of sexual fantasies, teens make community connections and feel less strange about what they desire. They can feel “seen” in the process.

In this chapter, I explore fan fiction and contextualize the research that is currently available about the topic. I then discuss the case studies that I conducted from January-February 2023 with seven young people in Toronto, Ontario, who spoke to me about their reading of sexual content in literature and online fan fiction. In this participatory research, I contend that my participants’ engagement with literature, both traditionally published and online fan fiction, gives them agency over their sexualities, as can be seen through their wide-ranging emotions and experiences.

³⁶ *Tumblr* removed visual porn (photos, video clips) from its website in 2018 when “child pornography passed through the app’s filtering technology” (Silberling par. 2). The site still allows “certain kinds of sexual content” (par. 2), such as erotic writing and nude art that excludes female nipples. See Silberling’s article, “No, *Tumblr* is not bringing back porn.”

³⁷ Femslash is “a type of fanfiction (stories written about TV, film, or book characters by their fans) in which two female characters are imagined to have a sexual relationship” (“Femslash”). Crossover fics are “stories in which the characters, premises, or settings of more than one fandom coincide” (Moonbeam).

Part One: Background and Context of Fan Fiction & Research with Young People

As I have previously suggested, teenage sexuality is a complex topic. Whether in teen sexual health manuals or fictional young adult texts, the depiction or even reference to sex is often contested. However, fan fiction allows young people (and people of all ages, in fact) to write any type of sexual content they like. This creative freedom bolsters teen agency by enabling young writers to define their own sexual narratives rather than having them mediated by adult authors or institutions. In fact, fan fiction works to counter the complex cultural contradictions of teen sexuality, as Tosenberger writes:

Our [North American] culture's relationship with adolescent sexuality is complex and contradictory: on the one hand, we valorize their youth and beauty, their erotic appeal, and often wink at 'horny teenagers' sexual escapades on television and film; on the other, we are anxious to contain adolescent sexuality within parameters acceptable to adult sensibilities. ("Homosexuality" 188)

Fan fiction therefore offers a space where adolescent sexuality is not "contained" but celebrated. This movement towards sexual candour is one that is growing in YA novels, but is still not fully realized. Although YA "has gradually allowed itself to become more sexually explicit," as Tosenberger explains, "there is still a strong imperative towards pedagogy—inculcating 'correct' attitudes about sexuality to an audience deemed in need of education" (188). Consider the novels previously discussed, such as *Jack of Hearts (And Other Parts)* by Lev Rosen (2018) and *Ask Me Anything* by Molly Lee (2019), where the main characters teach the reader about sexual health. Although not the primary aim of the novels, both authors communicate direct lessons about sex to the reader. In contrast, fan fiction serves as a

recreational space where (young) writers can “try out new identities and relationships that they may be worried about committing to in their own lives. Fanfic writers often treat non-heterosexual relationships as ordinary and not worth sensationalizing because they are ‘different’” (Garcia 355). Non-heterosexual relationships, depicted in “slash” stories,³⁸ offer queer-positive representations of sex that were not in the canon (the original text the fic is based on) (Tosenberger 190). And instead of the narrative necessarily focusing on the struggles of being homosexual, the emphasis is on “jouissance,” at least in the Harry Potter fan fiction that Tosenberger describes, in which writers explore queer sexuality “in its full, messy, exuberant glory” (201). Overall, fan fiction serves as a space where teens can be free to explore their sexualities in a way that is much less limited when compared to traditionally published material. Because fan fiction is not bound by institutional gatekeeping, the genre enables young people to imagine sexual experiences that reflect their own desires. This imaginative freedom is a form of agency in which the acts of reading and reworking narratives centres sexual possibilities.

While fan fiction seems to thrive on the openness and exploration of sexual desire and fantasy without censorship, scholar Jennifer Duggan does acknowledge that fan fiction is not a perfect space for all; in her autoethnographic article, “The lamentable status of (queer) children in fandom” (2021), Duggan argues that “Online media fandom is not always an unproblematic, cohesive, and welcoming multigenerational community” (45). She relates her own expulsion from a Harry Potter fan fiction website when she was 15 due to her age, when the website

³⁸ Slash is a type of fan fiction “that pairs two (or more) characters of the same sex. Often, ‘slash’ is used for male/male pairings only, while ‘femslash’ or ‘femmeslash’ are used to define a female/female pairing” (par.1). See <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SlashFic>.

owners realized that she was under the required age of 18 (45). At the time, she argued that because she was of legal age to have sex, she “should be able to read and write about it” (46); moreover, she noted that adult contributors to the website were writing about “teenagers having sex” and even “commercially published young adult books had sex in them” (46). The owners ignored her arguments, blocked her from the site, and in her bitterness, Duggan “deleted all [her] fan accounts” and “never wrote fan fiction again.” Instead, she became a “lurker,” someone who participates in fan fiction only as a reader (46). Duggan’s frustration emphasizes the pain that adult-enforced censorship can have on young people, limiting their agency as writers and sexual beings. This issue is a recurring topic in this dissertation, as young peoples’ reading and writing about sex is often limited or even prevented because of the societally promoted ideal of childhood innocence.³⁹ Within Duggan’s analysis, age-based exclusion emerges as a primary way fandom communities manage and constrain the expression of queer sexualities and gender identities among minors. Duggan argues that in attempts to keep children “innocent” of sexuality, a tradition with roots in the late eighteenth century (55), “children – particularly the youngest ones – nonetheless remain absent from most accounts of digital fandom” (54). In efforts to keep children away from fan fiction due to their “presumed innocence” (58), Duggan concludes that “adult fans’ fear of our [queer] sexualities and/or gender expressions is *harmful*” (author’s emphasis, 62). Queer youth seek out stories because they “have few other arenas to learn about intimacy or to imagine people like themselves being

³⁹ As a case in point, an American mother wrote to Nicole Chung in *Slate*’s parenting advice column in 2021 to ask how she should address the fact that her teen was writing erotica, as she was unsure whether to ground her child, have a talk about inappropriate writing, or “take away their iPad” (par. 3). Chung responds by championing the teen’s sexual agency and right to “a rich and private inner life” (par. 6). This is only one example of parental anxiety around teen sexuality (Chung 2021).

intimate,” and ultimately, “being excluded from online queer praxis tells minors that there are questions we should not have and desires we should hide” (62). Thus, as Duggan argues, although fan fiction is not a perfect space for encouraging a young reader and writer’s agency, it does offer many teens a genre in which to explore sexual content.

Research has shown that girls have “historically been discouraged from exploring or asserting sexual desire” (Hedrick 695), a pattern reinforced by traditionally published children’s and YA literature. As scholars including Tosenberger and Pugh note, children’s literature is largely shaped by adult authors who produce “adult-sanctioned narratives” for an audience imagined as in need of oversight (“Mature Poets” 10; Pugh 2), projecting adult anxieties about childhood innocence and sexuality onto young readers (Duggan 55). In contrast, fan fiction exists outside these gatekeeping structures, enabling sexual exploration regardless of a writer’s age. As McCracken argues, online platforms such as *Tumblr* function as relatively “private spaces” that are less easily policed by parents, allowing youth to explore desire, identity, and community (153). These online writing communities foster collective validation, particularly for nonnormative or queer expressions that may be unavailable or risky offline (155–56). In this context, pleasure becomes a shared and communicable value without adult regulation.

Hedrick’s study of fifteen real-person fiction writers found that writing erotic material normalized sex and reduced shame, increasing comfort around discussing sexual desire. As she notes, “Seven of the writers explained that perceiving sex as normal made them feel more comfortable talking about sex or reduced shameful feelings surrounding sex or sexual desire” (699). One participant, Beth, described realizing she “wasn’t alone in [her] thoughts,” a realization that made her “not afraid of sex or sexual encounters” (700). Although Hedrick’s

interviewees were at least eighteen at the time of the study, “most began writing fanfiction between the ages of 12 and 16” (696), suggesting an even earlier engagement with sexual content. Notably, among the ten writers who included at least one graphic sexual scene, only one had any real-life sexual experience; the remaining nine were drawing on other erotic texts and imagination rather than lived experience (698). Many initially found writing explicit scenes uncomfortable because “their existing sexual scripts did not have the level of detail needed to write convincing smut,” though positive reader feedback increased their confidence over time (698–99).

Hedrick cautions against censoring young fan fiction writers, arguing instead that peer-led discussion can support the development of what she calls “healthier relationships,” particularly in contrast to dominant romantic tropes (705). This concern emerges most clearly in participants’ discussions of the “bad boy romance,” a subgenre characterized by narcissism, aggression, emotional manipulation, jealousy, and unequal power dynamics (701). While such narratives risk reproducing harmful sexual scripts, Hedrick emphasizes that fan fiction communities also function as sites of critique, where writers debate and rework these tropes. Referencing Anna Todd’s *After* (2014), Hedrick shows how peer-based discussion enables teens to identify and challenge what she terms “unhealthy or emotionally abusive narratives” (693), using community engagement to imagine alternative models of intimacy (705).

Finally, for scholar Francesca Coppa, fan fiction’s “liveness” is what makes it a unique type of literature as it is “a cultural performance that requires a live audience; fan fiction is not merely a text, it’s an event. Whether published in a zine, on a mailing list, to an archive, or to a blog like LiveJournal.com, there’s a kind of simultaneity to the reception of fan fiction, a story

everyone is reading, more or less at the same time, more or less together” (232). And like most performance, there is a collective togetherness that must exist for the story to be produced and enjoyed. Reading fan fiction is, as Coppa argues, a return to the theatrical mode, as readers and writers engage in real time. Coppa writes, “In fandom, the author may be dead, but the writer—that actively scribbling, embodied woman—is very much alive. You can talk to her; you can write to her and ask her questions about her work, and she will probably write back to you and answer them” (236). Coppa’s framework is particularly important for my argument because it foregrounds fan fiction as an active, reciprocal performance of meaning-making. The immediacy between reader and writer mirrors the agency my project tracks among young people who articulate and revise their sexual imaginations through public dialogue. In this sense, performance is not theatrical but agential: an act of producing and sharing sexual knowledge collaboratively. My participatory research in this chapter reflects this same process, as participants work through sexual experiences collectively in conversation.

In sum, fan fiction’s contemporaneity offers a temporary insight into how sex is regarded by a young writer in the world today. A part of this “event,” to borrow Coppa’s words, is a performance between reader and writer; and while I do not examine the theatricality of fan fiction, I do emphasize that online writing, especially with regards to sexual content, is both archived and ephemeral, current but preserved indefinitely. Fan fiction offers a distinctive window into how young people produce and engage with sex contemporaneously. In my own selections of fan fiction for this study (“*Teen Romance*” and “*You Fucking Bottom*”), I chose texts that offered affirming representations of sexuality and showcased authors who wrote candidly and (seemingly) without editorial oversight. These works exemplify what scholars identify as the

liberatory potential of fan fiction: they reflect young writers who explore sexual themes beyond the surveillance of parents and other authority figures, a dynamic McCracken describes as a freedom from “parental policing” (153). Similarly, they resonate with Duggan’s argument that fan fiction provides a crucial expressive space for queer youth (62). My selections therefore function as evidence of the ways young people use online platforms to articulate sexual desire, experiment with identity, and assert agency through unrestrained narrative play. Admittedly, while these works embodied a freedom of sexual expression, their literary craft often lacked the refinement of traditionally published texts, revealing both the liberating and limiting aspects of writing outside institutional structures. Although I am not a reader of fan fiction myself, I deliberately selected pieces that reflected an openness toward sex and uninhibited expression, particularly through uncensored diction and plot. These choices, though initially appropriate for the study’s aims, later proved challenging for some participants, a tension I address in the discussion that follows.

Part 2: Let’s Talk About Sex (In a Focus Group)

To understand how young people think about sex in relation to literature, it became clear that focus groups were not only a practical method for gathering detailed information and opinions directly from young people, but also a participatory space in which they could actively shape the research itself. Rather than merely extracting data from them, the focus group format created an opportunity for collective discussion, interpretation, and critique; this allowed participants to articulate their perspectives and exercise their own analytical agency. In this way, my study served both to illuminate their views and to amplify their voices as co-constructors of knowledge. Important to my study was the creation of an environment where participation was

dialogic, and where the young adults could speak from their lived experience. As such, I frame my work within a childhood studies research methodology, one that values youth as knowledgeable social actors rather than recipients of adult-defined meaning. Allison James and Adrian James explain that child-focused research/research with children:

not only respects children as individuals with something to say, but also enables children's perspectives and standpoints to be articulated, something which is also central to the idea of **children as researchers** [author's emphasis]. For these reasons, child-focused research is core to childhood studies, for without research of this kind, our knowledge of children's lives would be considerably impoverished. (12)

My research study sought to emphasize my participants' "perspectives and standpoints" by structuring the sessions so that participants could direct the flow of the conversation, identify themes that mattered to them, and challenge the assumptions embedded in the texts. As the facilitator, my aim was to create a space where they could determine what was meaningful for themselves. This approach positioned my participants as active contributors whose insights shaped the analytical trajectory of the chapter. This active presence is captured in Chawar et al.'s chapter (2018) in which the authors in participatory research frame "young readers as subjects and agents of change who have the right to co-construct the political, economic and socio-cultural realities they share with adults" (112). In centring their interpretive authority in this way, I aligned my study with a broader child- and youth-centred research movement that treats young people as partners in meaning-making, a stance that becomes especially crucial when studying how adults negotiate sexual content in literature.

Similarly, in her work “Focus groups, young people and sex education” (1996), Lesley Pugsley emphasizes the effectiveness of using focus group interviews to research “sex education with young people” (114). Readers often learn lessons from literature, as I’ve already proven. In my focus group, the participants spoke about what they learned from these online texts; these responses in turn contributed to lively conversations about how prose affects readers. Likewise, Pugsley’s project, which involved interviewing young people about sex, allowed the researcher to “have access to a set of discussions between young people about sexuality and sexual knowledge, which might otherwise have been difficult, if not impossible to obtain” (118) because Pugsley was “a middle aged woman” who “could not have expected to ‘hang out’ with groups of teenagers as a participant observer and be privy to their conversations about sex” (118). Because I was a high school educator at the time of this study, I was often privy to young people’s conversations about relationships (through direct discussions with students when they desired to speak with me about this topic), though I was not privy to discussions about their ideas on sex and intimacy. Therefore, I felt that hosting a focus group was the optimal method that I could use to gain information about this topic with young people who elected to be in the study.

Although studies with young people in general are conducted regularly,⁴⁰ focus groups analyzing sex in literature are infrequent. Lesley Pugsley is an exception. She focused on sexual education by citing shortfalls in the UK curriculum (arguing how sex education at school did not

⁴⁰ More broadly, other studies with young people include: Vivian Howard’s analysis of teens reading for pleasure (2011); Núria Araña et al.’s work that foregrounds teen perspectives on relationships was featured on a popular Spanish TV series, *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* (2013); Claire Meehan’s study on young people and porn (2023); and Marie Plaisime et al.’s work with teens on social media and the promotion of health (2020).

help teens) and also looked at how teen magazines offer information about sex (123-124). In addition to examining sexual health manuals, my focus group research showcased the unique insight of actual young people who are often written *about* in fictional texts but who are rarely asked for their insight. By creating a space for participants to read and analyze sexual representations together, my study repositioned them from being seen as passive consumers to active interpreters of cultural meaning. This shift was crucial for them to understand agency: it appeared in the ways participants questioned stereotypes of virginity, challenged depictions of shame, and evaluated which portrayals of intimacy felt realistic or affirming. Their discussions became acts of agency, moments where they claimed interpretive authority over stories that traditionally spoke *for* them rather than *with* them. In this sense, their agency emerged through the act of reading, discussing, and reimagining sexuality on their own terms.

The few case studies about people engaging with sexual content in traditionally published literature reveal the gaps in current research. Davin L. Helkenberg is one of the few critics who has done work in this area. In “Young Women Encountering Information on Sexuality in Young Adult Literature” (2020), Helkenberg described a case study that she conducted with eleven young women (between the ages of 18-24 years) who read “novels, comics, and fan fiction” that contained sexual content (100). In interviews, Helkenberg’s participants articulated that “published YAL as a whole did not contain the information that they were seeking. This included positive narratives about LGBTQ relationships; bondage, discipline (or domination), sadism, and masochism play; and more descriptive sex scenes” (105). Thus, because topics such as BDSM and LGBTQ narratives are plentiful on fan fiction websites as opposed to in published YA literature, Helkenberg’s participants confirmed that

amateur online literature allowed young people to explore sexual content. Ultimately, she found “that young readers enjoy reading sexualized fiction on an aesthetic level but that they can also ‘carry away’ valuable information related to sexual knowledge, identity, and performance” (“Young Readers” 12). In Helkenberg’s study, the young people reading traditionally published literature were dissatisfied with this material because of its lack of “descriptive sex scenes,” but indicated that they still gleaned “valuable information” about sexuality (“Young Readers” 12-13). Helkenberg’s findings point to a broader pattern in existing scholarship: while young people actively seek out sexual knowledge through narrative forms, most research on adolescent sexuality approaches this process indirectly, through institutional frameworks rather than literary ones.

As a result, research on young people’s sexuality often begins in studies of sex education. These works trace how the messages young people receive about sex, particularly negative or moralizing ones, shape their understanding of themselves as sexual beings. For example, in “Negotiating Shame, Silence, Abstinence, and Period Sex” (2019), Jacqueline N. Gunning et al. note how “women receive numerous messages from important others about sex and reproduction” (112), specifically “shaming messages” (112). In their study, the researchers “sought to address how young women shift from negatively-valenced messages to more comprehensive messages” that focused on promoting “a sense of agency and meaning” (113). After recruiting participants “who identified as women or as assigned-female between the ages of 18 and 40 years” (117), the researchers hosted a survey on *Qualtrics.com* and presented their findings that focused specifically on reproductive and sexual health. Participants answered the following prompts:

What do you wish you had been told and from whom do you wish you had been told [parents, friends, family members, school, doctor, etc.,] about reproductive and sexual health? Finally, we asked participants to share memorable messages they could recall and then describe a memorable message(s) they received about reproductive and/or sexual health, and from whom they received this message. (118)

The researchers found that “Memorable messages stem from a variety of socializing agents, or important individuals and institutions like parents, educators, and mass media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, or chat rooms), with influences on individual belief systems and behavior” (114). In surveying women aged 18–40, Gunning et al.’s study underscores the long-term effects of inadequate sexual education, effects that also emerge in my own work with younger participants. Where Gunning et al. reveal how adult women retrospectively identify the harm caused by silence and misinformation, my research demonstrates how those same gaps persist among today’s youth. The significance of this parallel shows that the absence of open, informed conversations about sex pushes young people to seek alternative spaces for learning and exploration, spaces such as fan fiction communities, where sexual knowledge circulates more freely but not always more accurately. Ultimately, Gunning et al.’s participants discovered that “Through interpersonal discussions with friends, experiences with romantic partners, and conducting their own research, women identified the value of open interpersonal and societal dialog surrounding issues of sex and intimacy” (132). Similarly, my focus group participants articulated a strong desire for such dialogues, lamenting the lack of trustworthy adult guidance and comprehensive school-based sex education. This absence often drove them toward online platforms like AO3, where their encounters with sexual content both expanded and complicated

their understanding of intimacy and pleasure. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that when institutional forms of sex education fail, reading becomes a crucial means through which young people assert agency over their sexual learning and self-concept.

The research I describe in this section is crucial in this context because it gives insight into the ways in which new adults think about sex in relation to literature. Before my study, there had been only one other account that examined young people's discussions about sexual content in literature and the effects that this reading had on themselves as sexual beings (see Helkenberg 2022). However, Helkenberg's study did not look at online writing in conversation with YA, as my research does. As the primary investigator of this study, entitled "Let's Talk About Sex: Constructions of Intimacy in Young Adult Literature," I facilitated and fostered a safe space for participants to express and analyze the language surrounding sexual content in the two YA novels I selected for the workshop (*The Poet X* and *Full Disclosure*). The findings in this chapter draw on this study that I conducted at York University in Toronto between January and February 2023. Approved by the university's research ethics board in November 2022, my research included four focus group meetings where I asked questions about the assigned literature and collected answers from the participants, which I later analyzed. While this project aimed to explore the discrepancy between sexual narratives written by contemporary adult novelists, and more "optimistic" narratives about sex and intimacy created by young adults in their own fiction online, I expected to discover that online writing would be readers' preferred mode of expression to enjoy sexual content. Surprisingly, my findings proved the exact opposite. In the study, my research subjects concluded eventually that young adult literature was their preferred genre in which to read descriptive sexual content, while fan fiction (or more

broadly online writing) led to damaging thoughts and feelings about their own sexuality.

Specifically, my participants preferred “healthier” accounts, as participant Nadia describes, of sexual and emotional intimacy, which they found in the YA fiction I provided. I explore these findings in detail below.

My study initially sought to investigate two central questions: how do contemporary YA novels represent sex and intimacy, and how do young adults write their own sexual fiction? An aim was to draw attention to the language utilized in the texts to see how bodily autonomy was represented by young writers. I chose to work with new adults because their voices in sexuality research are often ignored. I also aimed to work with my participants as peer researchers so that my research could be characterized as youth-centered; I wanted to work *with* the participants, rather than treat them as receptive subjects. Centering my participants’ voices was important for me to lessen the researcher-participant power imbalance (Mayall 122), and thus I quote freely from transcriptions of these workshops.

In my study there were seven participants in total, who ranged from 18-24 years of age. Six of the seven subjects identified as women who employed she/her pronouns, and the seventh participant identified as non-binary. Three of the seven identified as queer, one as a lesbian, and one as demisexual/acespec.⁴¹ The subjects were recruited by email, using York University’s listservs for undergraduate students in varying departments and programs: English literature, CCY (Children, Childhood & Youth Studies), Humanities, Gender and Women’s

⁴¹ Demisexuality is when a person feels sexual attraction only once they have an emotional connection to the potential sexual partner. Acespec is short for asexual spectrum, which encompasses different types of asexuality (such as demisexual, graysexual, lithosexual, etc). See https://www.therainbowstores.com/blogs/blogs-guides/the-aseexual-spectrum-a-guide-to-aseexual-identities?srltid=AfmBOopucfT-XMckolGGOmWWg_QAbD0Bm3Xa3WygScArX9LqKnvR-tvQ.

Studies, Sexuality Studies, Psychology, Education, Professional Writing, and Creative Writing. Prospective subjects contacted me through email, and after organizing the schedule, seven people in total were selected to participate in the study.⁴² I protected the identities of my participants in a locked box for their handwritten material, and password-protected digital material (such as voice recordings). Each participant received a \$50 Indigo⁴³ Books gift card as an inducement to participate. All participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix) detailing the breakdown of the study, including how the research would be used later in the dissertation, and how their identity would be protected.

I led the project as a fourth-year doctoral candidate and informed my participants that the knowledge I would glean would be used in my dissertation; I also disclosed to the participants that I worked as a licensed secondary school teacher (OCT) in the province of Ontario. Pseudonyms were employed for confidentiality purposes. Our first official session focused on *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo and the second session was on *Full Disclosure* by Camryn Garrett. I chose these texts as both are critically-lauded novels and because their narratives are intersectional (both novels feature protagonists that are not white, who come from different social backgrounds, and include LGBTQ+ subplots). Our last two sessions focused on fan fiction, with two works for discussion that I found online: “you fucking bottom” by g0t4k1tty and “teen romance” by Rimalex (both are included as appendices). Again, as I am not a reader of fan fiction, and none of my participants volunteered a recommended text, I chose these two because of their modest length and their inclusion of graphic sexual content. Below I

⁴² While six of the seven participants identified as women in my study, my study was open to all genders. Mostly women answered the call and were then able to participate.

⁴³ Indigo is a popular Canadian bookstore chain.

speak thematically about my findings rather than analyzing each session separately, as I believe the conversations that stretched across sessions are inextricably linked through subject matter rather than text.

Results: On the Subject of Sex

At the beginning of the focus group exercise, each participant completed a questionnaire that detailed how they had learned about sex (whether it was from adults or in books/media), and what general feelings they associated with sex (see Appendix A). In the focus group setting, participants were open about their sexualities and suggested that books had been the main genre that had taught them about sex. In Table 1, I list four questions (not comprehensive) that my participants answered before the commencement of the study. I asked them a series of questions to gain an understanding of their backgrounds, their upbringing, their experiences with sex education, and their feelings about reading about sex in texts.

Table 1.

Pseudonym, age, pronouns	How did you learn about sex as a child/teenager?	Did any adults give you texts about sexual intercourse or sexuality?	Did you read texts with sexual content openly or in a private space?	What feelings do you associate with reading about sex?
Laura (21) she/her	Through friends and books, mostly fan fiction and ADULT books. There was never a conversation with an adult figure in my life.	NOPE!	Depends on the cover/popularity of the book. If it is known or eludes [sic.] to sexually explicit content I will feel shame for reading it in a public space.	excitement and shame
Matt (20) she/they	My classmate showed me pornographic videos.	No	Openly	No particular feelings

Abigail (19) she/her	friends in school and movies, shows, books	In high school reading the scarlet letter, and reading about jack the ripper in a history course at York.	mostly private	Sometimes embarrassing but also exciting
Nadia (18) she/her	Books, school, peers	No. I was taught a very detailed sex-ed curriculum most of my life but I was never handed any texts.	I would oftentimes read it on my phone.	Sometimes some shame as if I shouldn't be reading things, excitement, curiosity
Dylan (24) she/her	[At school and] I remember my mom asking me if I knew what sex was when I was in grade 6, and when I did she made me describe it to her to prove it. When I accurately explained my concept of sex my mother cried because she was disgusted by the idea that I knew what it was.	N/A	I touched on this in a previous answer but only in private spaces.	Now I associate reading about sex as an exciting experience, but in the past it was something I felt shameful about.
Angel (20) they/them	from multiple forms of media such as television, movies, books, and online spaces such as twitter and etc.	None that I remember, I was never given "the talk" by any adults around me growing up, nor was it a detailed education studied in school.	i do not often reach for texts with sexual content but when i do, i read them in a private space.	There is shame associated
Zina Redd (22) she/her	Genuinely? From fan fiction. Any other lesson was not so dissimilar to that one quote from <i>Mean Girls</i> :	No. Nothing barring the sex-ed textbooks I received in school per the (limited) Catholic	Yes. Reading explicit material is sometimes easier than bubblegum fluffy romance for me—I can school	Previously it felt like a "dirty" secret that I kept to myself. Thankfully (after a whole lot of therapy) I approach written intimacy with a lot more neutrality and positively.

	"Don't have sex. Or you will get pregnant (or an STI.). And Die." Thanks Catholic Education Board.	curriculum. No discussions of anatomy or safe sex practices.	facial expressions trying to figure out what position people have pretzeled themselves into, but holding hands for the first time?? Impossible to keep me from kicking and squealing in public.	
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As the answers to my initial questionnaire demonstrated, the act of reading sexual content in literature was mostly conducted as a private act for my participants. None of them had a trusted adult who gave them written material from which they could learn about sex, nor did they receive any sort of sexual health manuals, such as those discussed in Chapter One. Most participants learned about sex from their peers, and in limited ways at school through the Ontario curriculum. As shown in Table 1, at the start of the study, reading about sex brought feelings of excitement and shame for 86% of participants. Also noteworthy is the consistent discussion of shame throughout the research study; the participants found that shame was a key theme not only in the lives of the protagonists of the selected novels, but for themselves as young readers and as human beings.

Throughout this section, I offer three main subject groupings that address some of the results from the study, organized around the topics of shame, self-awareness, and literary critique, respectively. While the reading of certain texts produced negative or even distressing emotional responses among my participants, the act of reading itself still constituted a form of agency. The books' representations of sex, whether affirming or troubling, invited readers to think critically about their own values, desires, and boundaries. Even when the material provoked shame or discomfort, readers proved that they were actively thinking and interpreting

what they read. In this sense, I interpret their reading about sex as an agentic act because it demanded an active process of negotiation between self, text, and social discourse. After many discussions with my participants, I can conclude that while the reading of certain texts produced negative responses among many of my participants, the actual act of reading about sex does advance young people's sexual agency.

Sexual Growth and Shame

Shame is a recurring theme in this dissertation. As Yohanes Budiarto and Avin Fadilla Helmi define in their article "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Meta-Analysis" (2021), "Shame is generally defined as strong negative emotions characterized by perceptions of the global devaluation of oneself" (132). This definition underscores that shame operates not as a fleeting feeling of embarrassment but as a profound sense of moral or personal failure, an internalized belief that one's whole self, rather than a single action, is flawed. As Elspeth Probyn remarks in "Everyday Shame" (2010), shame "is perhaps the most intimate of feelings but seemingly must be brought into being by an intimate proximity to others" (331). In this sense, shame is both inwardly felt and socially produced: it arises from our awareness of being seen, judged, or measured against communal norms. Budiarto and Helmi further explain that "when individuals experience shame, the devaluation of self is perceived, and it may lower self-esteem" (132), emphasizing how shame's power lies in its capacity to corrode one's sense of worth. In the context of adolescence and sexuality, shame also functions as a regulatory tool: it polices desire, marking certain acts or bodies as deviant. Many teenagers, especially, learn early that sexual curiosity is something to conceal or feel guilty about, a lesson reinforced by peers, the education system, and media. Thus, while shame is often dismissed simply as a negative

emotion, it is more accurately understood as a culturally mediated affect that shapes how young people come to see themselves as sexual beings.

As I explored in Chapter One, sexual health manual writer Alison Macklin and scholar Steven Angelides both address the entanglement of shame and teenage sexuality: Macklin notes that sexual debut outside of marriage is frequently framed as shameful (122), while Angelides argues that “shame in mainstream media” actively contributes to erasing teen sexual agency (xi). Novels (such as *The Poet X* and *Before I Die*) similarly embed shame into their protagonists’ coming-of-age arcs. Xiomara experiences religious shame in *The Poet X*, while Zoey in *Before I Die* confronts gendered shame, believing she is being punished through pregnancy for enjoying sex. Shame, then, remains a prominent and recurring theme in both sexual health materials and traditionally published YA fiction, suggesting that the emotion is treated as almost essential in North American literary contexts when representing teenage sexuality.

While my original goal was to emphasize that shame is detrimental to teenage sexual growth narratives, my study instead revealed that shame can be a productive and necessary emotion, even if it is often painful or negative. Drawing on Probyn, who argues that shame is “the affect most clearly placed in the positivity of interest” and “the body’s way of registering that it has been interested, and that it seeks to re-establish interest” (329), shame can be understood not only as a force of repression but as a catalyst (331). In other words, the experience of shame signals that a boundary has been crossed, an assumption has been challenged, or a desire has come into view. For the teens in my study, shame often marked the moment when sexual norms, whether religious, gendered, heteronormative, or familial, came into conflict with personal desire. Rather than foreclosing agency, these moments prompted

reflection. In this way, shame became intertwined with agency: it can provoke young people to question inherited moral frameworks, to renegotiate their relationship to their bodies, and to seek alternative sources of knowledge. For my participants, encountering shame on the page opened up space to articulate their own discomfort and to imagine different possibilities for how sexuality might be understood. Thus, I learned throughout my research that shame enables new forms of self-definition. Recognizing this complexity allows for a more nuanced account of teen sexual agency, one in which agency emerges by working with and through shame.

Within the focus group meetings, shame was mentioned 21 times in the discussions of sex in literature and in relation to participants' own sexual experiences as people. While shame seems to be negative in most cases, the emotion, as evoked in literature, also served some use, enabling the participants to process their own experiences with it. One of the clearest examples of this productive engagement with shame emerged in our discussion of Acevedo's *The Poet X*. The participants discussed how the protagonist, Xiomara, felt shame about being a sexual person; she expressed this shame directly in a poem in which she describes masturbating (130-131). When I asked whether it was important that Acevedo included Xiomara's sense of shame after she masturbates, the participants believed that including shame made the text more relatable for them; this assertion surprised me. While I had assumed that participants would feel negatively towards shame, on the contrary, they felt shame's inclusion enhanced the text's realism. My participants recognized that shame is a complex emotion which provokes both positive and negative feelings within a text, making the writing accessible and useful to a teen reader (and to the participants in my case studies, specifically). Matt began by grounding the

discussion in broader cultural patterns of sexual double standards, while Dylan focused more on the role of realism in Acevedo's writing:

Matt: Our society is not perfect in terms of sex and women having sexual desire; they are going to be judged. Anywhere you go, any commercial, we have sexualization but women themselves can't have sex. It's very natural but right away there is shame: 'I'm not allowed to do this activity.'

Dylan: It's a relatability thing. I'm sure there are a lot of young readers, let's say 13, 14, whatever how old they are, and read this and feel like this because it is a stigma in our society. I think that's why it's made to be so innocent when it happens, or when she's writing about anything intimate, it's beautiful because the author's trying to make it clear that sex is beautiful but then there's this overlying thing. It's more realism, it's just to relate to the reader.

Abigail: The moments where she has this shame and guilt and stuff, it makes it realistic and relatable.

As the conversation above demonstrates, my participants do not dismiss Xiomara's experience of shame around masturbation; instead, they identify it as a realistic and meaningful response shaped by sexual stigma. Matt notes that such feelings frequently occur outside the novel, while Dylan points to the cultural conditions that produce shame and guilt around sex. Xiomara internalizes this stigma because of her American and Latinx culture. In addition to the shame scene, the participants suggested that the book handles Xiomara's burgeoning sexuality as an experience with which they can sympathize, as they can relate to her being consistently punished (and feeling shame) for having a post-pubescent body. Acevedo's portrayal thus offers

readers an encounter with the sexuality associated with shame that they can recognize. In this sense, the realism of this portrayal of shame serves as a catalyst for agency: it allows both character and reader to move toward a state of conscious self-understanding.

The conversation then moved from shame as an emotional response to its more embodied manifestations, such as how young women learn to perceive their bodies as sites of potential embarrassment or danger:

Dylan: I liked the theme of the body, not just about sex with someone else, but sexuality in the way you view your body. There was a lot of demonizing from society. And the line, 'When I was young, mommy was my hero but then I grew breasts', that was a stab to the heart. I get that because I'm chesty. This constant oversexualizing of her body—everyone views you as the problem and that does shape the way you view your body. And you have to be defensive.

Abigail: I really sympathize for her, [on] page 151, when she talks about how her mom says she has to pray for her body not to get in trouble... and when she got her period, she'd have to pray extra hard and how to avoid things from happening with guys. I think that's why she is angry at God because her body, she viewed it from Him, her period, He created it, so why are You creating these troubles for me? I felt so bad for her, and it just showed how she always had to repress these feelings and her mom gave her a lot of those conflicted feelings when she wanted something and couldn't have it... and how she blamed herself, even if a guy did something to her, like harassed her, her mom pushed that it was her fault. That kind of thinking. It's sad to read.

Seeing Xiomara's internalized guilt articulated on the page allowed my participants to name and process their own discomfort with sexuality, demonstrating how even negative feelings can foster understanding and growth. Dylan's comments on women's bodies as problematic reflects the thoughts explored in Chapter One of this dissertation, where Jessica Valenti discussed teens feeling the need to keep their bodies "pure" because of societal pressures (24) and the anxiety of attempting to achieve this. Much of this "demonizing" of the body, as Dylan describes it, is linked to parenting. Abigail corroborates this idea, emphasizing how a mother's influence and teachings can negatively affect a daughter, causing her to "blame" herself, as Xiomara does, for her mother's "conflicted feelings." This directly relates to Emily Nagoski's metaphor in *Come As You Are* around sexuality as a garden and the "weeds" or negative beliefs that culture plants in young people's minds as they grow (39). Together, these reflections show how shame is a learned, relational feeling shaped by family, culture, and the stories young people encounter.

Shame in *The Poet X* is also deeply tied to religion and parental pressures, as Xiomara comes from a devout Catholic family. This book (as well as Garrett's *Full Disclosure*, as I discuss below) provoked conversations among the participants about their own relationships with religion and how it affected who they were as sexual beings. Literature inspired participants to explore their sexual identities in relation to their religious selves:

Zina Redd: I was raised Roman Catholic and I am affirmably agnostic now. So, I have my own sort of religious trauma, we're in therapy, we're undoing a lot of that... the one line I keep going back to is when Xiomara's mom had said 'good girls don't wear tampons... are you still a virgin?' As if a piece of cotton could be equated with penetrative sex... She was in the 5th grade when she got her period, and it just continues to escalate up until, I

forget what poem, her mother saw her and her boyfriend like at the train and like, oh her tongue is down his throat, and just the constant reiteration that she is a whore...

Here, Zina Redd expresses her own “trauma” with religion, something she names as an ongoing process in therapy, while recognizing a similar pattern of pain and policing in Xiomara’s story. The disbelief in her voice (“as if a piece of cotton...”) signals a lingering frustration with how deeply these doctrines shaped Zina Redd’s early understanding of her own body. In identifying with Xiomara’s humiliation and anger, Zina Redd gives voice to the problems of purity culture: the mix of shame, betrayal, and exhaustion that comes from being told that normal bodily development marks moral failure. Within a Catholic framework, practices like wearing tampons and kissing boys mark Xiomara as a “bad” girl rather than a “good” one, a moral binary that Zina Redd actively works to undo within herself. That Xiomara’s mother calls her a “whore” because she is growing as a sexual being is not an unusual occurrence; as Jill Nagle reminds readers, girls need to have “compulsory virtue” in order to avoid being labelled as a whore (5). The need for a virtuous identity is a part of Valenti’s arguments as well about purity culture (2010), where girls are perceived to be “good” if they do not have sex and “bad” if they do (24). Religion is one of the factors that aligns girlhood morality with sexuality; therefore, ideas of sinning and repenting feed the shame cycle. Below, Laura and Angel discuss how Catholicism also left them with skewed ideas about freedom:

Laura: I loved the themes of first times. Intersection of religion and pleasure, and religion and HIV [in Full Disclosure]. Growing up Catholic, I identified with a lot of the worries she [Xiomara in The Poet X] had about being untouchable because the female body was so off-limits. We have to be subservient to men, that’s the way I grew up, and she was

worried how guys would interact with her, that she wasn't as experienced as other girls would be, she has this thing she has to hide. Catholicism, at least in my experience... you have to hide because you had to be a certain type of girl. If you experienced any queerness or fluidity in your identity, that was just wrong. I really connected with that piece.

Angel: Being Catholic, everything is black and white. Be this, be that... as soon as I moved here [to Canada] I had this freedom absorbing more media. Now that I look at [my family in the Philippines], they're living in this enclosed space without all the diversity of identities. The first chapter as well [of Full Disclosure], I think she [Simone] was saying every time she imagined telling someone she had HIV, she imagined them running out on her. And the guy [Miles] stayed for her.

Like Zina Redd, Laura and Angel emphasize how their experiences with Catholicism shaped their readings of both *The Poet X* and *Full Disclosure*, but they also highlight a deeper point about how religious frameworks constrain understandings of freedom. Participant Laura relates to Xiomara's fear of her own body and the need to hide her desires, something that she feels pressured to do because of the expectation to be "a certain type of girl" (i.e.. a good girl). Her emphasis on the need to suppress queerness and sexual fluidity further underscores how Catholic teachings regulate the imagination, making certain identities feel unthinkable or morally suspect. Angel's narrative extends this idea by showing how religious and cultural structures can restrict the agency of young people. Her contrast between her life in the Philippines and her arrival in Canada illustrates how access to diverse media and thus to more expansive representations of identity opened up conceptions of selfhood that Catholicism had

previously suppressed. Her reading of Simone's anxiety about disclosure and Miles's refusal to flee highlights how literature can model forms of acceptance that exceed the "black and white" binaries she was raised with. Taken together, these reflections offered by my participants suggest that YA literature can become a space where readers can renegotiate the restrictive moral categories inherited from Catholicism, allowing them to imagine forms of freedom and intimacy they were once taught to fear.

Shame is also heavily tied to the participants' readings of fan fiction. In addition to feeling "dirty" for reading fan fiction, participants felt strange knowing and not knowing the age of the writer of the fic. Most were uncomfortable with Y/N (your name) fan fiction, where the reader is meant to insert their own name into the fiction as an effort to increase the intimacy between reader and writer. Unaware of the uneasiness that my participants would feel about this type of online writing material, I inadvertently chose a Y/N fic as one of the fan fiction readings ("you fucking bottom" by g0t4k1tty) for our focus group. My research subjects were clearly uncomfortable by this choice. Dylan asked, "When is it almost borderline inappropriate to read [Y/N fic] as an adult that a 14-year-old wrote?" Similarly, Laura expressed, "That Nessa one is tough to read." Abigail concurred that it was "so painful" to read it. The participants may have found the "Nessa" piece, entitled "you fucking bottom", "tough" and "difficult" to read because of g0t4k1tty's graphic language, the grammatical errors, and the age of the writer, which was listed as 14 at the time of my study. While I had originally conjectured that the freedom of g0t4k1tty's writing would be liberating and exciting for the participants, their responses suggested that descriptive sexual content, at least in "you fucking bottom," was not always welcome, enjoyable, or even necessary, especially when it was written by a young teen.

Finally, the literature prompted discussions about the participants' experiences of shame during their own sexual activities. Shame often emerged when their behaviours did not align with prevailing cultural expectations, such as when their sexual experiences differed from acts depicted in pornography. For example, in an explanation of her first time having penetrative sex, Laura explains that her friend was "appalled" that Laura's partner did not slap her face:

Laura: I have this one friend who is into everything in the world and that's fine for her, but... she was just appalled at the fact that he didn't slap me.

Dylan: [Or] Spit in your mouth and choke you.

Laura: No shame to anyone who likes to be slapped in the face, but I don't want to be slapped in the face. Like anything else, neck down, fine, but I don't want to be slapped in the face!

Nadia: My girlfriend is into some things that I'm not into, and I'm into some things that they're not into, and we talk about that and that's fine. We won't do it then.

Communication, boundaries.

While the participants are not analyzing the literature directly here, the literature prompted them to share about what is and is not acceptable to them sexually. Laura's feeling of shame was provoked after her friend informed her that she was not having sex properly because she did not want to have her face slapped, but her discussions with the study's other participants made her feel understood—thus, Laura's internal shame was both provoked and "healed" by external discussions, as she expressed in the study. In this same conversation, Nadia also notes that varying sexual tastes are "fine" and that sharing desires enables healthy communication and boundary setting; in fact, communicating their needs and differences fosters agency, she

implies. Ultimately, the texts chosen prompted conversations about shame but also suggested ways of navigating uncomfortable moments during sex.

Literature as a Catalyst for Self-Awareness

Across the four sessions, many of the conversations among the participants led to retrospection about what they initially understood about sex as teenagers in comparison to how they feel now as adults who are sexually active. They reflected that the limited and heteronormative information they received (mainly from school sex education and peers) shaped their early ideas about sex in confusing and negative ways that ignored pleasure, queerness, and emotional intimacy. Without trustworthy adults present to clarify misinformation, the participants found themselves lost. For example, participants discussed their confusion as young teens about defining sexual intercourse:

Angel: Talking about misinformation of sex, I didn't know penetration was a thing. I didn't know that was the main part of sex. But as soon as I knew that, I was like, what do you mean it goes in?!

Nadia: Growing up, I thought the definition of sex meant that you were penetrated by a penis or that in general you were penetrated. Something went inside that canal. But then growing up, you realize sex is whatever you call it. If you want to just say heavy petting is sex then that is sex to you. There's not a sole definition of what sex can be and I feel like no one taught me that growing up. In health class, it was, 'Sex is when the penis enters a vagina and ejaculates and you lose your virginity.'

Angel: All the queerness part of that goes out the window.

Dylan: ... My friends will talk about how they haven't had sex with their partners yet, but they're giving blowjobs and going down on each other. For me and my partner that is sex. So really sex can be whatever you want it to be...The amount of times—I love my friends, I love them—the amount of times they ask me that question: 'So do you guys use a strap on?' Is that really what we're asking? Does it have to be we're not having sex if we haven't? If they ask me in the same way they would ask a straight person, 'So have you used a strap?' We're already having sex; this is sex for me. To each their own.

As the above excerpt reveals, a general lack of information and misinformation about sexual activity prevailed amongst the participants. While penetration was at first a surprising aspect of the sexual act that participants learned about as young people, penetration then became for them the only element that was used to define sex. This lack of education and knowledge about sexual acts emphasized the skewed heteronormative lens that they experienced growing up. Oral sex, non-penetrative sex (such as manual stimulation), and “heavy petting” (touching, kissing), as Nadia noted, were not considered to be sexual activities. Moreover, Dylan expressed her astonishment that her friends suggested that queer intercourse with a partner could only be considered sex if they were using a strap-on because this would become a penetrative act; this conclusion indicates that Dylan's friends also had heteronormative assumptions about sex. As the conversations among my participants confirmed, they grew to disagree with this “popular” notion that sex was only considered to be sex if it was penetrative.

Interestingly, reading fics also brought up fearful feelings that outercourse could lead to pregnancy, proving that online literature helped to reinforce skewed notions of sex. In discussing a fic about Niall Horan from the band One Direction, Laura spoke about how the 11-

year-olds that wrote the fiction had little to no understanding of sex, much like herself. In the Horan fic, she recalled, two characters grind against each other and the “next morning [the main character] had morning sickness and it was like oh my god she’s pregnant!” Laura believed for years that she could become pregnant not only through intercourse, but by engaging in non-sexual touching with boys. She continued:

Laura: Every time I touched a classmate that was male, I was scared that I was pregnant. Plus, we were exposed to Teen Mom⁴⁴ when we were nine, so stuff like that screws with your head.

Dylan: [...] one of my friends just got into a relationship with her first boyfriend and she is still concerned about the precum myth from when we were 11, reading fan fic.

Laura: [During] my first time [of penetrative sex] with my person, he had to talk me down at one point [because] I saw a Tiktok that someone got pregnant from precum. And I’m so embarrassed at 21 years old because nobody talked to me. My parents still haven’t spoken about sex. And I never heard it in school because all they told us was to abstain. I never had a sex talk of any sort and anything I learned about sex or intimacy came from Wattpad and AO3. I don’t regret it but it had a lot of misinformation.

Dylan: It’s a double-edged sword, like social media. You give people a voice and freedom online [to share information] that you wouldn’t talk about in person, but Tiktok, Vine, Tumblr... it’s not always reputable.

⁴⁴ *Teen Mom OG* is a television series that follows the lives of adolescent mothers. See: *Teen Mom OG*. Created by Lauren Dolgen, 11th Street Productions, MTV, 2009–2021.

A lack of parental and/or sexual education and general misinformation about sex gleaned from online fiction are common experiences for my participants. Believing that someone could get pregnant by kissing and engaging in outercourse led to the participants being afraid of penetrative sex. Engaging with material on these fan fiction websites therefore exposed the participants to much misinformation about sex.

Furthermore, having sex for the first time was still a complicated topic for the young people in my study. Virginity, the chosen word to describe the participants' discussion of sexual debut, was a conversational aside among them as they discussed the literature. In these conversations, sexual debuts were often seen through a heteronormative lens, where sex was framed around male pleasure and female pain. Penetrative intercourse was typically portrayed as the central act, one that promised only bleeding and discomfort for female participants. Within these narratives, patriarchal gender roles persisted: male characters were dominant and sexually assertive, while female characters were passive and defined by their virginity. The representations of sexual debut in fan fic and through peer conversations led both Laura and Nadia to discuss the toxicity around certain fan fics:

Nadia: Everyone has told me that every time you lose your virginity you're going to bleed and that is just simply not true.

Laura: I knew it wasn't true and then I had sex for the first time and then there was blood on the sheets and I was like, I'm in After. I didn't think that was real, I thought it was just for the book.

Nadia: The first time I had sex I got blood on the sheets too, but then it turned out I was just on my period! And we laughed about it, it was really funny.

Laura: I think it's so interesting that my whole idea about sex was from books and YA books (which it shouldn't be) and my whole concept of sex was so skewed because every normal thing was made to be toxic.

Nadia: Same with me. When I was 10, I got a phone and downloaded Wattpad. Until I was 16, I only read shifter (werewolves, shapeshifters) romance and that was extremely toxic masculinity. They're all pure smut and it was so toxic and I grew up and I had these ideas about romance, not just sex, just relationships... And then I got into the relationship, which is my first relationship, and at the start I was so toxic because that's how I thought it was supposed to be and my girlfriend was like 'Are you okay?' [I thought], what are you talking about, this is normal. The books told me this was normal.

Fan fiction, and in Laura and Nadia's cases, commercially published YA as well, "skewed" their expectations of first-time sex and early relationships. In this context, toxic relationships referred to ones that normalized coercive behaviour and rigid gender hierarchies, framing these dynamics as desirable or inevitable. Such representations undermined a young person's sexual agency by teaching girls to expect passivity, discomfort, and emotional volatility, narrowing the possibilities for communicative sexual experiences. As Laura and Nadia describe, these stories made ordinary bodily responses, such as bleeding, feel like confirmations of a toxic script rather than neutral variations of experience. Only with time, and through real-life relationships, did my participants come to recognize the distorted versions of reality embedded in these texts. Their reflections illustrate how deeply YA and fan fiction can shape early understandings of intimacy, and how the choice to disentangle oneself from those narratives becomes part of developing a more agentic and self-aware sexual identity.

Likewise, learning about sex through fan fiction also prompted the participants to recognize gaps in literature. My participants expressed a desire to have more representation in fan fiction of aftercare (i.e. attending to one's post-coital needs). The participants found that aftercare was more popular in YA, as in *Full Disclosure* when it describes the intimacy between the two characters, and in *The Poet X* when it features the intimacy between Xiomara and Aman. In fan fiction, however, Laura affirms that the representation of aftercare is rare. She explains, "Sometimes on AO3 the tag will be there that says aftercare, but it's usually a pat on the head, good job." Others concur:

Zina Redd: Maybe a drink of water.

Laura: Maybe. Perhaps a towel.

Nadia: And they held each other and they fell asleep.

Laura: And they fucked in the morning. Bye!

Dylan: There's no plot.

Laura: Fan fiction is quick, let's go, get it done. Like, bust one and leave, and these [traditionally published] books are more trying to understand the nuances of sex and intimacy.

Fan fiction's emphasis on sex and the absence of aftercare clearly was a problem for my participants. The words "maybe" and "and" repeated here point to them commenting ironically on how those narratives emphasized the importance of the physical act over the emotional one. Reading fan fiction purely for sexually descriptive material, then, was not of central importance to the participants in my focus group; rather, as time went on, it became apparent in our discussions that my participants desired to have healthy descriptions of sex, especially with the

inclusion of aftercare, as shown in traditionally published books which often attempted to explore more “nuanced” representations of sex.

Earlier in this chapter, I referenced Helkenberg’s study in which her participants emphasized that YA lacked representations of more broad-ranging experiences of sex, such as BDSM, which they could find online. Although my participants expressed diverse preferences regarding the types of sexual experiences depicted, they shared an acute awareness of when certain dimensions of intimacy or desire were absent from YA literature and fan fiction. Laura, for example, emphasized that YA works to describe “the nuances of sex and intimacy,” such as depictions of sexual desire, in a way that fan fiction does not. This difference in illustrating intimate nuance is present in *Full Disclosure*, for example, when the group of teen friends decide to buy vibrators together. This led to conversations among the participants about their own negative experiences when purchasing sex toys:

Dylan: I have a very tame group of friends; we all went through a Catholic high school experience, and I’m the only gay person in my friend group, and we just started talking about masturbating two years ago [in 2020] and I was the one having the conversation, and because I was with my first girlfriend at the time and we were talking about vibrators, and I’m 24, they didn’t have any, they were tame...

Laura: I read all the smuttiest romance novels from Indigo when I was 11; it was bad. But same thing, I waited until I was 21 to have sex and that was from no other reason but depression but I wasn’t comfortable with my body because it didn’t look like what the books and movies said it had to, like everybody was gonna be disgusted by my face and body and that I like things a certain way. So them [the characters] going to look at

vibrators [in Full Disclosure] is crazy to me... I couldn't look at anything remotely sexual as a young adult. And I remember the first time I went to look at vibrators with my friends and they're selling them at Indigo in the back corner.

Dylan: So terrible, you have to get them in the back.

Laura: Yeah, so they are untouchable. So [the characters in Full Disclosure] just going through the vibrators was so cool for me, like I felt like my inner child was healing... it was so liberating.

Angel: Facing sexuality head on.

"Facing sexuality head on," as Angel describes, captures what is at stake for my participants in this conversation: the movement from sexual "untouchability" toward access and bodily autonomy. For Laura and Dylan, sex toys had long existed as objects that were materially present but hidden in the "back corner" of Indigo. Garrett's depiction of teen friends casually shopping for vibrators disrupts this logic. By presenting sexual pleasure as communal and visible, *Full Disclosure* reframes what had previously been inaccessible or shameful. For Laura, this reframing is explicitly "healing," allowing her to revisit experiences of desire and curiosity that had been suppressed. The novel instead imagines a world in which young people are permitted to engage with sexuality openly, without secrecy or fear of judgment. This reimagining matters because it contrasts sharply with my participants' lived experiences, which were marked by restriction and discomfort. Contemporary YA like *Full Disclosure* offered my participants a language of safety and honesty that had previously been unavailable to them.

The reading material that my participants discussed also generated moments of self-discovery, as when they discussed the types of porn they felt comfortable using throughout adolescence and today, and their critiques of the Ontario sex education curriculum:

Angel: Talking about the curriculum and what it covers, it kind of pushes away the queer people to find their own resources and not everything is reliable, as we know.

Laura: Lesbian porn, for example, is just male gaze.

Dylan: It's hard to find ethical lesbian porn.

Laura: Quinn app is the best thing in the entire world.

Nadia: I was on that for a little while. I was on that for the Thomas Doherty [material].⁴⁵

It's weird. I'm a lesbian but I like his voice. Voice kink.

Laura: It's audio erotica and you just have everything on there.

Nadia: But you have to pay. I paid for a little bit but then I got tired.

Laura: I would rather pay for ethical porn than watch something that then makes me feel bad because I'm doing it wrong.

In a discussion that deviated from the literature at hand, the participants' discussion about their experimentation with different types of sexual entertainment emphasizes their agency as sexual beings. While audio erotica is celebrated by participants such as Laura, the membership fee is a deterrent for others. For Laura, an extensive use of filmic porn also led to feelings of low self-worth; Dylan described feeling a sense of disinterest after frequent viewing. The varying degrees of pornographic material available (from softer audio erotica to more intense visual porn) shaped how participants could continue to generate self-pleasure. Importantly, the

⁴⁵ Thomas Doherty is a Scottish voice actor in a short series of audio erotica on the women-led platform, Quinn.

discomfort they experienced also prompted reflection: participants realized that their fantasies did not need to satisfy dominant, popularized male-centered fantasies (ones that are often aggressive) and this realization marked a moment of agency for them all, as they began to claim the kinds of material they wanted and needed for their own pleasure. Ethical porn,⁴⁶ for example, became a type of sexual entertainment that Laura, who had struggled with her previous porn use, found liberating; paying for audio erotica enabled her to feel free to use and enjoy sexualized audios. While Laura described Quinn as “the best thing in the entire world,” Nadia found the paywall limiting, even though she enjoyed the free content on the app. Thus, access to porn enabled agency for my participants, but agency was exercised unevenly here, shaped by cost, personal comfort, and how closely the material aligned with the participant’s own desires. Participants’ experiences thus suggest that the aesthetic qualities of sexual media, such as the visual style of filmic porn or the rhythmic cadence of audio erotica, shape engagement and agency.

The fan fiction presented to the participants also prompted discussion about how porn might be classified in relation to literature. This conversation remained unresolved, reflecting participants’ uncertainty about how to distinguish between different forms of sexual material and echoing the broader cultural conflation of *porn* and *erotica* that they described as a “conundrum”:

⁴⁶ Jones et al. in *Sex Work Today: Erotic Labor in the Twenty-First Century* (2024) describe ethical porn as prioritizing “consent on and off screen. It also includes fair pay for performers, content that aligns with a performer’s interests, and respect and consideration for actors throughout the entire production process” (61). The authors go further to define feminist porn as building on the definition of ethical porn but “challenges stereotypes by depicting diversity across bodies by size, race, gender identity, and sexual expression [and] includes the realistic depiction of pleasure” (62).

Dylan: ... It brings up the idea, when is it literature and when is it porn and is porn literature? I don't even know the answer to that question.

Zina Redd: ... I don't like working on the binary thinking of it, but the way I was viewing it was men often are associated with visual pornography and like the act of viewing porn, but women are viewed in the vein of reading erotica or reading erotic content, so where do young adults come in and take a gander at a lot of stuff? Especially because both of those scenes [in the fan fiction under discussion] can be highly violent or oversexualized in a lot of aspects. As someone who is, 'Hi ACE,' as someone who hasn't had sex and doesn't plan on it anytime soon, but it's just like oftentimes, [I wonder] is that what it's actually like? I don't think so! It doesn't take two and two to put together. But there are a lot of impressionable people who think that's what [sex is] like in a lot of instances. Be it that it's people who are just exposed to visual pornography or people who are only exposed to the erotic written, the fan fic... it's kind of a conundrum. So where is the authenticity that comes into play too?

Laura: It's also interesting that we're talking about men using porn, it's porn and pornography and with women it's erotic... the terminology there...

Zina Redd: It's coded.

Dylan: It still needs to be seen from this idea that when women have sex or do anything sexual it's beautiful, it needs to be poetic, but when it's men it's just porn.

Laura: There's this episode in Friends where Rachel has the erotic book and everyone's just like 'ah!' about it. And she has to defend herself and be like, 'a woman can like a little erotica.'

Dylan: Yeah, and women can also like porn.

Taken together, these exchanges illustrate what Zina Redd calls a “conundrum”: the difficulty of naming sexual material in ways that account for both its content and its cultural framing. Participants repeatedly returned to how terms such as porn and erotica are unevenly applied, often along gendered lines, with women’s sexual engagement more readily framed as “poetic” or narratively justified. Dylan’s observation that “women can also like porn,” alongside Laura and Zina Redd’s attention to how such language is “coded,” reflect a shared awareness of how terminology shapes judgments about sexual legitimacy and taste. At the same time, questions of realism and impressionability surfaced, particularly in relation to younger or less experienced readers. Zina Redd’s reflections on whether these texts represent “what it’s actually like” signal an attentiveness to how sexual writing, regardless of how it is labeled, circulates ideas about intimacy and expectation. These discussions, left intentionally open by the participants, foreground the importance of reading sexual material critically and provide a foundation for the following section’s focus on responsible representation and interpretive practices.

Critical Reading Practices and the Desire for Responsible Representation

As previously mentioned, two of the focus group sessions covered traditionally published YA—*The Poet X* and *Full Disclosure*—while the third focused on fan fiction and two works I retrieved online, “you fucking bottom” by g0t4k1tty and “teen romance” by Rimalex. The first two novels were chosen because of their positive reviews, their intersectional protagonists, and their explicit engagement with teen sexuality. The fan fiction pieces were chosen because of their use of sexual content. Because I conducted a youth-focused study, I asked the participants if there was a fan fiction piece that they would like the group to read. I

invited them to email me titles or tell me in person. None of the participants volunteered a title, so I chose the above two fan fiction works to study. It is also important to reiterate that the fan fiction canon is expanding at an exponential rate, and so these examples can in no way be seen as representative of the entire canon of fan fiction. Moreover, what might have been popular at the start of this study may no longer be attracting engagement. (Interestingly, “you fucking bottom” is no longer available online, as of January 2025.) The participants’ discussions about the literature ultimately led to inquiries about literary expectations, the critique of diction used in YA and fan fiction, and connections that they made to other types of literature or media, such as slam poetry.

To begin, my participants’ responses to *Full Disclosure* reveal a shared literacy around dominant YA narrative conventions and a corresponding appreciation for texts that deliberately resist them. When discussing the novel, participants expressed relief that Acevedo refused the expected tragic plot trajectory often assigned to YA protagonists. Angel remarked that she initially assumed “the twist would be that Simone wasn’t actually HIV-positive and was accidentally misdiagnosed,” while Laura anticipated that Simone would become “a social pariah, just to create drama.” She imagined a familiar YA scenario in which Miles would be “disgusted,” publicly mock Simone, and eventually “come back around” after causing harm. As Laura summarized, “Everything you think is going to happen as normally does in YA and in some fan fiction, it doesn’t follow that—and it’s really cool.” Laura explicitly linked these expectations to Todd’s *After* (2014), a novel that originated as fan fiction and relies heavily on the “innocent girl/bad boy” trope. She described being disturbed by the novel’s romanticization of coercive intimacy, particularly a scene in which the male love interest keeps bloodstained sheets after

the couple's first penetrative sexual encounter. In contrast, Acevedo's *Poet X* portrayal of relationships was repeatedly described by participants as respectful, mutual, and emotionally attentive. Abigail also observed that Acevedo resisted the standard YA "bad boy" trope, presenting a partner who is considerate:

Abigail: ... and after she stops [them from having sex], he doesn't reject her or tell her to get out. She has her own views of guys and her expectations of them and then he doesn't do what she expects. [He says], 'I'll have your back and guard your heart', on page 352. I was shocked. That was so vulnerable of him. I didn't see that coming from him.

Abigail's reaction underscores how deeply normalized coercive male behaviour has become within YA romance conventions. Her surprise signals critical recognition: she understands the trope well enough to recognize and value its disruption. In this sense, participants made literary judgements, appreciating authors who rework familiar plots to imagine more ethical and reciprocal forms of intimacy. Scholarship supports this observation. Jessica Taylor's "Romance and The Female Gaze Obscuring Gendered Violence in the *Twilight* Saga" (2024), examines the *Twilight* series and its representations of violent boys/men as particularly attractive. While my participants did not express enjoyment of violent male characters, scholarship suggests that audiences often seek out narratives that deviate from conventional YA plots, including those that feature more explicit sexual content. Attention to the portrayal of relationships as violent also extends to the participants' responses to the language used in texts, where they distinguished between the crafted prose of traditionally published novels and the often jarring diction of fan fiction.

In speaking about the difference in language that is used in novels in contrast to fan fiction, the participants appreciated the language in the traditionally published texts, such as *The Poet X*, over the writers' diction in the fan fiction, finding the language and the presentation of words in the novels beautiful in their use of imagery. Below are two separate exchanges among my participants about the beauty of the presentation of *The Poet X*:

Dylan: I think it was really interesting in terms of the language... I saw there was a dichotomy in the language. There was the poem where she talks about masturbating for the first time. It's a beautiful poem because it's so coded. So interesting and so flowery and light and then immediately after it's followed by shame... I really liked this natural language, so when she's using words like stem and root and grow, [it's] very natural. And then I think it's immediately after she's filled with shame.

Zina Redd: It was interesting because I've looked at a lot of concrete poetry, idea of playing with the mise-en-page display of the words on the page. Just the fact that you could read it as those verses or you could read it straight across and see what kind of patterns could be pulled from both ways. In dialogue or in a combative situation.

Dylan: This is the first narrative poem I've read with verses. I'm a slow reader most of the time. I know that's shocking for a teacher, but I read [this text] so quickly because of the rhythm to it. I could really engage with it.

In these exchanges, Dylan and Zina Redd participate in literary analysis to show how Acevedo uses aesthetic form, careful diction, rhythm, and structural choices, shapes readers' engagement with sexuality and transforms sexual content from depiction to a site of reflective pleasure and agency. For example, the poem "Fingers" about self-pleasure utilizes words that

are “flowery and light” (Acevedo 130), words that relate to nature, to show just how “natural” masturbation is, as Dylan explains; the shame that follows is a learned feeling that Xiomara’s mother instills in her. In a second example, from the poem “Verses” (306–307), Zina Redd’s interest in the “mise-en-page,” or Acevedo’s use of poetic structure, highlights how form itself produces meaning; the visual arrangement of the words invites the reader to slow down and examine the poem. Dylan’s appreciation for Acevedo’s “coded” language further underscores how metaphor creates space for interpretation rather than explicitness. Across these responses, beauty emerges as an aesthetic value through which sexuality becomes less stigmatized. For my participants, aesthetic form mattered because it shaped how they made sense of sexual experience.

Mostly, the participants responded negatively to my chosen fan fiction. Although it was clear that the participants enjoyed reading fan fiction, they acknowledged its flaws due to amateur writers’ lack of experience. In discussing g0tk1tty’s “you fucking bottom,” Nadia remarks on the naivety of the 14-year-old author’s writing. Rather than foregrounding agency, their discussion highlights how inexperience can result in inaccurate representations of sexuality:

Nadia: [“you fucking bottom”] is talking about tops and bottoms, and the way they’re talking about it is like how baby gays talk about it. Okay, you’re young... Fact that it was a 14-year-old, it makes sense why the writing is not good.

Dylan: ‘I cummed three times’.

Nadia: ... it’s bad writing and bad understanding of how sex works... Baby gay is when you enter the world of queerness. That’s what we call them. And they hear the word top

and bottom and they use it to label everything so [if] you do this, you're a bottom. But bottoms and tops are not the same as doms and subs, so when they're saying you're a bottom, you can't give. I was like, yes you can. You can be a bottom and still give. And you can be a top and receive. It's a very simple mindset. Bottoms receive and tops give and [this is] just not true.

Dylan: You're trying to make sense of this new LGBTQ gay community you're in, but you're looking at it from a heteronormative lens.

Laura: It feels very male gaze... They're incorporating kinks that I don't think they understand how they work either. The published books would use nicer words as well... In this it's like as soon as she touched my tits I came... that's not how that works.

Clearly language choice affects the way readers and participants understand and enjoy described sexual content. In the above excerpt, participants have a difficult time reading “you fucking bottom” because of the author’s “bad understanding of how sex works,” as Nadia notes. In addition to the lack of strong sexual content in the writing, the focus group noticed that amateur writing can also be too focused on the attempt to represent sexuality through inflated language:

Zina Redd: There's a lot of fic that I've read, I find particularly on Tumblr, AO3 a little bit, the use of flowery vernacular is kind of rampant, where instead of saying, 'he touched me with his fingers,' they would use 'digits'. My digits did this, his digits did that.

Laura: 'Member' is a very Wattpad term for penis, and also 'orbs'. His eyes. His green orbs stared me down.

Zina Redd: And instead of ‘this is how I acted,’ ‘their ministrations is something I’ve seen over years.’ They’ll say anything except calling the ‘clit,’ clit. So they’ll call it your button, your pearl, your petal, your jewel, and sometimes they just refer everything as the vagina but they won’t call it what it is, which is vulva. Some authors just don’t have any sense of anatomical correctness.

Even if well-intentioned, these fan fics can miseducate readers: elevated or imprecise language, like using “vagina” for “vulva”, spreads misunderstandings that are reinforced when young authors rely on other unverified online sources. Yet, there is also a distinction between Dylan’s appreciation of the published literature and Zina Redd’s aversion to the language of the fan fic. There is a chasm here between imaginative writing (writing that is stylistically distinct and attentive to craft) and trite language that depends on repetition and formula; the former invites the reader to reflect on sexual experience as complex while the latter merely gestures toward physical acts. Though the fan fic would seem to be sex-affirmative because of its curt presentation of diction and plot, my participants found these texts to be too blunt because of their focus on the physical act at the expense of any literary subtlety. Thus, it seems that sexual agency is better illustrated through writing that is traditionally published. This difference may in part be explained by the interventions of editorial teams in the shaping of a narrative for publishing. While editors may impose certain forms of censorship, such as removing scenes that could be deemed inappropriate for teen audiences, they also contribute to creating sex-affirmative narratives (such as Lee’s *Ask Me Anything*) by ensuring that sexual expression is illustrated as being pleasurable and emotionally resonant. Sexual agency in fiction, then, seems to be most convincingly conveyed through language that treats sexual experience as thoughtful,

not merely explicit. The contrast my participants identified between Acevedo's poetic description and the explicitness of the fan fiction thus underscores that mere representation of sex is not enough; how sex is written, along with word choice, literary technique, rhythm, and tone, influences how the reader feels the act.

Finally, the readings assigned for the focus groups encouraged participants to make connections with other texts/media that encouraged their sexual agency. For example, since Laura enjoyed that *Full Disclosure* featured positive father figures and the representation of masturbation, she made a connection to another novel, Julie Halpern's *The F-It List* (2013), where the main character, 16-year-old Becca, is dying of cancer and wants to masturbate and have sex before she dies. (This novel shares similarities with *Before I Die* by Jenny Downham, analyzed in Chapter 2). Laura shared her disbelief that the character had yet to masturbate at 16. Moreover, Laura connected her astonishment with *Full Disclosure*'s characters Claudia and Lydia, who critique Simone's lack of sexual debut. Laura argued that much writing (YA and online writing) is "porn with a plot" where after a first kiss, sex quickly follows. She imparted that she and her friends had discussed that after kissing, "the next step isn't immediately sex." In discussing literature, and the connections made beyond the chosen texts of study, the participants in my group were excited to articulate their own preconceptions about what it meant to be a sexual person, such as what age is "the norm" to start masturbating, and in turn, speak about how they have grown beyond sexual expectations to create their own standards and expectations for themselves.

Discussion & Conclusion

Although I began this study with specific research questions regarding intimacy, sex, and the young adult reader, the data I assembled from my participants extended well beyond those initial queries, revealing broader insights into teen sexuality and the reading of sexual content. I had initially expected fan fiction to function as a constructive, pleasure-producing counterpart to YA fiction, but my findings revealed the opposite: participants generally described their experiences with fan fiction as being negative in relation to learning about sex, while responding much more favorably to the YA novels I provided. Moreover, from a reading-for-pleasure perspective, the unedited nature of fan fiction often disrupted their reading experience. The frequent grammatical and stylistic errors in amateur writing became a distraction, pulling them out of the narrative. In contrast, participants praised the YA novels not only for their subject matter but also for their artistry which cultivated a sense of intimacy and realism that they found lacking in the fan fiction. As I discovered, although YA has its limitations in terms of the descriptive sexual content that it provides, it was preferred by the participants in this study as it offered thoughtful representations of sexual and emotional intimacy. Although an exciting medium through which to explore writing and reading without censorship, fan fiction often proved unappealing in aesthetic terms in its expressions of sex (whether because of authorial inexperience, a lack of editing, or an overreliance on trite language and imagery). Ultimately, my findings suggest that YA remains the more effective genre for fostering teen sexual agency among young readers. The genre invites adolescents to explore sexuality and intimacy from both educational and pleasurable perspectives, offering nuanced and realistic portrayals of sexual experience. Fan fiction, in contrast, provides a space for experimentation and fantasy, but

one that frequently lacks the reflective depth and linguistic refinement that can transform sexual representation into a vehicle for agency and self-understanding.

Notably, my participants were part of a demographic (ages 18-24) that has used the internet since they were young and, therefore, a great deal of the reading they did as children and as teens/adults was not monitored. Although my participants had the freedom to read whatever material they chose, much of this reading material had a negative impact on them because they did not have someone who guided them in their reading, like a trusted adult (a teacher, for example) who could discuss topics with them. In fact, participant Laura spoke about the sadness she carries for her younger self. Although she did not regret the fan fiction or the romance novels that she read from Indigo, she acknowledged that her experience reading those texts as a nine-year-old did affect her negatively. Now, as an adult, she looks back at how her ideas about intimacy became skewed by this reading, separating herself now from her nine-year-old self whom she refers to as “she”:

Laura: When I had my first time [of sexual intercourse], I [tried to] remember this thing that [I] read when [I was] nine [to] do that now. I feel like I had this education but I feel sad... I don't believe in the innocent child thing, I just know my own experience, I just feel sad that she at nine-years-old didn't feel like her body was good enough because it didn't match what I was reading or how I expressed love or like, didn't match the books I was reading. And no one knew how to talk about that either. You talk about fan fiction with friends, like this new Niall Horan fan fiction that just came out and it was wonderful or After, and it was like we were all silently judging each other if we didn't understand things. And it was really weird.

Similar to the women in Jacqueline N. Gunning et al.'s study, Laura found how "healing [it is] to talk about sex in a public forum." The YA literature in my focus groups became a catalyst for participants to begin to speak about a variety of broad topics that affected them as people engaging with sexual material. Conversations covered the literary elements of a text to discussions about the participants' self-growth and personal experiences of their sexualities. This movement from the literary to the personal highlighted the need for a public space where sex could be spoken about freely. In the exit questionnaire, Dylan emphasized the importance of speaking about sex; she wrote that she "learned that the public discussion of sex and intimacy, especially in a room full of strangers, is one of the most optimal ways to learn about sexuality no matter what age. These kinds of discussions fostered in classrooms would be so beneficial."

Shame, however, is an ongoing experience, whether as a theme in YA texts or in real life, as participants felt shame because of their cultural conditioning. As young people, they were taught that sex had to be a certain way to be considered "good." As participants reflected on their youthful and present-day reading habits, they discussed the shame they experienced in adolescence to the self-acceptance they now enjoy in adulthood. Participants shared how they felt less shame in the present day with regards to sex. While none of them regretted reading fan fiction, they did wish that their sex education had been more useful, so that they did not have to rely on fan fiction for teachings of "honest" representations of sexuality. Fan fiction, like visual porn, is not meant to be educational, as my focus groups confirmed. However, most of my participants suffered from a skewed view of sexuality, as children and teens they did not recognize that their media usage was distorting their views on sexuality.

While fan fiction does not necessarily teach sex, pleasure, or intimacy in the same ways as sexual health manuals or YA novels, it provides a space for readers to vocalize, experiment with, and critique sexual fantasies. My participants emphasized that writing and reading fan fiction allows individuals to find community and recognition for their desires. At the same time, most of our discussions focused on the limits of acceptable or comfortable fantasy. Participants expressed unease about Y/N fan fiction and works featuring real people, such as celebrities, due to questions of consent and the ethical implications of publicizing private sexual fantasies:

Dylan: The thing about writing about real people, like Nessa, like Harry [Styles], I think it's an issue of consent. It's not really happening which is why the lines have become blurred. But Harry, when he reads that, did he consent to being a part of this type of image or world that's being made around him?

Laura added that fame complicates consent further, noting that public images are often “out there” and subject to consumption in ways beyond the individual’s control. Abigail echoed this concern: knowing a real person’s online presence makes it difficult to separate the fantasy from reality.

These conversations were about ethics but also sexual agency. Participants asserted that private fantasies are natural and valid, but consent and respect must guide public sharing. In this sense, fan fiction becomes a site where readers reflect on their sexual knowledge, boundaries, and judgment. However, when fan fiction or commercially published works, such as *After* or Hoover’s *It Ends with Us* (2016), normalize abusive sexual scripts, participants found them troubling:

Laura: *Back to It Ends with Us, I'm surprised that storyline didn't die out with us... you asked us last week if we regretted any of it, and no I don't regret any of it because it was the sexual development, but we [women in their early 20s] are being very vocal about how After fucked up our ideas about sex and relationships.*

Their critique of these texts, particularly the violent “ideal man” trope popularized in a series like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, illustrates a sophisticated literary and ethical sensibility. While they appreciate sex-positive storytelling, they also seek narratives that balance sexual freedom with respect and consent. Even when engaging with amateur fan fiction, participants highlighted miseducation in the form of uncritical reproduction of harmful sexual tropes or technical errors in grammar or structure. Ultimately, their responses show that sexual agency is inseparable from critical literacy: participants desire freedom to explore sexuality, but with attention to ethical and aesthetic boundaries.

Finally, in their exit questionnaire (see Table 2), which six of the seven participants completed, while two said they would have never picked up *The Poet X* or *Full Disclosure* on their own, they thought the books were “interesting,” as Nadia writes, “in the way they depict healthy sexual relationships and also the struggles other people face surrounding sex.” Dylan was especially specific about how she viewed the two novels:

I think Full Disclosure offers a unique perspective on intimacy and sex in young adult literature. It's very open and honest and well informed. It provides readers with a discussion on sex and intimacy from a new lens, the lens of a young adult with HIV. It shows the reader the importance of educating yourself in preparation for sex. The Poet X acts as a relatable narrative for young readers with strict parents and guides the reader

through a journey to pushing the boundaries of discussions on sex and intimacy in the home- more specifically with religion as a major contributor.

As my readers confirm, literature that is “open and honest and well informed” can be useful and relatable for younger readers, so that they have a map of how to navigate their growing sexual awareness. Moreover, with respect to reading about sex after the focus groups had ended, 50% wrote that they were more comfortable reading about sex in mainstream fiction because of their editorial oversight. As Dylan wrote, “The online sources offer accessibility for writers but often act as some people’s personal fantasies or diaries,” which all participants agreed was problematic. While Abigail reinforced that “online content has more freedom,” Nadia remarked that she “would definitely reach out to read texts that promote healthy relationships rather than toxic ones as [she] actually find[s] them more enjoyable.”

Below, I have included some of the results that emerged in the exit questionnaire:

Table II.

Pseudonym, age, pronouns	What did you learn from your participation in this study?	Are you more comfortable reading about sex now? Would you rather read about sex published books or online? Please expand.	What feelings do you associate with reading about sex now?	Is there content in particular that you would like to see in future texts that include some form of sexuality? Is there something you want changed?	Do you think books are the best way to start thinking about sex? Or would you choose film? Or another medium?
Laura (21) she/her	I learned that being open about sex is such a fantastic and empowering thing. i learned that there are people out there that actually value and support	YES! absolutely. I’d rather read about it in published books. It’s much safer and comfortable than online, being able to google an author makes me much more comfortable. i	i feel SAFETY. i feel interest. i don’t know.. i just feel much better about it all now.	i want more consent written down explicit consent	i think we need to start in the curriculum. it has to start in education to make sure everyone understands consent and anatomy, and THEN we can begin to explore

	me, and weirdly have the same experiences ahaha	was very uncomfortable reading abt sex for a very long time because of the fan fiction. but now i feel much more confident.			sex through books and film. I think books are good. I think well-written books can display the TENDERNESS of it all— something movies don't often do. As long as it's well written and not male gaze-y, i think any sexual media is a great learning opportunity. and if it is male gaze-y, having that education to fall back on and supportive spaces to talk will spare the damage.
Matt (20) she/they	YA fiction has many layers	Not exactly, through this experience I am able to read about sex but do not prefer it, instead I am interested in finding out the different dimensions of characters and how they navigate life through the lens of desire, and what struggles stand in their way.	None, it is simply words on a page; part of a bigger story.	I would like to see YA literature in which characters do not have sex but instead feel desire and how that plays into LGBTQ+ relationships and even what compromises are made between partners and how this affects different types of people. I do think that YA literature had a better selection of LGBTQ+ media than other genres.	I believe literature is the best way to start thinking about sex as it can provide a deeper view into a character and their thought process which the audience can relate to and learn from.
Abigail (19) she/her	The texts taught me more topics I	It depends, most online content has more	fun, interesting, funny	The bullying and pregnancy trope	Books and film are both very popular and tv

	wouldn't have looked into if it wasn't for this workshop. I also learned a lot from other people's reading habits and ways they read	freedom, but I read more published books		in books should stop lol	shows as well. For me, all of these types of media introduced me to sex
Nadia (18) she/her	I learnt how media and literature can really influence how people perceive sex and it's expectations. Especially in youth.	I would say i have always been comfortable reading about sex. However, now I would definitely reach out to read texts that promote healthy relationships rather than toxic ones as I actually find them more enjoyable.	Now I don't see it as shameful to read about sex now. Especially in public. To me they are just books now. Something I can enjoy and learn from.	I wish there were more queer (specifically men loving men) books that are written with the same passion heterosexual books are. Heterosexual books usually have many sex parts in them however, queer books only focus on the fluffy and innocent parts. I would like future queer texts to ignore the stigma around queer sex in books.	Yes. I think it is the best way. With books, you can allow your imagination to shape sex in the way YOU want it. Therefore, learning about what you like and what you don't. Film tends to overexaggerate how it actually is and is too in-your-face.
Dylan (24) she/her	I learned that the public discussion of sex and intimacy, especially in a room full of strangers, is one of the most optimal ways to learn about sexuality no matter what age. These kinds of discussions fostered in classrooms would be so beneficial.	I would rather read about sex published books than online personally because I think the information is more credible. The online sources offer accessibility for writers but often act as some people's personal fantasies or diaries.	I think it's a liberating and freeing experience to read about sex.	I would love to read more queer exploration and coming out literature for new adults or even adult literature for people who come to the realization later in life. Even more discussion on complacent heterosexuality.	I think all media aspects are great outlets to start thinking about sex, it depends on the person and what they're personally interested in.

Zina Redd (22) she/her	there's a great deal of finesse when it comes to sex portrayed in young adult media. it's not all the keyed up heavy petting, cut to black, but it's also not only straight up erotica. there's lots of gray space	i would say i'm more comfortable with reading published sex— i've been used to it in fanfiction, but it was a great to close read the scenes in context for intimacy, and character exploration. as for either medium, i have no preference for either online or published at this point in time.	i still recognize my own personal disconnects with sex. but i can recognize it as it propels characters forward— either through giddy excitement or sensual explorative practice. i'm fairly neutral to sex both in fiction and in person, so this perspective still mirrors that	full disclosure did great opening up some ace discourse, but i'd love to see a greater familiarity with that vernacular. it is an entirely other ballpark and i know people are only just becoming better acquainted with 2SLGBTQIA verbiage, but there's still a lot of aphobia that undercuts conversations and fiction. i'd love to see that brought into a novelized space to make things more digestible, and take some of that emotional burden off ace people or other queer people to continually explain that language. full disclosure was a great first step, so i'd love to see more	i do have a partial bias since books were my first exposure to discussions with sex, but i do agree—i think they are a really great medium to start out with
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In Julianna E. Lopez Kershen's discussion of sex-positivity, she argues that sexual interests and interactions can be understood as "a positive and vital element of human experience" (122). The responses gathered in this study reflect this orientation: participants were receptive to writing about sex and sexuality that foregrounded openness, intimacy, and care, while also attending to the aesthetic qualities of the text itself. Overall, the YA novels were

valued both for their representations of healthy relationships and their use of language, which participants repeatedly described as pleasurable to read. Fan fiction, likewise, offered opportunities for experimentation, community, and self-expression, though participants were especially attentive to questions of craft, tone, and emotional resonance when reflecting on their reading experiences. Taken together, these responses suggest that sexual agency for young readers is closely tied to aesthetic engagement: texts that approach sexuality with narrative care and creative intention enable readers to explore intimacy in ways that feel meaningful. Ultimately, this chapter lent to this dissertation's larger argument that thoughtful, artful representation, and the freedom to choose how and where to encounter such writing, most effectively supports young people's developing relationships to sex, pleasure, and self-understanding.

Conclusion

Talking about 'It': A Dissertation in Reflection

This dissertation has studied adolescence and young peoples' engagement with sexual content in sexual health manuals and literary texts, both in print and online. Adolescence is clearly a time for growth and the exploration of the self. As I have explored, how teens learn about sex is affected by external factors, such as opinions from those in their immediate circles (parents, siblings, teachers, extended family, and friends/classmates), and on a larger scale, by social media, film, and literature. Teen sexuality continues to be a controversial topic in America because of the varying cultural constructions that circulate about "innocence" and "experience," and the liminal state that teens inhabit as neither adults nor children. Yet as I have noted, young adults experience desires and curiosities, and most have sexual feelings that increase in adolescence. While this dissertation indicates that not everyone desires to have sex, as shown in Alice Oseman's YA novel *Loveless* (2020) and confirmed by participants in my focus group, sex remains an important topic even for those who identify as asexual.

The push towards producing literature that is truly inclusive of a range of teen lived experiences is ongoing. In the creation of complex characters, authors are producing more sex-supportive stories by going beyond producing fear narratives and depicting characters who have sex with and for pleasure. This is a departure from older narratives, in which sex was depicted as unenjoyable or as leading to pregnancy, STIs, or emotional trauma. Even recent sexual health manuals feature more comprehensive information about sexual experiences, which supports teenage bodily autonomy; for example, Heather Corinna's *S.E.X.* manual for teens (2021) includes descriptions of a variety of sexual actions, such as anilingus (when "one partner orally

stimulates a partner's anus or rectum with their lips or tongue" [232]) and role-play during sex, emphasizing the importance of "boundaries" (244).

I found that a prevalent feeling in YA novels and among participants of my focus group is shame, and while I initially deemed textual representations of shame as negative, participants in my focus group expressed that these embodied experiences of shame were productive: shame made the narratives legible to their own experiences and foregrounded the emotional labour of becoming a sexual subject. Rather than functioning solely as something to be overcome, shame in these texts created space for tenderness, desire, and communication. Because participants experienced shame in their own lives around sexuality and sexual encounters, encountering characters who similarly struggle with shame modeled ways of working through difficult emotions, underscoring the importance of emotional intimacy as part of sexual agency. Thus, my hypothesis that the removal of shame from YA texts would benefit readers was proven wrong; instead, as my research and focus groups confirmed, texts that feature a full range of emotions, from shame to pleasure, represent a more inclusive scope of adolescent experiences. In a North American society where sex education curricula and cultural expressions in film and literature embed sexual shame blatantly, sex-affirmative literary representations (such as those seen in Snadowsky [2007] and Green [2005]) offer comfort and matter for conversation for adolescent readers. Furthermore, depictions of pleasure and desire in informative sexual health manuals, YA literature, and fan fiction, represent a number of different media to which contemporary teens can turn to explore their sexual agency.

The attempt to suppress teenage sexuality is an ongoing concern across North America, with a focus given to preserving teenage "innocence." This dissertation has explored texts that

work against this campaign, texts that inform teens about their burgeoning sexualities. It is clear that authors in the twenty-first century supplement teen learning about sex through illustrative and authentic representations of sexuality, and by means of a range of different narrative forms (sexual health manuals, fictional novels, and online writing). Opposing this desire to impose sexual “innocence” as a standard, authors include wide-ranging topics, such as sexual debuts, moments of masturbation, and engagement with pornography to feature representations of teenage sexual agency and autonomy in contemporary texts. The work that is being done is laudable in the fight against abstinence and fear narratives, with an emphasis specifically given to pleasure. And while not all texts are meant for sexual education, such as fan fiction available online, many texts, such as Nelson’s *I’ll Give You the Sun* (2014), offer complex illustrations of burgeoning sexuality that provide readers with examples of sex-positivity.

The Personal Motivation Behind the Research

My initial desire to study sexual content in young adult literature stemmed from my own love of YA novels, which continued beyond high school, past my own young adulthood, and into my 30s. As a teen, I sought out sexual descriptions for pleasure, but I also used these passages to learn about intimacy, especially because as a Catholic high school student, sex was construed as a strictly procreative act. If you did have sex, my instructors conveyed, a young woman would surely become pregnant, and in this religious environment, abortion was unforgiveable. Much like my focus group participants, I knew very little about pleasure as a student in an Ontario high school; sex meant trouble and that lesson stayed with me. For years I devoured novels and avoided different types of intimacy; books were where I was safe. As I continued to study literature, I found myself drawn to YA studies and the more research I did, the more I found that

sex as a topic in YA was still a developing area. As the years went by, I wanted to become a part of the growing academic conversation about pleasurable narratives, especially regarding the interweaving of sexual education and sexual health manuals, fictional YA, and fan fiction. I recognized that a place in which I could potentially contribute was to focus on the activation of teen sexual agency through literature. While I originally thought that online writing would be vital to teen agency, as the internet offers a place where writers can post uninhibited and uncensored sexual material free from editorial interventions, much to my surprise, the research participants in my focus group felt the opposite. While they enjoyed reading fan fiction, their relationship with the genre was fragile. In fact, it had caused some of them much pain. I do not argue that fan fiction should be made inaccessible to teens because of the potential damage it could cause; I have encountered countless published texts that have caused me emotional pain, such as Janet Finch's *White Oleander* (1999) and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* by Phoebe Gloeckner (2002). Instead, I speak from the perspective of one who has been negatively affected by institutions at large regarding my own sexual development, and propose that sexual education and the learning about sexual pleasure is a complex and deeply personal subject. This dissertation hopes to champion and affirm teen sexual agency, which is a message that I unfortunately did not receive.

Areas for Future Research

As with any research project, as time moves forward, the YA texts that I analyzed became dated. While the texts that I selected for analysis offered an interesting range of texts, there is always a newer text that could potentially better fit the research. As my research continued, I found additional YA novels that would have been applicable to my argument, such

as Jason Reynolds' *Twenty-Four Seconds From Now...: A Love Story* (2024), a YA novel from a Black and male perspective of teenager, Neon, who is about to experience his sexual debut.

It is an exciting time in which to read emerging texts that support teen sexual agency. What I offer here is a summary of a representative cross-section of texts; future research will likely include more texts about teen sexual agency (hopefully within an even more expansive global context), and ones that foreground LGBTQ+ narratives, especially of trans and asexual teens. Their narratives are only just beginning to appear in sexual health manuals.

My focus group work also reminded me of the importance of conducting experiential research with adolescents and their perspectives on the topic of sex. There is still much room for research with young people about the topics of sex, agency, and growth. Directly engaging with young people and elevating their voices so that change can occur on both a micro (within the home) and macro level (within institutions such as schools) is a direction that research can continue to support ideological change. While only five of the seven culturally and sexually diverse participants attended my sessions regularly, data acquired during my research can illuminate young people's experiences with sexuality and their engagement with sexual literature. Additionally, although my research focused solely on literary texts and online writing, many of the conversations expanded to discussions about current social issues and psychology, and these conversations offered a glimpse into the fascinating avenues where further research could be conducted.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues that young adult literature shapes how adolescents understand sexual agency. Through representations of pleasure, YA texts resist fear-based models of sexuality and provide young readers with imaginative frameworks for thinking

through intimacy and self-knowledge. Analyzing the construction of sex in literature for young people reveals the ways these texts support adolescents as they navigate the complexities and enjoyments of becoming sexual subjects.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Introductory Questionnaire

- 1) How did you learn about sex as a child/teenager?
- 2) How do you learn about sex today?
- 3) Do you wish you read more about sex growing up? Please expand.
- 4) Were there any memorable texts (young adult, contemporary novels, graphic novels, etc.) that had sexual content that you remember? Please describe.
- 5) Did any adults give you texts on sexual intercourse or sexuality? Please describe.
- 6) Did you read texts with sexual content openly or in a private space?
- 7) What feelings do you associate with reading about sex?
- 8) What feelings do you associate with writing about sex?
- 9) What would you like to explore in this study? What are your hopes as a participant?
- 10) Name and pseudonym
- 11) Pronouns
- 12) Age
- 13) Parts of your identity that are important to you (ex. Ethnicity, sexual orientation, race, first-generation immigrant, etc.)

Appendix B: Exit Questionnaire

- 1) Name
- 2) Permanent email (for contact if necessary)
- 3) Would you be interested in reading my dissertation chapter on these workshops once it's been approved by my committee?
- 4) What did you learn from your participation in this study?
- 5) What are your thoughts on the young adult literature excerpts we studied in our weeks together (such as *The Poet X* and *Full Disclosure*)
- 6) Are you more comfortable reading about sex now? Would you rather read about sex in published books or online? Please expand.
- 7) What feelings do you associate with reading about sex now?
- 8) Is there content in particular that you would like to see in future texts that include some form of sexuality? Is there something you want changed?
- 9) What about this next generation of middle school to teens—what do you think they're thinking about all of this? If you have younger siblings, do you know if they're interacting with these sites?
- 10) Do you think books are the best way to start thinking about sex? Or would you choose film? Or another medium?
- 11) Is there anything else you want to say? Share? Talk about?

Appendix C: Revised Consent Form (March 2024)**Informed Consent Form****Date:****Study Name:** Let's Talk About Sex: Constructions of Intimacy in Young Adult Literature**Researcher name:** Tita Kyrtsakas, Principal Investigator, fifth year of doctoral research in English at York University. titak@yorku.ca**Purpose of the Research:**

- This project aimed to explore the intriguing discrepancy between negative sex-narratives written by contemporary adult novelists, and the positive narratives of sex and intimacy created by young adults in their own fiction.
- My critical methodology is intersectional and feminist, and I utilized a text-centred approach to analyze texts by adults and young people (material and digital)
- This research is used in my dissertation and at conferences

What Participants Were Asked to Do in the Research:

- There were 7 of you as research participants in the age range of 18-24 years old
- You were required to attend each meeting and actively engage with activities (such as readings of excerpts and discussions)
- You understood that confidentiality in the meetings could not be guaranteed in a focus group setting as you were physically in a space together
- You, the participant, took an incoming and outgoing digital survey on how you perceive sexual content in young adult literature and writing
- The research occurred on multiple sessions over two months (five sessions, 5-7.5 hours total)
- You received a \$50 Indigo books gift card for your participation in the study

Risks and Discomforts:

Though the researcher will do their best to remove any identifying data as described below, there are still potential risks to anonymity such as someone close to you may predict your identity. Thus anonymity cannot be fully guaranteed. There will be minimal risks involved with having your data shared as it is anonymized. Any personally identified information (ex. street names, names of significant others, school names, etc.) will not be included in the transcriptions and will be elided. Personal identified information will be substituted with “_____.” For example, “My girlfriend lives near _____ and so my commute to see her is quite lengthy on the TTC.” The elision will be done to ensure that readers cannot deduce who the subjects are in the study.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: The focus group conversations were important in showing the intricacies of engagement between young people and sexual content. Benefits of sharing these conversations would be to enable other readers to fully grasp the depth of the conversations in relation to sex and sexuality from young people. A benefit to you would be knowing that you are a part of informing the world

Voluntary Participation: No new research data will be collected but I am asking you if you would provide consent for previously collected focus group discussions to be published in anonymized form as a part of my dissertation. The anonymized research data will not be confidential and rather made available to public. You do not have to agree to consent. For discussions to be published, each participant should give consent. Even if one participant does not consent, that discussion will not be published.

Confidentiality:

- Anonymized data (the transcribed, digital interviews) will not be destroyed, but used in the appendix of the Principal Investigator's dissertation and therefore will be indefinitely in public for access.
 - a. Recordings (audio and video) will be saved in a password protected file to research team members' local computer, not the cloud-based service and will be deleted October 2025.

Unless you choose otherwise, all information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Data will be collected through audio tapes and handwritten notes. Your data will be safely stored in a locked box and/or digitally on a password protected file and only the researcher and researcher's supervisor will have access to this information. The data will be stored for 2 years and will be destroyed in October 2025.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me at titak@yorku.ca or my supervisor, Dr. Alison Halsall at ahalsall@yorku.ca. You may also contact the Program in English at lapsengl@yorku.ca or (416)-7365166.

This research has received ethics review and approval by the Delegated Ethics Review Committee, which is delegated authority to review research ethics protocols by the Human Participants Review SubCommittee, York University's Ethics Review Board, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian TriCouncil Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, Kaneff Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I _____ consent to have the anonymized data for **Let's Talk About Sex: Constructions of Intimacy in Young Adult Literature** conducted by Tita Kyrtsakas be made indefinitely available. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

I _____ agree to have the following anonymized focus group transcripts available indefinitely to the public:

Transcript 1 (<i>The Poet X</i>)	☐	N	Y	☐
Transcript 2 (<i>Full Disclosure</i>)	☐	N	Y	☐
Transcript 3 (Fanfiction)	☐	N	Y	☐
Transcript 4 (Closing remarks)	☐	N	Y	☐

Signature _____
Participant

Date _____

Signature _____
Principal Investigator

Date _____

Appendix D: Online Fiction “Teen Romance” by Rimalex

Summary: love/hate relationships are honestly the light of my life

Chapter 1: Hiding

Between 3rd and 4th period is when Nico passes Will in the hallway, pretending they don't know each other.

It's funny, isn't it? The way Nico lets Will fuck him in the locker rooms but refuses to acknowledge him anywhere else. Oh well. He'll keep that secret.

Will turns into his classroom, dreading English. Nico has this class too, he wonders why he was heading the opposite way. Probably skipping.

"Will!" Jason yells out, raising his arms from the back of the class as if they didn't sit in that same area every day. "We're sitting here!"

Will rolls his eyes and settles into the desk next to him, fishing his phone out of his pocket before the late bell rings.

No texts from Nico. Huh.

"Why do you always get on your phone the moment you sit down before class, bruh?" Austin pesters him.

"Why do you care?" He fires back.

"I don't know, hmmm," his mouth turns up into a sly smile, "maybe you've got a secret boyfriend?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Will sees Jason raise his eyebrows and suppress a smile. He told him about Nico forever ago, it's no big deal.

"I got no one, loser." Lamé response, but a response as it is.

"Uh huh. Whatever."

He puts his phone up as Mr. D walks into class, his lunch and a diet coke in hand. "Phones up, please."

The class moves to follow directions, the mood dropping as class starts. Will doesn't bother paying attention, honestly, english doesn't matter to him.

He thinks back to yesterday, when Nico pulled him into the bathroom during dismissal. He didn't deny anything Nico asked him for yesterday, or any other time. Nico's got him wrapped around his finger, but Will's too proud to admit it.

What an unlikely couple they would be, if Nico were to ever come out. He shakes his head softly, a little shocked at his thoughts.

There are no feelings between them. They decided that forever ago. They're nothing more than friends with benefits, and that's it. Not even friends, he thinks. Enemies with benefits. A more fitting title.

His phone vibrates in his pocket suddenly, loud in the silence of the classroom.

"Who's phone was that?" Mr. D turns from the board. Shit. He's in trouble. "Turn it off or I'll take it up."

He sighs as silently as he can. Usually, Mr. D takes phones up with no hesitation. Maybe he had a good break today.

He takes his phone out to silence it, but stops when he sees a text from Nico.

come to the bathroom 11:06

ASAP 11:06

the one from yesterday btw 11:07

if u can </3 11:07

ignore the heart it was an accident 11:07

Jesus, Nico types fast. He remembers to mute his phone and turns a little to the side so Mr. D won't see him texting.

11:10 omw

11:10 that heart was no accident u love me

die 11:10

Why his heart beats a little faster when Nico tells him to die, Will couldn't tell you. His hand shoots up. For a few minutes, he clears his throat and sniffs to subtly try and get Mr. D's attention.

"Solace? What do you need?" He finally turns to him.

"Can I-- May I use the bathroom?" He corrects himself quickly, hoping to get permission.

"Can you wait? We have about 10 minutes left." He disappoints, turns back to his lesson.

Will slides down in his seat and groans internally.

11:16 D said no

11:16 just wait a little

11:17 we both have lunch next anyway

let down of a lifetime 11:19

i am so disappointed i might die 11:19

my dick was hard and everything 11:20

now I have to think about ur face so it goes down smhhhh 11:20

11:21 get over it

11:21 meet me in the bathroom close to cafeteria tho

11:22 u'll get ur fix then

11:22 addict

choke 11:23

Will refuses to admit he blushed a little.

It takes Nico forever to get to the bathroom. Will hid in there for at least 10 minutes before it was empty, Nico at least could've done the same.

He enters a stall he deems clean enough, and waits.

"Will?" Nico whispers, walking next to the stalls.

He opens the door he's behind leaning against the side with a brow raised. "You couldn't have been quicker?"

"Die." He pushes Will back, locking the stall.

Immediately, Will latches his hand to Nico's hair and kisses him harshly, his free hand gripping Nico's waist against him.

"Couldn't wait until the end of the day, huh?" He mutters into Nico's mouth, the hand in Nico's hair moving to grab his chin. "Horny bitch."

Nico doesn't reply, instead grinding his hips against Will.

"Answer me," He demands, kissing the side of Nico's neck.

"I--," he cuts himself off with a muted whimper as Will cups his hand onto his crotch. "I couldn't, I couldn't stop thinking about--about yesterday--*ahh--*"

"Course you couldn't," Will undoes both their jeans, pulling them down and turning Nico around. "I'm surprised you aren't walking with a limp today, baby." He smiled against the curve of Nico's shoulder. "Lube?"

It was a joke, if Will's honest. He was surprised to see Nico pull out a bottle of it from his jacket pocket, along with a condom.

"What?" Nico blushes and scrunches his nose a little. "It's strawberry-flavored!"

Will chuckles. Maybe he'll taste it someday. Just not today. He takes both things into his hand, simultaneously pulling their boxers down. He flips the cap off the bottle and squirts a decent amount on his finger.

"You ready?" He whispers into Nico's ear gently.

"Ready." They lock eyes for a second.

Sometimes, between all the roughness and pretend-hate, things like this happen. They slow down for a moment, they make a violent type of eye-contact. Each time, for just a moment, Will think he's in love with Nico. And, from the look in his eyes, he also thinks Nico's in love with him.

He ignores it, sliding a finger inside Nico and watched his mouth open a little.

"nghh-" Nico whimpers, pulling Will's free hand onto his hip.

Will moves it back and forth slowly, takes relish in the way Nico's face changes to a mood of pleasure.

"Another one," he pleads.

"Another one, what?" Will teases, having a power over him he never has outside of these moments.

"Another one, please please please, I need--" his hand clamps over his mouth as he lets out a loud moan at the entrance of 2 more of Will's fingers.

"Good boy." Will mumbles, pushing his fingers in and out while stretching them out.

"Will--will, please please, I want, I want, I need you in me, hurry up--" Will moves his hand back on Nico's mouth.

"Quiet down, baby," He pulls his fingers out of him. "You don't want all your little friends to hear how needy you get for my cock, now, do you?" Will unwraps the condom and rolls it onto himself.

Nico moans in response, his eyes rolling back into his head as Will rubs the head of his dick against Nico's hole.

"Huh," Will smirks. "Would you like that? Slut. You'd like it if I fucked you in front of them, right? If I let them watch while I fucked your brains out, huh?"

Nico reaches behind him to push Will inside of him, but Will slaps his hand away and fakes a frown at the way Nico whines.

"You don't decide when I fuck you, di Angelo. I do." He slams himself into Nico in a swift move, groaning as Nico's eyes roll back and he silently screams.

He moves his hips back and forth, hitting Nico in all the right spots and shaking the wall he's leaning Nico against.

Nico tightens around him as he fucks into his prostate, and Will moans so loud he has to bite onto Nico's shoulder to quiet himself.

"Fuck, baby," he licks the bite-mark slowing his thrusts and instead pulling himself almost all the way out and burying himself deep into Nico over and over again. "You feel so fucking good around me. Only me. Can't have anyone else fucking you, you're mine, you got that?" He hardens his grip on Nico's hips, knowing he'll leave bruises.

Nico whines in response, so fucked out he can't reply properly.

Will fucks into him faster, "Use your words, baby boy." He's moving harsh and quick, hoping the sound of his hips slapping against Nico's ass isn't echoing outside the bathroom.

"Y-yes," Nico babbles, "Yours--yours, only yours, ahh,"

"Good," Will hides his face on Nico's shoulder again, muffling his moans as he edges closer and closer to his climax.

"Will--will, cumm--cumming, please," Nico moans, pleading for release.

"Go ahead, baby, you can cum," Will slows the rocking of his hips as Nico tightens so hard around him, fucking him as he cums and whines.

"Thank you," Nico mumbles carefully, *ah-ing* with each of Will's thrusts before his release.

"Shit," Will speeds up, wanting to cum before Nico gets too sensitive. He cums into the condom, groaning and flopping onto Nico at his end.

"Will?" Nico whispers.

"Sorry," Will pulls out of him and ties up the condom, wrapping it with toilet paper and throwing it into the trashcan beside the toilet.

He turns back to Nico, reaching into his jacket pocket, knowing he always has Kleenex packets in there. He pulls them out, gently dragging them against Nico's crotch and legs, quietly cleaning him. He pulls his boxers and jeans up, buttoning him up and setting his hands on Nico's hips.

It was these moments, every time. It was soft and gentle and caring. It was the opposite of them.

"Thank you--again," Nico sets his head against Will's chest. "I hate you, you're a fucking loser."

"You're literally laying your head against my chest, but okay." Will smiles into his hair.

"No, I'm not. Fuck you." Nico pulls away carefully, holding his smile back. "Um. I think the bell's about to ring. Yes."

Will unlocks the door, pushing it forward and letting Nico out before him.

He decides to again ignore the way his heart was bursting when Nico set his head against his chest.

Appendix E: Excerpt of Online Fiction "You Fucking Bottom" by g0tk1tty

she looks up at me, crawls back up till we are face to face, licks her fingers then makes me lick them. after her fingers are out of her mouth, she makes sure its still open, and spits in my mouth. FUCK THAT MADE ME HORNIER THAN I ALREADY WASSS. "oh yeah? i fucking will you whore."

oh shit.

nessa gets up and opens her drawer. she gets handcufs out. uh oh. she turns arond, smirks, and gets on top of me. she pushes me against her bed and handcuffs me to the bed frame, then she goes down while kissing me all over my body and handcuffs my legs to the sides of her bed.

she starts licking my clit and sucking on it. i couldnt help but moan.

"ugh nessa-oh fu-fuckk" and i cummed 3 times. she looks up at me, "yes. good girl, cum for me." i didnt wana say make me again. she completely DESTROYED me. so i just smiled and said "whatever you say." she stoped since she was sure im satysfied. she started kissing her way up to my boobs, then neck, then lips. we made out for a while and then i pushed her away, "nessa, you pleased me so well, i want you to feel good too" i say.

i was pretty nervous. i was scared she wouldnt be satysfied with me, but yk what fuck it ill do my best.

she laughs. "you are a fuvking bottom y/n, besides i like to give more than recieve" oh its on.

Y/N: im gona turn YOU into a bottom.