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Faith, Progressive Sexuality Education, and Queer Secularism: Unsettling Associations

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I am an advocate of sexuality education programs that are influenced by comprehensive approaches. I strongly believe that advocacy for comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is important, especially given the politics of sexuality education in the US context as well as internationally (Rose 2005). I also don't want to set up a binary that suggests that the world is neatly divided between those who support CSE and those who support abstinence-based approaches. Jessica Fields, in her book *Risky Lessons*, questions the perception that there are clear distinctions between these approaches, as based on extensive observation of sexuality education lessons in North Carolina schools. She notes

> the idea that sex is normal and natural prevailed in teachers' everyday classroom practice. The sharp distinction between abstinence-only and comprehensive policies did not correspond to a sharp divide between the classroom instruction about bodies that the two curricula provided. (2008: 104)

Fields' observations are an important reminder that sexuality education, *in practice*, may not appear as divided as it does in sexuality education debates. At the same time, Fields acknowledges that liberal visions for sexuality education (in which young people have conversations about sexuality, responsible decision-making, and the mechanics of reproduction) are "so taken-for-granted in

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today's secular public education that it is easy to forget that science supports an ideological system" (2008: 102). This naturalization of different versions of secular sexuality education interests me in this chapter. How did this set of positions become naturalized? And what are some of the consequences of this imagining of secular versions of sexuality education as simply reflecting modern reality? I consider how comprehensive approaches have been creatively adapted to engage young people in the USA who are religiously affiliated, also how they have been implicated in the production of religious–secular binaries.

The progressive sexuality education that I explore in this chapter happens within schools, in out-of-school programs, and at public events (specifically, I focus on a comedy festival act). I recognize that these places are incredibly distinct, with different audiences and purposes. But looking across these sites it is possible to see how particular sets of ideas, which I associate with secularism, produce and reference the "taken-for-granted" understandings that are apparent to Fields. The focus in this chapter is predominantly the US context, because this is where distinctions between abstinence and comprehensive approaches have been most pronounced and most contested. While these ideas have their roots in the USA they also have resonance beyond the USA, including Australia, where I live. I consider how comprehensive approaches interact with and sometimes frame relations between religiosity, sexuality education, and secularism, and I consider faith-based organizations' (FBOs) relationships with comprehensive approaches. I also draw on Nancy Lesko's *Feeling Abstinent? Feeling comprehensive?* (2010); her examination of the role of affect in structuring feelings toward these different approaches is placed alongside two ideas of Jasbir Puar's "sexual exceptionalism" and "queer secularism". I identify and trace some of the relations between queer secularism, abstinence versus comprehensive binaries, and their associated affects; I think about how these affective binaries are sustained via sexual exceptionalism and queer secularism.

Teen Birthrates, Religiosity, and Sexuality Education Provision in the USA

The research that I analyze below looks at how sexuality education in the USA influences adolescent birthrates. There is recognition within this research that sexuality education cannot be isolated from the broader social context, including issues such as religiosity, race, and ethnicity, social class, and state

policies on abortion. Whether one is for, or against teaching about religion in public school contexts, religion is always going to be a significant part of many young people's cultural contexts. The research below suggests the salience of religion as a contextual factor that needs to be addressed in the provision of sexuality education, whether it is framed within a comprehensive or abstinence-based approach.

The relationship between religiosity and teenage pregnancy in the US context is explored in a recent longitudinal study, which considers 24 states in the USA. Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2012) in their article *Associations Between Sexuality Education in Schools and Adolescent Birthrates* found a strong link between *religiosity and increased levels of teenage birth rates* (my emphasis). The authors maintain that the findings of the study "underscore the strong influence of religiosity and abortion policies on adolescent birthrates". They also make the caveat that this association is "above and beyond sexuality education":

> *Teaching more sexuality education* did not lower adolescent birthrates when accounting for state characteristics (i.e., higher religiosity, stricter abortion policies, and sociodemographic characteristics). (2012: 139) (my emphasis)

Despite their research finding that there is no relationship between more sexuality education and a decline in adolescent birthrates, Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2012) argue that all US states need to "embrace comprehensive sexuality education" (139). I would argue that these findings are not an endorsement of any style of sexuality education. It is most likely an argument for more research that can consider how sexuality education can specifically target young people who have higher levels of religiosity and live in states with restricted access to sexual and reproductive health services, including abortion.

In their study of demography and teen birth rates in the USA between 2000 and 2008, Zhou Yang and Laura Gaydos (2010) also note "the significant positive influence of religiosity on birth rates across age and race", and they state "*this effect could be independent of policy*" (521) (my emphasis). Akin to Cavazos-Rehg et al., Yang and Gaydos found a strong correlation between religiosity and birth rates. The variables that Yang and Gaydos took into account include Medicaid waivers, abstinence funding, parental consent, religiosity, demography, and socioeconomic status. The dependent variable was teen birth rate (518). They found that "religiosity had a significant influence on teen birth rates across age and race … conservative religious beliefs

strongly predict [increase in] teen birth rates" (520). So, Yang and Gaydos suggest, provisionally, that regardless of how conservative or progressive a state's policies might be regarding sexuality education, that conservative religiosity may counter this influence and therefore teen birth rates among religiously devout young people will not diminish.

Both these quantitative studies suggest that religion strongly influences teen birth rates *regardless of the type and amount of sexuality education provision experienced by young people*. If one accepts that religion is an important factor in each of these studies, and sexuality education as currently taught (comprehensive or abstinence based) does not necessarily impact adolescent birth rates, then what is an appropriate response? Indeed, Yang and Gaydos' (2010) conclusion is that "religiosity had a significant influence on teen birth rates … conservative religious beliefs strongly predict [an increase in] teen birth rates" (520). Somewhat contrary to the findings reported above, Kathrin Stranger-Hall and David Hall (2011), in recent quantitative research on abstinence-only (AO) education and teen pregnancy, trace a relationship between AO sexuality education and increases in teen pregnancy.

Following on from establishing this link, Stranger-Hall and Hall argue:

> An important first step towards lowering the high teen pregnancy rates would be states requiring that comprehensive sex education (with abstinence as a desired behavior) is taught in all public schools. Another important step would involve specialized teacher training. … As a further modification, "sex education" could be split into a coordinated social studies component (ethics, behavior and decision-making, including planning for the future) and a science component (human reproductive biology and biology of STDs, including pregnancy and STD prevention), each taught by trained teachers in their respective field. (2011: 9)

Stranger-Hall and Hall's suggestions for future directions accord with my own past understandings of how sexuality education can be enhanced—many might continue to concur with their recommendations. I see such suggestions as potentially limited in what they can achieve because of their failure to substantially engage issues related to religiosity and sexuality education. There is one mention in this article on the relationship between religiosity and teen pregnancy, which suggests that these are positively correlated, but the suggestions for future directions don't sufficiently address this issue. To my mind, ethics, sexual citizenship, and references to decision-making (all cited as

integral to the reduction of teen pregnancy rates) have become secular codes that theoretically may make space for discussions of religiosity, but generally tend not to be explicit about these connections.

How does progressive sexuality education address these links between religiosity and teen birth rates? How does sexuality education that is avowedly secular engage with religious communities? How do progressive approaches, that are predicated on science, reason, and an explicit absence of discourses related to morality, engage young people who are religious, committed to abstinence, and clearly sexually active? Is developing a pedagogical form of address to engage with these young people to use birth control even a possibility, given the social contexts in which they negotiate sexuality?

It is incumbent upon researchers in sexuality education to understand how religion and progressivism are mutually entangled—a progressive approach cannot nullify the influence of religion, and presumably the reverse is also true. Young people are engaging in abstinence-based sexuality education, declaring a strong religious affiliation and having sexual relations. Religious and progressive commentators who continue to argue the superiority of religious *or* secular approaches in terms of young people's sexual decision-making, freedom, and liberation may both miss important opportunities to engage young people in conversations about sexuality. What would sexuality education provision look like if researchers and practitioners assumed that secular *and* religious perspectives are intrinsic to the production of sexuality education?

I don't want to appear naïve about the politics that shape sexuality education provision in the USA. I recognize sexuality education provision in the US context is highly contextual. I also understand that religion may be left out of suggestions for future directions in sexuality education for myriad reasons: it may be seen as too controversial; as potentially running afoul of federal, state, and local statutes that preclude schools from offering religious instruction; as anathema to education about ethics and decision-making; and, as contrary to public health imperatives and to scientific education about sexuality.

Regardless of the location in which they are enacted—within and outside the USA, sexuality education research and programs (religious and secular) are often bound by a religious–secular binary at the outset and this shapes the politics, the philosophy, and aims and aspirations of researchers/practitioners/parents/young people. In order to try and demonstrate just how this binary can shape practice, I consider an article by Jesse Mills entitled *I Should Get Married Early: Culturally Appropriate Comprehensive Sex Education and the Racialization of Somali Masculinity* (2012).

Comprehensive Sexuality Education and the Somali Community in San Diego

Jesse Mills' study illustrates some of the misfires and misrecognitions that can occur when progressive ideas are enacted/perceived as regulatory. This is one example of how a progressive approach to sexuality education can produce a set of alignments that have the potential to reinforce religious conservatism, therefore minimizing the efficacy of a comprehensive approach.

Mills observes the day-to-day operations of Project Brotherhood, Responsibility, and Outreach (Project B.R.O.): a CSE program aimed largely at young Somali men recently arrived in San Diego, California. The education program takes a comprehensive approach, aiming:

> (1) to provide young men with the knowledge about sexuality they need for good decision-making; (2) to encourage respect for themselves and others; (3) to help young men understand the importance of self-responsibility, especially in the area of sexual behavior; (4) to help young men increase their level of meaningful communication with their parents; and (5) to prevent partner violence by encouraging healthy relationships. (2012: 11)

Mills sees this attempt by sexuality educators to reach out to the Somali community as informed by US racial stereotypes. He also observes the imperatives placed on health educators to stick to particular "scientific" scripts in the provision of sexual health education because they feel the need to rationalize funding and perpetuate their own employment as credible sexual health researchers/educators (9, 10).

Educators in this program embraced a message of abstinence (while seemingly, according to Mills, not engaging these same young men's strong cultural and religious commitment to abstinence). Explicit within the program was a focus on health experts depicted as the most authoritative figures that young men should consult in discussions of sexuality. This was apparent in Project B.R.O.'s investment "in replacing African authorities with the ideologies and institutions of abstinence and personal responsibility. This tension was clear in Project B.R.O.'s failed attempt to engage parents" (18). For Mills, this pedagogical assemblage may have had the unintended consequence of reinforcing a particularly patriarchal version of Somali Muslim masculinity.

This manifested in conversations between participants about staff attitudes that were seen as too liberal on the subject of homosexuality, hooking up, and having multiple partners (as long as you practiced safe sex), but critical of the

practice of men taking more than one wife. Mills argues that such logic did not shift the perspectives of the young men he spoke to. Rather, in response they were inclined to adopt homophobic beliefs, effectively enabling them to "claim Islam and mainstream normalcy within their own culture. That same homophobia, however, also substitutes individualistic heteronormativity for the collective community-formation characterized by homosocial intimacy" (2012: 28). In this study, young men recognized the power associated with the straight marriage bond, but at the same time they had to reckon with accompanying prohibitions associated with homosocial intimacy, also a part of this same individualistic heteronormativity.

Mills attributes educators' failures in the implementation of this CSE program to its underpinnings in:

> the broader structures of humanitarianism [that] rely on racist and sexist stereotypes that conform to prevailing social values as stakeholders may not have enough knowledge or critical perspective, or, more likely, may not feel in a position to disrupt the mainstream from which vital good will flows.

> The distorted threat of Somali sexuality allowed Project B.R.O. to come into being, yet the program's misplaced reliance on the culture of poverty ideology and easy shift to a more diffused multiculturalist framework secured its role of surveilling and disciplining abjected youth of color. (2012: 30)

The desirability and availability of funding for the implementation of CSE programs targeting minority youth (even if they happened to practice relatively low levels of unsafe sex), resulted in the implementation of a program that understood these young men through the lens of poverty and racialization. It also, reportedly, failed to engage with the role of religion and community and the changing attitudes of these young men's female peers. The secular underpinnings, implicit within many instantiations of the comprehensive approach, contribute to Project B.R.O.'s failure to apprehend the significance of religion in shaping young people's understandings of sexuality. It is evident that the program's architecture was embedded in secular understandings of sexual decision-making, abstinence, and sexual freedom that ensured that these young men and the workers in the program had agendas that were mutually unintelligible, if not antagonistic. It is also noteworthy that workers in this program didn't, *at least according to Mills*, conduct this critical appraisal themselves. Rather, Mills characterizes the workers as clinging to narratives that reinforce progressive ideas about sexuality, as well as reinforcing racial and class stereotypes about the young men they were paid to "help".

This analysis of Project B.R.O should not be read in isolation. In many ways, the approach being adopted by the workers in this program is entirely unremarkable, it reflects some taken-for-granted understandings about the intrinsic value of a comprehensive approach. My discussion of Mills suggests something of a gap between progressive approaches and faith-based communities in the USA. In the section below, distinctions between comprehensive and faith-based approaches are not straightforward.

Faith in Progressivism

In a review of comprehensive and abstinence-based approaches to sexuality education being utilized within FBOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) in the USA, David Landry, Laura Linberg, Alison Gemmell, Heather Boonstra, and Lawrence Finer demonstrate that faith is no predictor of the approach people might take toward sexuality education. These researchers are from the Guttmacher Institute, a progressive think tank on sexuality education.[1] My decision to point out these researchers institutional location is in part informed by a desire to construct them as credible in their assessment of FBOs. To this end, I am privileging evidence-based analyses of FBOs—a secular maneuver?

In analyzing the barriers to provision of comprehensive sexuality organization, Landry et al. (2011) note that CBOs are often funded under the auspices of public health initiatives and that this limits what they are able to achieve because they are "locked" into prevention programs and may not provide broader youth development or recreational activities. This is particularly significant in relation to the ideas I am exploring in this chapter because it speaks to the ways in which funding of sexuality education reinforces secular/religious binaries. If sexuality education garners support principally on the basis of its prophylactic effects, then funding programs that go beyond this logic may be difficult to justify.

In their analysis, Landry et al. (2011) suggest potential benefits associated in not being confined within a progressive approach, arguing "faith based-organizations are usually not solely driven by public health outcomes and may be better able to incorporate a variety of lesson plans and topics in a

[1] The Guttmacher Institute is a not-for-profit think tank in the USA that prides itself on its use of evidence "to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights through an interrelated program of research, policy analysis and public education designed to generate new ideas, encourage enlightened public debate and promote sound policy and program development". See http://www.guttmacher.org/about/index.html

comprehensive sexuality education program" (93). So FBOs may be more likely to vary progressive scripts and go beyond a focus on health imperatives (96).

The notion that CBOs are limited by a focus on health and risk prevention is an argument that has been made by numerous commentators (Allen 2004; Lottes 2013). Allen (2004) emphasizes the importance of thinking about pleasure and desire in sexuality education, going beyond a focus on the mechanics of sexuality education; a position she critically revisits in "Pleasure's Perils" (2012). Lottes' argues for operationalizing connections between discussions of sexual health and sexual rights, a discussion that she recognizes has to engage values and beliefs. While Lottes and Allen have been critical of the narrow focus of CSE, the critiques cited above have not engaged questions of how religion might play a role in complicating discussion of rights, pleasure, and desire in sexuality education.

Advocates of an abstinence-based approach do draw on progressive discourses to capture the imagination of Christian young people. For instance, "sex positive" sexuality education, a term often harnessed by supporters of the comprehensive approach (see Landry et al. 2011) has also been mobilized by Christian sex counselors. In *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century*, Jeffrey Moran argues that:

> In the long run, perhaps sexual "liberals" in SIECUS [Sexuality Education and Information Council of the US] and elsewhere should not worry too much. Abstinence education and the modern conservative movement have deep roots in American culture and are by no means immune to the cultural changes they claim to despise. For example, the LeHayes have tried to approach sexual expression more positively than the conservative tradition dictates, and Irvine cites evidence that other Christian sex counselors have angered some of their allies by attempting to make their presentations more explicit, more sensational. What happens when the first generation of abstinence educators looks into the blank faces of its students and realizes that what Christian conservatives had believed for so long to be the unspoiled innocence of youth is, in fact, nothing more than the crying ignorance of the American teenager? (Moran 2003: 288, 289)

Moran's *Teaching Sex* draws our attention to processes of secularization within progressive and conservative approaches, but somewhat confusingly, at least for this reader, he also affirms progressive approaches. While Moran doesn't perceive CSE as the antidote for the "ignorant American teenager", he does want to ease the concerns of liberals who worry about the proliferation of abstinence discourses in the USA. Maybe echoing Fields above, Moran does this by suggesting that progressive and conservative sexuality education

provision is not always as far apart as one might think. Moran perceives something of a blending of Christian conservatism and the liberalism of SIECUS.

Moran also softly mocks Christian conservatives for their misrecognition of ignorance as innocence. The assumption here from Moran is that young people who are the subject of abstinence-based approaches are essentially indistinguishable from their peers—essentially, he proposes that adults should perceive young Americans as ignorant on the subject of sexuality, not innocent. This analysis doesn't appear to entertain the notion that young people might be innocent and ignorant, devout and promiscuous.

In thinking through debates about abstinence, innocence, and ignorance, I have found the work of Charles Taylor quite instructive. He comes at debates about celibacy and abstinence from a slightly different angle. He suggests that such debates bring forth the ignorance of Christians and secularists alike, "what Vatican rule-makers and secularist ideologies unite in not being able to see, is that there are more ways of being a Catholic Christian that either have yet imagined. And yet this shouldn't be so hard to grasp" (Taylor 2007: 504). The importance of this insight (which is surely not new) is that attempts to see secularism and Christianity as separate flies in the face of the blending of these ideologies, historically and in the present, and the ways this impacts people's beliefs and practices.

Nancy Lesko also sees similarities between comprehensive and abstinence-based approaches to sexuality education. But for Lesko this similarity is apparent in their affective structures; both approaches are marked by feelings of certainty about their own truths, and by a belief that freedom can be achieved if people would only adhere to their particular version of truth, secular or religious. She argues:

> both CSE and AO supporters are nostalgic, viewing the current state of sex education as a loss, or compromise, and a far distance from a preferred education about sex, gender, marriage, and authority. (2010: 285)

In responding to this nostalgia, Lesko thinks about how sexual knowledge might be imagined otherwise:

> Memories and longings are not to be split off from science or psychology, but rather linked in liberal studies that resist final conclusions and wholeness and emphasize open inquiry (Weis and Carbondale-Medina 2000). These are possible orientations in doing sexuality education differently—moving away from instrumentalist messages to locate sexual knowledge within history, society, and individuals' lives and meanings. (Lesko 2010: 293) (my emphasis)

I share Lesko's desire to see sexuality education as moving away from instrumentalist messages. The open inquiry she suggests needs to apprehend not only politics, history, and society, but also the place of religion, spirituality, ethics, and belief in the production of individuals' lives and meanings.

Open inquiry is another idea associated with a progressive approach to sexuality education. This is because open inquiry is predicated on the assumption that young people (and their families) see the value in contestation of ideas related to sexuality. In their Pew Research report, *Religion in the Public Schools*, the authors suggest open inquiry may be untenable for religious groups who insist upon the teaching of biblical truths about religion (and I would argue sexuality) to young people, within and outside schools (The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2007).

While some opponents of comprehensive approaches might balk at the idea of open inquiry, supporters of comprehensive approaches might resist any introduction of religion and belief in public instruction on sexuality education—including the open inquiry proposed by Lesko. This objection may be inspired by a strong belief that the space of public education is ideally defined by the absence of religion. I make this point in order to illustrate how the advocacy of open inquiry in sexuality education is a political position—just as arguing that religion has no place in public schools is a political position. Both positions can be justified and opposed via different interpretations of secularism in the US context.

Sexual Exceptionalism, Queer Secularism, and Sexuality Education, Within and Outside the Academy

I have found Puar's notions of sexual exceptionalism and queer secularism instructive in thinking about the underpinnings of progressive sexuality education. Puar sees queer sexual exceptionalism as "wedded to individualism and that rational liberal humanist subject" (2007: 22). She also associates this sexual exceptionalism with the idea that being queer is transgressive, but also aligned to

> liberal humanism's authorization of the fully self possessed speaking subject, untethered by hegemony or false consciousness … rationally choosing modern individualism over the ensnaring bonds of family. (2007: 22–23)

Notions of sexual freedom, rationality, modern individualism, and autonomy are, to my mind, intrinsic to the project of progressive sexuality education. This isn't to say that those outside this progressive project are somehow beyond reproach. It is recognition of how sexual exceptionalism is sustained by circuits of power and privilege infused by race, class, and citizenship (Puar 2007:13).

In a later writing, Puar interweaves sexual exceptionalism with the notion of queer secularism, describing the latter as structures of feeling and thought that "inhabits a space of refusal in relation to religiosity and the opportunities religious affiliations and attachments might allow" (2014: 207). These relations also obscure "the Christian basis upon which such a queer secular position relies, and which it foments" (2014: 207). This is particularly significant for Mills' analysis of how CSE engages with young Somali men, newly arrived in the USA, who identify as Muslim. Relations between secularism and Islam are quite differently inflected to relations between secularism and Christianity. Approaches to sexuality education that fail to register this difference are complicit in submerging these differences and potentially refusing to acknowledge and discuss what this might mean for pedagogies related to sexuality education.

Utilizing these ideas, I focus on how different formations of secularism are interwoven with imaginings of progressive sexuality education. These relations may be consciously held and explicitly elaborated. They may also shape thought and affects in such ways that particular ideas come to be taken for granted, and perceived as part of the normal structure of modern sexuality education.

Nancy Lesko, a researcher with whom I identify because she is strongly associated with progressive ideas in sexuality education, explicitly attends to the ways in which certain feelings associated with AO and CSE have become taken for granted. Lesko notes:

> From my location in the academy, abstinence approaches are generally associated with tradition, backwardness, and conservative religion-infused public policy, while comprehensive sex education is linked with modernity, scientific accuracy, and freedom to talk about and enact sexuality (Pigg 2005). (Lesko 2010: 281)

This analysis by Lesko focuses on how feelings toward AO and CSE direct us in specific ways, while also attending to the ways in which feelings about AO and CSE might touch. In her analysis of AO and CSE, Lesko worries about "ceding space to conservative religious advocates and undermining the tenuous support for CSE" (2010: 294). This anxiety, which have I shared, speaks to the power of secular discourses of sexuality education.

My focus takes a different slant; I am interested in tracing how secularisms continuously affirm CSE as modern, scientific, and associated with freedom. This tracing is intended to develop understanding about how the secular academy has arrived at a place where it construes abstinence approaches as traditional and backward and conservatively religious. It is recognition that approaching AO as associated with tradition, backwardness, and conservative religiosity is insufficient as a means of understanding the appeal of AO.

The production of specific types of sexuality education as backward, and others as modern has a range of effects beyond affirming the normative value of progressive approaches. One of these side effects is the production of a set of relations in which the "queer agential subject can only ever be fathomed outside the norming constriction of religion, conflating agency and resistance" (Puar 2007: 13). Religion is constructed as particularly egregious within this set of relations—with Islam [at least at this moment in time] potentially constructed as especially problematic (Puar 2014).

Puar's discussion of queer secularism focuses on the production of Muslims and Islam as backward (out of time), fundamentalist, non-white, and homophobic. She argues that these relations are "debatably avoidable to an extent for queers from other [religious] traditions such as Judeo-Christian" while also acknowledging that this formation of queer secularity is partially founded on "the denial of Christian fundamentalism as a state practice in the United States" (2007: 13). Ann Pellegrini, writing about the history of queer studies, which surely informs queer secularism, in the "Anglo-American mode", argues it "proceeds through a secular imaginary within which, religion, if it is to appear at all, must be made to appear as arch-conservative enemy of progress" (Pellegrini 2009: 208). In debates relating to progressive sexuality education predominantly white, Christian fundamentalist groups are constructed as simultaneously backward/highly organized, fringe/mainstream, lacking in power/at the center of power, authentic/disingenuous. Those associated with progressive and conservative camps might also jockey to be positioned on either side of these binaries, depending on the context in which they are located.

> Being a queer agential subject within these sets of relations often means being seen as resistant to religion. In making this point, Puar reverses Jakobsen and Pellegrini's formulation that,
>
> "Of course 'they' (those who are religious) hate 'us', 'we' are queer". (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003, In Puar 2014: 205)
>
> And, Puar proposes her own formulation:
>
> "Of course 'they' (those who are queer) hate 'us', 'we' are religious".
>
> (Puar 2014: 205)

Puar suggests it is important to keep both these formulations in mind, drawing our attention to the ways in which perceived antinomies between the "we" who are queer are the "we" who are religious give force to one another through their repetition. This formulation of Puar's also helps explain why associating oneself with religion, or coming out as religious, it can sometimes be difficult to make oneself understood as sexually agentic, progressive, or modern.

Puar's comments about queer secularity in *Terrorist Assemblages* are written in relation to a photo of Poulumi Desai, an English multimedia artist who is holding a sign entitled "I Am a Homosexual Also" while dressed as a Muslim cleric. This image sutures together queer, Arab, and fundamentalist Muslim by "interrupting both conventional epistemological and ontological renderings of this body" (2007:13). The normativizing and sometimes violent racialization and secularization of queerness is apparent for Puar in Desai's production of the queer Arab cleric. This image evokes fundamentalist religion and homosexual identity claims, a very queer juxtaposition. This pairing might be troubling for the Muslim cleric and for the liberal queer. It draws our attention to the garb of fundamentalism and, potentially, to the limits of progressive sexuality. This performance of the Muslim cleric could also be imagined as a form of sexuality education that at once complicates and refuses secular religious binaries. Puar's discussion of queer secularity is part of a broader discussion in which she thinks about "the mechanics of queerness as a regulatory frame of biopolitics" (2007: 24). She sees queerness, in this regulatory frame, as automatically associating itself with transgression while simultaneously "erecting celebratory queer liberal subjects" complicit with "all sorts of other identity norms, such as nation, race, class, and gender, unwittingly lured onto the ascent toward whiteness" (2007: 24). Both CSE and AO are borne from and reproduce white histories and archaeologies of sexuality (Moran 2000)—histories that are implicated in the ways in which sexualities are racialized, and how they can be racialized differently (Barnard 2004). Expert knowledges within the field of sexuality education are also racialized because of the ways in which they are crafted out of secular understandings of sexuality that are inflected by liberalism (McKay 1999), rights discourses (Lottes 2013), and a focus on adolescent sexuality as normative (Tolman and McClelland 2011).

Such histories have also resulted in popular formations of progressive sexuality education that embrace ideas of the autonomous liberal subject who is a rational decision-maker, pleasure seeker, and knowledgeable risk taker. The character of Juno in the eponymous movie is one example of this conflation—she is, in many ways, a celebratory queer subject (white, working class, smart, beautiful, transgressive, pregnant but not maternal). Arguably, Juno complicates secular norms because she is a sexually agential teen who

can access abortion, but chooses instead to go ahead with her pregnancy, after seemingly little thought. Juno is queer, secular, and irrational. Somewhat akin to Desai, this is a juxtaposition that troubles familiar associations—there is an expectation that Juno, as a young sexually progressive woman, with ready access to abortion will do the rational thing and exercise her right to choose—an abortion.

These configurations of queer secularism resonate for me in conversations I have with peers that may involve religion, and pedagogies of sexuality education. The pertinence of these concepts in thinking about progressive norms in sexuality education was brought home while I was at a comedy gig, *Taxi's, Rainbows and Hatred*. In the show Tom Ballard (a young, white, gay, Australian comic) ruminates on everyday acts of homophobia that he experiences, focusing especially on the numerous small incidents of homophobia he has experienced in taxis. Ballard also berates homophobic Ugandans, Russians, and Irish Catholics. One lesson conveyed in the show is that being gay is normal in contemporary Australia [Ballard also makes the point that Australia is generally exceptional in its tolerance of gays and lesbians—when compared to places like Uganda and Russia—though also more intolerant in comparison to places like Ireland that have instituted reform regarding marriage equality]. The audience at the show appeared to connect with this representation of the celebratory queer liberal subject—this type of humor is familiar. Ballard, and his representation of Australia and Australian's like him (the audience—this author) are hailed as fellow liberal subjects; we are a part of the fabric of the comedy festivals cultural program.

Ballard relates two stories during the show involving taxi drivers characterized as religious and homophobic. In the first encounter, Ballard hails a taxi and the driver, recognizing him (by name) as a gay comic, suggests he pray and refuses to let him in the taxi, leaving him standing in the rain in the middle of the night in a regional town in New South Wales.[2] In the second encounter the driver, pointing to a drag queen outside the taxi and suggests to Ballard that all queers should be placed together, on an island, far away, so they can rot together.

Such incidences of everyday homophobia, while not equivalent, bear some resemblance to many incidences of everyday racism, sexism, and classism—affective responses to these different incidences are always inflected by the actors involved in these encounters, and by the formulations that

[2] I have no doubt that Ballard's experience with this taxi driver in Newcastle would have been very disturbing and my intention is not to minimize the gravity of and significance of such acts of homophobia.

contextualize these actions. The possibility to forge affiliations across difference via some recognition that everyday acts of discrimination have multiple configurations—and that these encounters have different histories, affects, and effects—is not explored in this lesson.

A general lesson of the show appeared to be that those backward religious types can be pretty homophobic, but such intolerance shouldn't stop you from choosing to be yourself in the face of everyday acts of homophobia. It is likely that this lesson is superfluous. The audience at the show of a well-known *gay* comedian is already on message. Going to the show might mimic many students' and teachers' encounters with progressive sexuality education. For many, an encounter with this style of sexuality education is unremarkable, as they are already on message.

For those who do not agree with the message, speaking back to this style of pedagogy can be a difficult task. This performance of sexual exceptionalism left me wondering about the shared pleasures to be found in characterizing certain types of people as backward—which isn't to say that homophobia is unproblematic. Progressive sexuality education, *when it is underpinned by sexual exceptionalism and/or queer secularism*, is not that far removed from Ballard's gig. It inadvertently, teaches young people lessons about who is like "us"—and, by virtue of curricular absences—who is not like "us"—the "us" being sexual progressives.

Progressive Sexuality Education and Freedom from Religion

Complex entanglements of sexuality, secularism, and Christianity in the USA are examined by Jakobsen and Pellegrini in *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (2004). Arguing against calls "for a stricter enforcement of the separation of church and state" (12), Jakobsen and Pellegrini point out that American secularism is not really that secular (13). Divisions between church and state are blurred by the public expressions of religiosity by political figures (every President must affirm their religiosity), by the celebration of religious holidays, and, by the affirmation afforded religious rituals—marriage being a prime example. Given this reading of the US context, Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue for

> more public space for secularism. … We want the freedom not to be religious and the freedom to be religious differently. And we want both these positions to count as the possible basis for moral claims and public policy. (2004: 12–13)

This take on secularism and religion is integral to thinking sexuality education otherwise. Such a style of thought might perceive marriage equality as not distinct from religious discourse, but something deeply infused with religious overtones, thereby refusing the characterization of queer and religion as necessarily separate.

Sexuality educators might engage young people in conversations about the value of marriage from diverse religious and secular perspectives—recognizing that both formations are interwoven with moral claims. Such an approach does not discount the important work of identifying and interrogating legal, economic, physical, and political violence experienced by "sexual others" (Puar 2007: 10) and by "religious others" within and outside the USA. This approach may not be perceived as distinct from Lesko's call for open inquiry. To my mind, what distinguishes this approach is its explicit engagement of religion, race, and culture as pertinent to public discussions of sexuality education—but not with a view to demonstrating, once again, how backward religious people are (see Ballard).

Apprehending the ways in which debates about "the political and the religious, the public and the private" (1–3) structure sexuality education also requires an examination of how specific notions of sexual freedom are conditioned by liberalism and poststructural feminism (Scott 2009). Freedom in sexuality education has been associated with the production of autonomous and agentic sexual subjects (Corngold 2013). To this end, Josh Corngold has endeavored to articulate a vision of sexuality education that promotes young people's minimalist autonomy, explicitly including cultural, religious, and ethnic attachments as part of his conception of autonomy. He writes:

> the conception of minimalist autonomy that I have begun to outline here is not so strong that it requires persons to foreswear close and enduring connections to faith, family, community, and tradition, neither is it so weak that it condones habitual deference or servility. To assert that someone could still count as an autonomous agent whose life decisions and aspirations are largely dictated or controlled by others is to depart grossly from the ordinary usage of the concept. An individual certainly need not abnegate all loyalties, allegiances, and interpersonal ties that bind in order to be considered autonomous. This person must, however, be willing and able, after duly considering various alternatives, to make key judgments and life decisions for him- or herself. (2013: 473)

At the heart of Corngold's approach is the autonomous individual, who can, ideally, with the help of schools, parents, and peers "sift through and critically examine discrepant messages to which they are exposed" (465). It is possible to see here a characterization of the sexuality educator's role as to encourage young people "to enact self-determined goals and interests" (Mahmood 2005: 10). Saba Mahmood perceives such ideas of autonomy and self-determination as central to liberal and progressive feminist thought.

Mahmood doesn't seek to diminish the transformative power of liberal and feminist discourses of autonomy (13), but she is critical of the imaginings of freedom that underpins such discourses. Drawing on liberal theorists distinctions between positive and negative freedom to illustrate the shape of freedom within this imaginary, she writes:

> In short, positive freedom may be best described as the capacity for self-mastery and self-government, and negative freedom as the absence of restraints of various kinds on one's ability to act as one wants. … *Liberalism's unique contribution is to link the notion of self-realization with individual autonomy.* (Mahmood 2005: 10–11) (my emphasis)

Feminism and liberalism, in this formulation, prioritize "the ability to autonomously 'choose' one's desires no matter how illiberal they may be" (Mahmood 2005: 12). Similarly, within the context of sexuality education there is a prioritization of the right of young people to make their own choices (Corngold 2013), even if those choices sometimes might not be perceived as wise or healthy choices (Whitehead 2005). In this imagining of sexual freedom, religion and belief can play a part in sexual decision-making, but they are only admissible when they are seen as compatible with the cultivation of autonomous decision-making, within the progressive-secular imaginary. This is because custom and tradition, and one might add religion and belief, are seen to impinge on sexual freedom, insofar as they may counter self-sovereignty. Within Corngold's vision for sexuality education, custom and tradition, and religion and belief are acceptable, as long as they are *not* perceived as contrary to self-sovereignty/autonomy.

Such conceptualizations of self-sovereignty are, Mahmood argues, apparent in the work of poststructural feminist critiques that have "highlighted the illusory character of the rationalist, self-authorizing, transcendental subject", which secures its authority by "performing a necessary exclusion of all that is bodily, feminine, emotional, and intersubjective (Butler 1999; Gatens 1996; Grosz 1994)" (2005: 13, 14). In the passage below, Mahmood teases out some of her concerns she has with how notions of autonomy and poststructural feminism have produced their own norms:

> the normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion. In doing so this scholarship elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance. … I will suggest that it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics. (2005: 14)

The detachment of notions of agency from progressivism is crucial for Mahmood in her study of devout women in Egypt who are associated with the mosque movement. This maneuver enables her to differently conceptualize practices that might be otherwise read as submissive within a frame informed by feminist poststructuralism.

What would it mean to conceptualize sexuality education without recourse to the binary of subordination and subversion? How might Mahmood's work invite different understandings of sexual agency—that may not be predicated on notions of self-sovereignty? Circumventing the subordination/subversion binary, Mahmood argues:

> the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance … what may appear to a be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structure of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms [regulatory queer secularism] but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms. (2005: 15).

This detachment of agency from progressivism, articulated by Mahmood, can be instructive for how the sexually agentic subject is understood in the field of sexuality education. If one accepts Mahmood's insistence upon the detachment of progressivism from agency, what matters is not the resistance of norms. Such analysis involves attending to the multiple ways in which norms can be enacted.

Annamarie Jagose (2012) has provided an interesting illustration of this point in her rethinking of women who fake orgasm. Rather than conceptualizing these women as submissive, Jagose seeks to understand the conditions in which the fake orgasm is produced, recognizing that faking it is about much more than submission. Similarly, other sexual practices that may, at first glance appear to the sexuality educator/researcher as passivity or the refusal of self-sovereignty, might, on closer inspection, be instructive in reworking familiar understandings of sexual agency. In the field of sexuality education, such a move would require familiar conceptions equating progressivism with agency to come under scrutiny.

Conclusion

Sexual exceptionalism and queer secularism are useful concepts in attending to the binaries that underpin progressive discourses of sexuality education. The notion of queer secularism, as I deploy it here, gestures toward particular

associations between sexual freedom and autonomy, progressivism, and modernity relating to sexuality education in the USA and Australia. I have argued that these associations may be inherently damaging to how comprehensive sexual education is constructed and delivered, because they produce a sexuality education that is, in effect, often preaching to the converted. The foreclosure of religion and the normalization of progressivism are, at once, pleasurable and problematic, because they reinforce them and us binaries. Expanding the reach of comprehensive approaches might necessarily involve questioning attachments to some of the secular norms that sustain progressivism.

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