

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Mulholland, Monique, *Young People and Pornography: Negotiating Pornification* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 200 pp., \$95.00 hardcover (978-1-137-33293-6)

It's in an episode of the *United States of Tara*, that T says: "Let's go buy revealing clothes that make us look insecure"—a line which simultaneously subverts adults' claims to know "the" meaning of teens' expressive practices and reveals adults' fears about the influences of porn on children. In *Young People and Pornography: Negotiating Pornification*, Mulholland examines the panic about "pornification"; the ways in which the explicit and the illicit are changing; and, how these changes are understood and negotiated by young people. Mulholland defines pornification as a trend whereby a pornographic aesthetic increasingly characterizes mainstream sex. Her central interest is the extent to which ideas about normal sexuality are constructed in relation to the changing nature of the illicit, and vice versa. Key research questions include: "Has the explicit actually become so familiar? What happens when the illicit attains a publicness?... Has porn become normalized?" (6). She ends the book with an exploration of young people's own perspectives on pornification.

Mulholland's book is one of a growing set of monographs and edited collections examining the purported sexualization of culture, and its relationship to young people. As Mulholland notes, however, few works draw on empirical research with young people. To fill this gap, Mulholland canvases South Australian youth between the ages of 13-16, asking them to reflect on how they understand, and are negotiating, cultures of sexuality. This attention to the voices and perspectives of young people is as refreshing as it is necessary given the potentially transformative effect that young people can have on the larger culture. As Mulholland notes, *what* pornification means is provided via her mapping of anti-pornification activists' claims to knowledge—namely psycho-medical actors who cast young people as "innocent, 'developing,' and essentially asexual until reaching a predetermined age (74). *How* pornification means, however, can only be understood by "considering what is not spoken and which voices have little or no access to determining the parameters of the debate" (72).

Mulholland's text distinguishes itself from earlier modernist and psychology-based treatises on sexualization and pornification by drawing on research from a range of disciplines and theoretical approaches—including sociology, sexuality studies, history, feminist theory, cultural geography and postcolonialism. She advances a post-structuralist interpretation of sexuality while also drawing on cultural studies and queer theory's denaturalization and framing of sexuality as an invention produced through the power relations.

The first third of *Young People and Pornography* paints an explicit picture of how "normal" and "perverse" sexuality have been constructed in modern Western contexts, based on a set of culturally and historically specific discourses. Here, Mulholland establishes how "fictions of normal and perverse sexuality" are set against, and constituted by key tropes that Mulholland identifies as underpinning cultural constructions of the normal and the illicit (13). In particular, Mulholland argues that these fictions rely on notions of control, respectability, civility, adulthood, and the primacy of the private; and they establish normal sexuality as "respectable, restrained, decent and moral, based on a series of raced, classed and gendered assumptions" (13). Mulholland examines the place of pornography in constituting the fiction of the perverse and fictions of the normal. She argues that the newly emerging discursive category of the pornographic serves the interests of the normative by producing the "pornographic" as dangerous and exotic material that needs to be controlled.

The first third of the book, while relatively unoriginal in terms of its content, nevertheless offers an important mapping of the intersections between theories of childhood, gender, sexuality, critical race, and post-colonial literature. While the conclusions drawn here reproduce the insights of earlier queer and sex-positive feminist theory, including Gayle Rubin's theory of the politics of sexuality and Beverly Skegg's seminal work on class, gender and respectability, chapter four's systematic interrogation of the contemporary panic over pornification establishes the need for the further interrogation of how pornography has "functioned as a particularly virulent cultural perversity" (13).

Throughout, Mulholland argues that this pornification panic maintains the categorical boundaries around the term "pornography", which seemingly contradicts the idea being put forward, which is that pornography has become a normalized feature of everyday life. According to Mulholland, this begs the question: Is porn porn anymore? (64). How is it that the definitional boundaries of the category are retained, that porn remains a definable and illicit object while at the same time becoming so normalized and mainstream? How can both

be true? To answer her own questions she argues that, “the continued categorization of pornography is useful because it sanctions the fear, panic, and desire to control the out of control and that this preserves its regulatory and classificatory power. (76). The fear of the publicness of a supposedly normalized pornography, according to Mulholland, represents “an attempt to shore up the historical function of the illicit as secret and private” and to control the out of control and silence young peoples’ counter-knowledge.

Mulholland’s greatest contribution to the debate on pornification stems from her insights about young people’s understanding of, and engagement with, porn. Starting in chapter six Mulholland argues that despite their familiarity with pornography, young people maintain distance from it through the use of humor, parody, and spectacle. While Mulholland was unable to ask specific questions about what actual porn they had seen and how they determined what was funny, good, bad or shocking, she notes that in general young people articulated that porn is one part of a package of entertainment they found appealing. As such, there’s a sense from these students that porn is not afforded an excess of significance; porn is not treated/singled out as exceptional, and yet it is *not* normalized in the ways that anti-pornification proponents would claim because the young people speak to distinctions between acceptable (laughable) porn and inappropriate porn. As Mulholland notes, porn “is interesting and enticing; a spectacle. And despite its commonplace presence in cultural life, illicit” (116). In essence then, Mulholland argues that young people have recast the illicit in *public* spaces, thus troubling the dominant perception that for the illicit to be illicit it has to remain in secret, *private* spaces. This new “public illicit” are bordered as acceptable or otherwise based on historically persistent conventions of race, class, and gender and respectability.

Given Mulholland’s commitment to post-structural queer and feminist theoretical frameworks for understanding pornification panics it is not surprising that her last chapter interrogates how young people’s negotiations of the sexually illicit mobilize persistent and familiar signifiers of respectability. This final chapter is important in that it reaffirms the ongoing place of morality and propriety, as opposed to increasingly popular arguments about neo-liberal responsabilization, for maintaining the borders between good and bad sex and sexual subjects. That said, Mulholland’s claim about the “newness” of this “public illicit” relies on an erasure of a rich history of queer writing on public sex as “good”. Overall, however, Mulholland’s book is a highly valuable contribution to the field of porn studies and its intersections with critical adolescent studies and sexuality studies. This text will be

of interest to introductory gender and sexuality students and course directors seeking to complicate discussions of childhood sexualization and pornification.

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