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"Some thought they were 'in Love'": Sex, White Teenagehood, and Unmarried Pregnancy in Early Postwar Canada

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Article abstract

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SHARON WALL*

Abstract

This article explores the culture of postwar heterosexuality as it impacted (mainly) white girls who were teens between 1945 and the early 1960s. It explores the prevalence of, and changing opportunities for teenage sex, the issue of sexual desire, and the nature of girls' partners and relationships. Based on this exploration, it argues that opportunities for teen sex were expanding, that girls' partners were more often other teens, and because of this and the age-consciousness of the times, that marriage was being questioned as the appropriate solution when pregnancy occurred. More broadly, this study challenges the (now aging) stereotype of the conservative "Fifties," especially the notion of this period as a sexually conservative one. As such, it also helps to connect (rather than to contrast) the 1950s with the decade that followed. Finally, it makes the case for an expanded notion of sexual "revolution," one which unfolded over several decades of the twentieth century. In early postwar years, this was a revolution of behaviour only for unlike "the Sixties," there was little public acceptance or open avowal of pre-marital sex.

Résumé

Le présent article porte sur la culture de l'hétérosexualité dans l'après-guerre et son incidence sur les filles blanches (principalement) en pleine adolescence entre 1945 et le début des années 1960. Il explore la préva-

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lence des rapports sexuels à l'adolescence et le nombre croissant d'occasions d'avoir de tels rapports, la question du désir sexuel, ainsi que la nature des partenaires des filles et de leurs relations. Il avance que les occasions d'avoir des rapports sexuels à l'adolescence étaient à la hausse, que les partenaires des filles étaient généralement eux-mêmes des adolescents, et qu'en conséquence et en raison des sensibilités à l'égard des différences d'âge à l'époque, la possibilité d'un mariage comme solution à l'annonce d'une grossesse était remise en question. Dans une optique large et conformément aux « travaux de réinterprétation » du début de l'après-guerre, cette étude remet en cause le stéréotype (vieillissant) des « années 1950 », surtout la notion que cette période était caractérisée par un conservatisme sexuel. Pour s'en convaincre, il est intéressant de dresser des parallèles (au lieu de contrastes) avec la décennie qui a suivi. Enfin, l'article défend l'idée qu'il faut élargir la notion de « révolution » sexuelle, qui se serait produite sur plusieurs décennies du XXe siècle. Au début de l'après-guerre, la révolution en était une qui touchait seulement aux comportements; contrairement à ce qui prévalait dans les « années 1960 », les relations sexuelles avant le mariage n'étaient pas bien vues et étaient rarement avouées.

“It was the backseat of a car type of thing; you know, a mickey of lemon gin.”¹

With few words, Cheryl M. (as we'll call her), has much to tell us about girls' teenage experiences of sex. A teen from Mississauga, she found herself pregnant in 1958 at the age of 15. Her experience, like all others, has its unique and particular dimensions, but it also shares commonalities with those of other girls, commonalities that can help historians map out some broad characteristics of the culture of youth heterosexuality and pregnancy in early postwar Canada. First, her words are brief. Girls in Cheryl's situation were expected to be remorseful; they were not expected to seek an audience as aggrieved victims. Second, the car — icon of postwar modernity and middle-class affluence — offered the setting for this fateful experience. Postwar society, in fact, offered a number of expanding opportunities for premarital sexual experimentation, whether in terms of time or space. Finally, the role of

alcohol suggests a hint of teenage rebellion, but also, perhaps, an atmosphere of reduced agency. If more teens were having sex in postwar years, when it came to the balance of sexual power and the repercussions of pregnancy, all too often, girls were not in the driver's seat.

This paper explores the culture of postwar heterosexuality as it impacted girls — mainly white — who were teens between 1945 and the early 1960s. While a growing and valuable literature explores the criminalization and regulation of girls' sexuality in Canada, this paper seeks to get closer to girls' experience of sexuality itself.² It explores a number of issues, including the prevalence of, and changing opportunities for, teenage sex, the issue of desire, the types of partners girls had, and the nature of their relationships. Based on exploration of these issues, it is tempting to argue that more teens were having sex than ever before, but I will leave it to the reader to decide, given what is largely impressionistic evidence. What seems clearer is that opportunities for teen sex were expanding, that girls' partners were more often other teens, and that because of this and the age-consciousness of the times, marriage was being questioned as the appropriate solution when pregnancy occurred. More broadly, and in keeping with the "re-interpretation scholarship" on the early postwar period, this study challenges the (now aging) stereotype of the conservative 1950s, especially the notion of this period as sexually repressive.³ Following Alan Petigny's work, this article also helps connect (rather than contrast) the 1950s with the decade that followed.⁴ Indeed, the so-called "sexual revolution" — if we are still to use the term — may well have started before the appearance of the "hippie" generation. However, this study also shows that, in early postwar years, this was a revolution of behaviour only; if many teens experimented sexually, there was little public acceptance or open avowal of such behaviour, nor was there liberation from past prejudices, points which continue to set this era apart from what is popularly known as "the Sixties."

Unfortunately for historians, sexuality is a realm of experience that leaves few historical traces. Too often, it is only when sexuality "goes wrong" — as manifest by unmarried pregnancy,

sexual assault, or abuse — that historical records are generated. Reflecting this reality, this paper draws largely on the experience of teenagers who became pregnant outside of marriage and the sources such pregnancies generated, though it is worth stating explicitly that pregnant teens were hardly the only adolescents having sex in this period. In the case of unmarried mothers, historians are fortunate that postwar schools of social work — at both the University of Toronto and the University of British Columbia — left behind detailed studies of this issue in the form of Master's theses. These are not without their biases, but they too can be isolated and analyzed. Other evidence comes from medical literature, literature of the Salvation Army (which ran homes for unmarried mothers across the country), City Welfare Departments, vital statistics, and a small number of interviews with formerly pregnant teens. Ontario figures strongly in the data, but evidence was also drawn from British Columbia and Nova Scotia as well as from sources (such as census data and minutes of national committees) that offer a more national view. Perhaps more important than region in this case, are questions of class and race. As Franca Iacovetta's work suggests, middle-class families were more likely than others to evade the social work gaze.⁵ For example, a 1947 thesis on Toronto "sex delinquents" classed almost three-quarters of its 58 cases as "poor."⁶ However, it would be wrong to assume only working-class girls went "astray"; indeed, 28 percent of girls in Doris Atkinson's study were deemed "comfortable" or "superior" in terms of economic standing. Other studies, based on girls who had been referred to social agencies, also reveal a mixed-class base. Mary Parlee's 1958 thesis took as its explicit goal to study the experience of "normal girls" from "normal families," a reference that had meanings for both class and race. None of her 58 cases included families on assistance and, while three of her subjects had fathers who were "unskilled labourers," all the remaining girls had fathers who were "skilled labourers," "professional men," or "business executives." Interestingly, this study also defined "normal" girls as: non-delinquent, living at home, and with non-working mothers.⁷

Despite pathologizing "non-standard" families, the experts of this era believed that a girl from any class could find herself pregnant. Parlee's reference to an already published 1958 (American) article entitled "It Could be Your Daughter" hits the point home. "In recent years," the article began,

we doctors have observed an impressive increase in the number of pregnancies among unmarried teenage girls, many of them from so-called privileged homes. The girl who gets into trouble today is not necessarily the girl from the wrong side of the tracks, nor is she a true psychiatric case. Illegitimate pregnancies occur among sweet, nice, normal girls like your daughter and mine.⁸

So-called "normal" girls also appeared in the 700 cases of unwed mothers (presumably of all ages) served by the Toronto Children's Aid Society (CAS) in 1958; a full 40 percent of these were classed as middle and upper "strata."⁹ The point here is not to discount class differences, but to note that the culture of heterosexuality and the problem of pregnancy I examine here had an influence which cut across classes.

What then, about race? In Canada, as in the United States, to call girls "normal" also implied their whiteness. Interestingly, however, race played out differently in the discourse on unmarried pregnancy in each country. As Rickie Solinger has shown, race dominated discussions of unwed motherhood in the postwar United States, with analyses of Black and white pregnancy differentiated starkly by race.¹⁰ In Canada, race was likewise all-important to social workers engaged by the Department of Indian Affairs, as I will show in future work. However, it only occasionally figured in discussions of those who worked for the mainstream social agencies such as the CAS which worked with all other (non-indigenous) unmarried mothers. These workers were certainly not blind to the "racial backgrounds" of individual girls — "Anglo-Saxon," "Russian," "Ukrainian," and "coloured" often noted in case files and studies — but I have found only one study where race was invoked as an explanatory factor (to be discussed later).¹¹ The most-oft maligned racial "Other" in Canada — "the Indian"

(as she was still called) — was almost entirely absent from professional discussions of unmarried pregnancy. To be fair, in great part, this can be explained by the fact that First Nations people were not entitled to the use of provincial social services that most often brought teens under the expert gaze. Indeed, provincial governments insisted that it was the federal government alone that held responsibility for “Indians.” As a result, when it came to Canadian discussions of premarital sexuality, a unique kind of “two solitudes” held sway. Occasional references in maternity home records to “our little Indian [or Chinese] girl” reinforced the notion that when race was not mentioned, whiteness was the assumed category.¹²

“It Goes on in the Schools All the Time”: Prevalence and Opportunity

Precisely because girls from white, middle-class homes were also ending up pregnant in this period, a sense of crisis was fuelled. While middle-class moralists had long viewed the sexuality of working-class, immigrant, and First Nations girls and women with a critical eye, in postwar years the development of an increasingly broad youth culture (nurtured by greater rates of high school attendance) instilled fears that even youth from “good families” were running out of control. The demographic fact that there were simply more teenagers likely also played a role. Revealing anxieties that were more intergenerational than race- or class-based, one study referred to a British Columbian mother who “deplored the habit of young teenagers having boy-friends. She told the social worker that “the sex problem is quite the thing. It goes on in the schools all the time and most parents are quite alarmed about it.”¹³ Interestingly, worry focused on high schools, institutions originally designed to contain youth, but which appeared to be developing as much according to the influence of youth culture as to the dictates of adult control.¹⁴ To some extent, evidence from vital statistics supports the impressionist view that “everyone” was “doing it” and that “everyone” meant, most importantly, white girls. First, it is significant that

so-called "Indian illegitimacy" was tracked separately from "Canadian" rates.¹⁵ Indeed, even analysis of the census' explanatory footnotes leaves it unclear as to whether those considered status Indians were also included in the "Canadian statistics." In one sense, the answer is perhaps not as important as the fact that likely few asked the question. Clearly, one talked about "the nation" or one talked about "Indians"; one didn't think of including Indians within the boundaries of the nation. When one analyzes these so-called Canadian (presumably non-indigenous) rates, several things are of interest. Overall, non age-specific rates of "illegitimacy" were relatively steady during these years (even falling somewhat in the early 1950s). The percentage of those mothers who were teens, however, was rising. While during the war years teens accounted for 27-28 percent of all illegitimate births, by 1961 this number had increased to 37 percent.¹⁶ The situation, however, looked most alarming when this relatively short view was taken; in fact, teen's share of all illegitimate births for 1921-31 had also ranged between 33 and 35 percent. Perhaps it is the lower rates of the 1940s that call for explanation, and in fact, the usual argument is that rates were down because so many men and boys were away at war. Alternatively, perhaps rates in other age groups were up owing to what some see as the more permissive wartime atmosphere.

Counting not teens' share of all (non-indigenous) illegitimate births, but instead teens' illegitimate birth rate itself (the rate at which unmarried teens experienced a pre-marital pregnancy) provides more justification for public anxieties. Overall, this rate rose roughly 160 percent between 1921 and 1961, from less than .5 percent of girls to 1.3 percent.¹⁷ More to the point, the largest ten-year increase was in the decade leading up to 1951 (Table 1). While historians often suggest that sexual behaviour among youth was more permissive during World War II, a point confirmed by their rising age-specific illegitimate birth rate in the early 1940s, what is interesting is that rates *continued* to rise after the war. By 1951 and according to official records, almost one percent of unmarried teens experienced a pre-marital pregnancy. Put another way, statistics on teens' overall share of illegitimate

births could be suggestive, but these age-specific illegitimate birth rates point more clearly to the fact that a higher percentage of teens were becoming unmarried mothers. The rates also point to the likelihood that behaviour underwent the greatest change in the decade from 1941 to 1951. One can only speculate as to what was the most significant change: that teens were having more sex, that they were getting pregnant more often (owing to improved postwar nutrition?), that they were marrying less often in cases of premarital pregnancy, some combination of these, or some other factor(s).

Table 1. Illegitimate Birth Rate, Girls 15–19 years, Canada, 1921–1971 (per 1000 unmarried girls)

Census Year	Girls Illegitimately Pregnant (per 1000)	Percentage Increase from Previous Census
1921	4.9	-----
1931	4.7	- 4 %
1941	5.8	+23 %
1951	9.1	+57 %
1961	12.7	+40 %
1971	15.2	+20 %

Statistics from Raghubar D. Sharma, Table 2, in “Pre-marital and Ex-nuptial fertility (Illegitimacy) in Canada, 1921–71,” *Canadian Studies in Population* 9 (1982), 5. Percentage increase tabulated by author.

Of course, rates of unmarried pregnancy provide only one indicator of the incidence of premarital sex; some teens perhaps avoided, and also succeeded in ending, unwanted pregnancies. The Salvation Army noted that “contraceptives” (presumably condoms) were available “at any drug store,” offering young couples a “screen of safety”;¹⁸ other sources mentioned abortion in this regard. However, both existing scholarship and other primary sources consulted here suggest contraception was not likely the most popular approach to limiting pregnancy. First, those who bought condoms in this period were often more concerned with disease than with pregnancy, an issue that (rightly or wrongly) didn’t seem to concern teenagers contemplating early

sexual experiences. Further, as men and boys could more easily evade any consequences of pregnancy, the impetus to seek out contraception was, sadly, not all that great. Finally, (the few) birth control clinics of the era would have refused service to unmarried girls.¹⁹ Teen couples were perhaps more likely to limit themselves to "petting" or to rely on withdrawal in efforts to avoid pregnancy, though the latter practice may have led to as many pregnancies as it prevented.

Sadly, girls may have turned to abortion more often than to birth control, despite abortion's illegal status and serious risks. Numbers, of course, are impossible to determine, though a 1947 Maclean's article based on interviews with "doctors, policemen and prominent clerics" suggested roughly 30,000 had been performed in Canada that year alone.²⁰ Concern over this practice was clearly mounting when, in 1958, the Toronto Police formed a fulltime "abortion squad" to put a stop to it.²¹ Women's recollections, details offered in social work studies, and the reporting of abortion-related deaths in daily newspapers confirm that some teens chose this route.²²

Finally, if some ended premarital pregnancies, others hid them. Indeed, rates of teen marriage and parenthood confound attempts to determine exact rates of premarital sex in these years. As scholars have shown, the immediate postwar years saw not only a renewed glorification of marriage as the key to personal happiness, but a falling of the average age of marriage overall.²³ While in 1941 the average Canadian bride was 24.4 years old, by 1951, she was only 23.8, and, by 1961, 22.9.²⁴ Some, of course, were younger. Between 1951 and 1961 alone, there was a 25 percent increase in the number of teenaged brides and a 30 percent increase in the number of teenaged grooms.²⁵ Vital statistics show an even more marked increase in the case of (married) teenage fathers. Though teenagers were always a small number of total fathers — .5 percent in 1941 and 1.1 percent in 1961 — one should note that this represented an increase of more than 100 percent in just 20 years.²⁶

While one cannot know with certainty how many teen marriages were hiding premarital pregnancies, there is certainly a

long history to suggest this route would have been considered. As D’Emilio and Freedman have argued, in colonial America (as in England), the practice of “bundling” — of engaged couples’ sharing a bed with some constraints put on contact — sometimes led to pregnancy. This was never deemed publicly acceptable, but with public confession, acceptance of the designated punishments, and the agreement to marry, premarital pregnancy need not have held any long-lasting social consequences. Peter Ward points to similar approaches to “righting” situations of pre-marital pregnancy in British North America.²⁷ Returning to the postwar period, we find one Alberta study that came to some startling conclusions in this regard. Of 130 teenaged wives married between 1955 and 1964, a full 82 percent were already pregnant upon marriage.²⁸ To be fair, this was not a randomly chosen group of teen wives, but rather girls who had lost babies to stillbirths or early infant deaths. Possibly, the stress of premarital pregnancies led more easily to infant deaths, explaining the astoundingly high percentages. Still, even if these percentages are somewhat inflated, the implications are highly suggestive. If nothing else, these statistics remind us again that many more teens were having sex before marriage than numbers on so-called “illegitimacy” reveal. By 1962 the Salvation Army, for one, was convinced that “the problem of teen marriage is closely linked with the problem of unwed mothers and ... illicit sex relationships.”²⁹

Other evidence similarly indicates that hastily planned marriages were one response to premarital pregnancies, if perhaps in a minority of cases. In 1953 the Royal Canadian Airforce (RCAF) reported that, of the cases where airmen were contacted as putative fathers, 17 percent of them married.³⁰ Likewise, a study of five Toronto maternity homes (based on 1958 data) showed that almost 12 percent of applicants in a six-month period withdrew applications because they were marrying.³¹ Finally, individual case histories indicate the same view of marriage as a solution. Bonnie G. was happy to secure marriage with the father of her child even after enduring the shame of two “illegitimate” pregnancies. She recalls her mother’s advice: “You better get him

back because nobody else is going to want you."³² It is important to note, though, that the expected prize of marriage did not always materialize. As indicated in a study of CAS wards, "One of the girls planned to marry the putative father, but he failed to turn up for the wedding."³³ In Tina V.'s case, she explains, "My father tried to get the fella[sic] to marry me and he refused."³⁴ These stories, too, we should keep in mind.

Proving beyond question that teen sexual activity was on the rise is, of course, a hard case to make for almost any historical period, but especially during times when people did their utmost to hide such behaviour. Certainly, expert panic may tell us as much about attitudes as actions. Heightened idealization of marriage and family life in these years may in turn have heightened aversion to out-of-marriage pregnancies, but so did questions of age. As Doug Owram points out, teen culture and "going steady" may have "mimicked" adult roles, but adolescent culture also showed a "peer-group distinctiveness."³⁵ Essentially, I would argue that in postwar years the teen peer group was cast as one among several within the broad category of childhood. Once teens were understood in this way, the issue of these "children having sex" and "children getting pregnant" could hardly be seen as anything but socially troubling, whether teen sex was happening at a higher rate or not.

Whatever the conclusions on the rate of teen sexual activity, it is clear that postwar society offered unique opportunities and contexts for youthful heterosexual contact. As historians of education have shown — though not enough has been made of this socially significant fact — an increasing percentage of postwar teens attended co-ed high schools: 35 percent in 1941, more than 50 percent by 1954, and roughly 60 percent by 1961.³⁶ As D'Emilio and Freedman point out for the interwar period in the United States, for teens this meant hours of time spent together in classrooms, assemblies, after-school clubs, at sporting events, and at organized dances, all of which offered close interaction with the opposite sex.³⁷ Postwar teens of all classes also had large amounts of leisure time (more, certainly, than many interwar working-class teens who worked factory, cleri-

cal, or other jobs, often by the age of 14).³⁸ It is not that earlier teens had no chance for heterosexual contact; historians such as Kathy Peiss have shown that working youth of earlier decades were adept at finding ways to indulge in all manner of heterosexual exchange.³⁹ However, this exchange was restricted mainly to after-work hours, with most of the day spent in sex-segregated workplaces. Postwar observers, focusing on the misuse of after-school hours, perhaps missed the social significance of what was going on *inside* the school. The Salvation Army, for one, worried about lack of adult influence during teens' leisure hours: "Today little is heard of chaperones, definite hours for retirement or knowledge of where young people spend their leisure time," it lamented. "Parents no longer seek to know what they read, what they do and with whom they go."⁴⁰ Social workers also worried about teenagers' use of after-school time. In her study of Toronto sex delinquents, Atkinson highlighted a number of trends she found worrisome: three-quarters of girls "did not regularly help with any work around the home" and had "no planned recreation," and only 17 percent attended church. What these girls did make time for was equally worrisome: comic books, movies, and, intriguingly, "interests old for age," though the last was not described in any way.⁴¹

Atkinson's singling out of movie-going (among some girls, as many as four times per week) reveals that worries about youth took not only temporal but spatial form. While going to the movies was not something new in postwar years, as American scholarship has shown, movie-going was recast as a particularly teenage pastime in these years, largely in response to diminishing audiences brought on by the advent of television.⁴² Accordingly, the darkened spaces and close physical proximity that theatres typically imposed took on new meanings in the context of all-teenage (rather than family) audiences. No doubt more than a few teenaged couples took advantage of such settings to explore the first stages of physical intimacy.

Movies, of course, were about more than just setting; as with much of postwar popular culture, observers found plenty to worry them in media content as well. Sexualized content came

in for special criticism as yet another factor contributing to the problem of premarital pregnancy. As Tina Block found in the case of Pentecostals in British Columbia, evangelically minded religious groups could be especially critical of the mass media.⁴³ In this connection, the colourful assessment of the Salvation Army is worth quoting at length:

Television and other mass media have brought sex into the living room. The pendulum of life and conduct swings backwards and forwards. It has surely swung its furthest from the times when there was a reluctance to read the words "belly" and "womb" out loud in a Scripture portion to ministers preaching from the pulpit on sex; from "body odour" being mentioned in a whisper to full page advertisements ... of toilet paper and sanitary necessities. The love affairs of Hollywood actors and actresses are glamorized. Most newspapers, magazines, and even "comic strips" contain articles on, or allusions to, sex. It is a subject that seems to be on everyone's lips.⁴⁴

On this subject social workers sometimes agreed. Also making the link between "glorified sex on television and movies," and teen pregnancies, one stated in her 1962 study: "No young person entirely escapes the numerous sources of sex stimulation that give rise to the possibility of becoming involved in sexual misconduct."⁴⁵ Determining whether consumption of such images actually led to more teen pregnancies is a near impossible task, though it is true that expanding forms of media meant postwar youth lived in an increasingly sexually conscious society where, as Beth Bailey has put it of the whole twentieth century, "sexual experience ... was laid open to public view as never before."⁴⁶

If movies offered new spaces of intimacy, likely few ever got pregnant there; the same could not be said of the car. American scholars of sexuality have noted the car's connection to premarital sex even in the interwar years.⁴⁷ If cars, like movies, were not new to the 1950s, much broader rates of ownership perhaps explain Kinsey's striking finding that, for 41 percent of women in his sample who were no longer "virgins," the car

was the setting for premarital sex.⁴⁸ In Canada, the concerns of worried onlookers and the memories of girls themselves confirm that cars were indeed spaces of sexual experimentation. The CAS listed “automobiles” as one source of problems among teens and social workers criticized “promiscuous” girls taken with drinking and “joyriding”; interviewee Ramona B. admits it was in a car “at the drive-in show” in Windsor that her child was conceived, as does Cheryl M., whose recollection opened this paper.⁴⁹ Certainly, concerned observers from social workers to the Salvation Army commented on the “accessibility of cars”⁵⁰ for teen use in this regard. The Army, again, put it most eloquently:

The automobile is increasingly attractive and available to youth. Most Canadian provinces grant drivers’ licenses at 16 years of age. The car is no longer just a medium of transport, but a status symbol. It is often portrayed on the films and television as the place for petting and other sex experience . . . It has been said of the horse and buggy days that at least the horse knew the way home, and was easily identified by neighbours!⁵¹

Kaufmann was wise to note the class dimensions of the car’s influence, pointing out that while “corner store” girls and boys generally met in public, “school pals of the middle and upper class” were able to “drive in cars and hold petting parties and otherwise engage in sex experimentation.”⁵²

Another factor often setting the stage for teenage sex was alcohol. As Craig Heron has shown, alcohol increasingly became a part of the recreational life of Canadians (teenagers included) in the decades following World War II.⁵³ In some cases, a few drinks may have given otherwise cautious teens the impulse to “go a little further.” Perhaps this helped some girls, taught always to be conscious of sexual danger, to consider their own possible pleasure. On the other hand, in at least some cases, excessive drinking was blamed for situations of outright assault. This is how Montrealer Tina V. explains her 1958 pregnancy at the age of 13: “I was running with a bad crowd. I played hooky from school. I got drunk and, while I was passed out, one of the fellas

had intercourse with me," as she later discovered. Even though clearly victimized, she can't keep her story from ringing with self-blame, even years after the fact. Disturbingly, is it also possible that these are the terms in which Tina feels she is expected to frame a story of drinking, "fast cars," and "fast boys" when speaking with a university-educated interviewer?

Sex, Desire, and Girls' Attitudes

If opportunities for sex were changing, could the same be said for its gender dynamics? In fact, D'Emilio and Freedman argue that, despite the liberalization of sexual behaviour, the double standard remained firmly in place in these years.⁵⁴ This fact holds equally for Canada, as does Beth Bailey's depiction of girls as sexual gatekeepers who were expected to manage insistent male drives.⁵⁵ As Ramona B. recalls later in life, "You were always pressured. Different guys always wanted to have sex. You always said no, no, no. And that was the end of the relationship. I guess I just got tired of not having a boyfriend." Broader studies revealed such dynamics also operated elsewhere. Halifax physician Dr. Solomon Hirsch concluded in a study of 96 Nova Scotian women and girls that 41 of them "had sexual relations because the man had desired it or demanded it. Eleven of these women stated that they were in love Most of the others ... specifically mentioned that they wanted to please the man so that he would not reject them 'He might like me more if I did,' [they stated] or 'I wanted to become more popular.'" ⁵⁶ When such scenarios resulted in pregnancy, as Tina V. elaborates, girls were to blame. "A woman getting pregnant or a woman having sex or even [being] abuse[d] ... it was the girls' fault [T]hey were driving men to do this to them. Men couldn't help themselves That's why you were supposed to wear dresses below your knee Show as [little] skin as possible." As scholars of delinquency have also shown, when it came to heterosexuality, it was girls' actions that were always most closely policed.⁵⁷

As is still sometimes the case today, sex itself was narrowly defined in this period as sexual intercourse, but other practices

worried observers as well. “Petting” — essentially any sexual touching short of intercourse — was one practice frequently mentioned in popular and expert discussions. This practice was closely associated with the postwar penchant for “going steady,” both leading inevitably to intercourse. As social worker Theresa Kaufmann put it about one of her young Vancouver cases, “Linda is really a fine girl but like many she was caught up in the adolescent culture of steady dating and petting which led to sexual relations.”⁵⁸ While this kind of behaviour had been fairly widely practised even in the interwar period, the fifties may have increased its prevalence. Indeed, the preference for going steady over the interwar desire for what Bailey calls “promiscuous popularity” (based on many dates with different people) may have made sex more likely between couples who considered themselves in love.⁵⁹ The strengthening of high-school peer cultures sometimes lent a group aspect to these practices, while the spread of car ownership offered more opportunities, as mentioned above.

If, then, more girls were having sex, can it be assumed that girls felt more desire? Unfortunately, this is a hard question to answer since the intense psychologizing of unmarried pregnancy in this period left little room even to consider female desire. As Mona Gleason has shown, childhood was increasingly psychologized in postwar years while, as Elise Chenier has shown, sexual tendencies, whether “normal” or otherwise, were also understood less in moral than psychological terms.⁶⁰ Touching, as their work did, on the realms of both childhood and sexuality, it is not surprising that professionals who worked with young, unmarried mothers exhibited this same reliance on psychological explanation. While some Canadian experts were troubled by the depiction of all unmarried mothers as “psychologically sick persons,”⁶¹ in many ways, Canadian analyses echoed the American focus on personality. As one British Columbian social worker stated in her 1949 thesis, “It is taken as axiomatic that unmarried motherhood ... is but one presenting facet of a girl’s disturbed personality.”⁶² For the most part, experts connected that personality to less than ideal family conditions: “broken homes,” controlling fathers, domineering mothers, and all kinds of other family tensions. Girls “revolted” against

these situations, it was argued, becoming pregnant as a way to punish parents or, sometimes, to "force" marriage and escape the family. Alternate, though similar, explanations likened pregnancy to the rebelliousness demonstrated by "stealing, setting fires, and difficult behavior in school."⁶³ Reflecting their assumptions as to the psychological "causes" behind unmarried pregnancy, expert studies explored family relationships in great detail, while sidelining analyses of actual sexual experiences to short discussions and, sometimes, statistical tables of dubious value.⁶⁴ Girls having sex were "disturbed" girls; rarely was the subject of their desire deemed relevant. Michelle Fine's "missing discourse of desire," a phrase she uses to define 1980s sex education, clearly has a long history.⁶⁵

Must the historian, then, abandon hope of exploring desire? It was common at the time, and perhaps remains so today, to assume that boys sought sex while girls sought only affection (or some other emotional or psychological reward). Young girls in particular were assumed "not usually [to be] conscious of any physical sexual hunger," as one study of "sex delinquents" put it.⁶⁶ One wonders whether interviewees, even years later, are affected by these same assumptions. Explanations such as, "I was looking for a hug" or "I was looking for someone to love me" might be entirely true, but one wonders if other realities would be "speakable." Hirsch's study, already mentioned, revealed a variety of experiences. On the one hand, over a third of girls in his sample did not enjoy sex at all, those he labeled "completely frigid" and who found intercourse "painful or repulsive."⁶⁷ Even for girls not having such negative reactions, there may well have been factors mitigating desire. In a world before the advent of "the pill" and long before more widespread condom use, many girls were aware that sex represented as much danger as pleasure. The very stereotype, then, of girls as less interested in sex may sometimes have become reality. Some may have felt they simply had other things — such as pregnancy, childbirth, and ruined life chances — to worry about.

Sex education might also be blamed for stunting girls' awareness of the possibilities of sexual desire. As both Marie

Louise Adams and Christabelle Sethna have shown, postwar sex education (where it existed) was not only devoid of useful content in terms of avoiding pregnancy, but also focused exclusively on married heterosexuality as the only acceptable context for sex.⁶⁸ Even within their discussions of marriage, there was no mention of female pleasure or desire. The instigating factor for sex education programs — fear of VD running rampant — fits with what Fine calls a “sexuality as victimization discourse” and the silencing of a discourse of desire that marked sex education in the 1980s and even up to recent days.⁶⁹ In this earlier period, however, male aggression was not even among the acknowledged dangers. Girls mentioned in a number of the social work studies (and interviews) attested to the fact that sex education was either non-existent or negatively focused. In terms of the latter, it was parents and not schools who were more likely to warn girls of dangers.⁷⁰

On the other hand, and despite all these negative forces, there were girls who experienced sexual activity as pleasurable. Hirsch’s own study was quite clear that, of his 96 cases, 20 “enjoyed relations and had frequent orgasms,” 33 “enjoyed relations but only rarely had orgasms” and five, in his words, “implicated their own sexual desire as important in leading to [sex].” Because only half of Hirsch’s subjects were under 21, conclusions about teens are difficult to make. Still, the study, following in the steps of Kinsey and others, does point to the existence of female desire. Other studies offer similar snippets of evidence indicating sexual desire among girls. No doubt girls’ experiences varied. If some consider their experiences, as does Ramona B., “five minutes of stupidity [that] ... if I had to do it over again I probably wouldn’t,” there were others who seemingly enjoyed sex and who were accused of acting on “sheer physical desire.”⁷¹ Interviews might well be one place to explore issues of pleasure and desire in a more in-depth manner. Unfortunately, the few interviews undertaken here did not shed much light on this issue. Admittedly, for elderly interviewees to open up to researchers on such delicate questions might require more carefully nurtured interview relationships, ones forged over, at least, several meetings. Even then, there may

well be realms of experience of which women might think, as Jean Barman has found, "Oh, no! It would not be proper to discuss that with you."⁷²

Pleasure was likely also shaped by how girls felt about premarital sex. In some cases, they seemed to have absorbed dominant values. For example, even girls already residing at maternity homes could show judgment of others in the same situation. In one study that asked 12 girls at a Toronto home how they felt about "repeaters" (girls who had more than one premarital pregnancy), the results seemed fairly unanimous. All agreed that such girls should not be accepted back. In their own words, these residents described repeaters as a "different type," "twice as bad as us," "wild," "bold," "flashy," and as having "no will power." Ultimately, girls seemed to agree, as one put it, "you can be forgiven once, but not twice."⁷³ If this seems to affirm that residents could be just as punitive towards other girls as society was towards them, one might again wonder about the power dynamics of interviews. What of the desire to please the interviewer? And how might the girl who said "repeaters" should be accepted back, have been regarded? Who needed to draw more negative attention than one already had done?

In fact, other observers suggested there were girls who took more liberal views. Returning to Hirsch's Nova Scotia study, his attempts to get at the "right and wrong" of the question apparently elicited some disgruntled responses. "Some of the women acted as if the doctor were somewhat naïve in asking any kind of question about the subject," his report stated. "They felt that if a man and woman were dating regularly, they would, of course, be having sexual relations." Elsewhere he stated 17 percent of his sample thought sexual relations appropriate "if marriage were planned."⁷⁴ Though this was obviously not an insignificant minority, Hirsch tried to downplay that fact by adding this was the case mainly among the "coloured women and their families," an argument often made in the case of indigenous girls in the Canadian setting.⁷⁵ Among "other groups," (another oblique reference to whiteness?) he suggested that premarital sex was still "strongly rejected" and "in many cases, the girl was no longer

accepted into the house.” This last statement highlights certain parental responses, but still does not reveal girls’ own views. Others interested in this question — religious groups in particular — certainly believed that attitudes were changing in more than a marginal way. The Salvation Army claimed that by 1962, “to abstain ma[de] one an ‘oddbod.’”⁷⁶ Even some social workers referred to the “slackening” and “general laxity” of public morals, highlighting the extent to which they shared broadly Judeo-Christian values, but also their perception of a sea change in values.⁷⁷ In the eyes of some at least, attitudes and behaviour long associated with working-class, indigenous, and other racialized groups were now spreading throughout society.

Age, Teen Marriage, and Other Kinds of Relationships

Thus far this paper has considered the extent of teenage sex and how girls felt about it, but it is worth asking, with whom were they having it? In cases that led to pregnancy, “older boys” were often seen as the source of girls’ trouble. Reflecting again their psychologizing bent, social workers spent a fair deal of effort trying to understand girls’ presumed fascination with these “older boys.” As Kaufmann commented in her study of “child-mothers” (13–15 years of age), “the older boy may represent to the young girl an adolescent fantasy hero, whom she can worship.”⁷⁸ When asked to explain these age differences, girls offered they felt “flattered,” “more adult,” and that they “gained prestige with their peer groups.” Kaufmann went further, trotting out Freudian theories of possibly “unconscious searching for the Oedipal adjustment and fulfillment lacking in their family relationships.” Other social workers were equally focused on issues of age, penning studies entitled “The Age Factor in Unmarried Pregnancy” and “Adolescent Unmarried Mothers.” All noted, as Kaufmann did, that male sexual partners were generally older than their female counterparts.⁷⁹

However, if boys were typically older than their sexual partners, how significant was the gap? In fact, in four different studies, between two-thirds and three-quarters of teen girls had

sexual partners of not more than four or five years older than themselves; researchers were, after all, still calling them "boys." Admittedly, data collection in some of these cases makes it hard to tell if it was 15-year-old girls coupling with 19-year-old "boys" — what many then and now might still see as a significant gap — or (more likely, I think) with teens closer to their own age, but the same general points hold. On the one hand, boys were typically older than their female partners, as in much heterosexual coupling; on the other hand, the gap seemed to have diminished over time. At least one of the four authors of these studies noticed that, "generally speaking, the ... girls chose men who were similar in age to themselves."⁸⁰ In the case of the youngest girls, male partners were perhaps just old enough to have a driver's licence or a job, both of which meant the means for a "date." Interestingly, what Kaufmann pointed to as a probable cause of girls pairing up with "older boys" — conditions of schooling — may well have been precisely what limited these age gaps to only a few years. Kaufmann, in fact, worried about "the proximity" of junior high-school girls and boys from senior high, and the "opportunities for ... associations" that such potential "mingling" created. However, with their outlook so thoroughly age-conscious by this period, these observers missed the larger significance that schools were sequestering teens — as a group — from the rest of society and that their choice of sexual partners often reflected this.⁸¹

There is other evidence to suggest that the age gap between romantic partners was narrowing, if anything, in these years, certainly among teens. Since tracing the age of sexual partners who did not marry is very challenging, a look at births within marriage can offer additional insight. First, from the time the data was first tabulated by census administrators in 1921 through until 1961, married teen mothers were most often coupled with husbands in the age range of 20 to 24 years (47 percent of them in 1921 and 64 percent by 1961), solidifying the notion that male partners were slightly older. Though teen husbands were always a small minority, they also were steadily increasing. In the interwar years five to six percent of "legitimate" babies born

to teen mothers also had teen fathers; by 1949 this trend had almost doubled to ten percent and, by 1961, it stood at almost 13 percent. Over the same period, the occurrence of more significant age gaps between married parents decreased. Husbands of teen girls in the 25- to 29-year-old age range decreased from 33 percent in 1921 to just under 19 percent in 1961. Likewise, while only a minority of teen girls ever married and had children with men 30 years and older, in the interwar period this was not an insignificant minority — between 12 and 14 percent. By 1949, this percentage had dropped to 7.6, by 1959 to 4.5, and, in 1961 to an all-time low of 4.1 percent. To clarify, the statistics concerning legitimate births to teen mothers, as with those for unmarried pregnancy, suggest a general trend towards teens' choosing sex partners who were closer to their own ages.⁸²

In fact, this very trend may well have exacerbated the problem of unwed pregnancy in postwar years. Whereas a 24-year-old, presumably employed, young man may have considered marrying his pregnant teen girlfriend, owing to a host of social and economic factors, a 16- or 17-year-old would have been much more reluctant to do so. As the numbers above suggest, even as the rate of teen marriage was increasing, only a minority of girls married teenage boys. Even by the early 1960s, more than 85 percent of teenaged wives with newborns were married to men 20 years old and over. Quite simply, if teenage girls were more often choosing sexual partners of their own age, for whatever reason, when pregnancy occurred, they were not necessarily marrying them.

One reason teens were discouraged from marrying no doubt concerned the fact that, in adult eyes, they “hardly knew each other.” But how true was this? Canadian researchers were aware that the reigning American experts tended to characterize teen relationships as fleeting.⁸³ Perhaps not displeased to discover some national differences, Canadian scholars concluded the opposite. The study of the “normal girls” concluded “most ... knew the putative fathers for several months or more.”⁸⁴ Perhaps flying even more in the face of researchers' class-based assumptions, at least half in Gordon's study of pregnant CAS wards had rela-

tionships "of longer duration." Two of these cases resulted from "common law unions," and in two more marriage resulted.⁸⁵ The youngest girls, too, seemed to be relatively well acquainted with their partners. One study revealed that over 60 percent of its 15- to 18-year-old cases had been involved in "continuing" as opposed to "casual" relationships, with ten percent already engaged. Kaufmann found these longer relationships ranged from three months to two years in duration.⁸⁶ Clearly, many girls were relatively and sometimes more deeply involved with the fathers of their babies. These were not the "ghost lovers"⁸⁷ or fly-by-night adventures sensationalized in the American literature. Each study found some girls who stated that they were "in love."⁸⁸

Given the general cultural celebration of marriage in this period, experts' antipathy to teen marriage requires explanation. Some social workers claimed that marriages contracted "in shame and in haste" (at whatever age) were doomed to failure. The illegitimate child was said to be an "ever present reminder" of the guilt associated with premarital sex, a dynamic that could result in "hatred ... of the first child."⁸⁹ The Canadian Welfare Council stated that "such marriages often do not work out satisfactorily. If the girl is contemplating marriage, she should be encouraged to think it over very carefully to be sure that it is not merely a hasty answer to her problem."⁹⁰ With teen marriage in particular, it is clear that age-specific objections were added to these general ones. While maternity homes might celebrate the marriage of a resident, there is also indication that Home staff thought teenagers were simply too young to take this step. Interestingly, some Home rules included prohibitions on visits from putative fathers, one indication that ongoing relationships were not encouraged.⁹¹ Reflecting, again, the fact that many teen girls were still living at home and attending school in this era, the Salvation Army suggested that early marriage was often turned to as a way to exit "unhappy family or school situations," more a reflection of generational tensions than mature love.⁹² Certainly, when it came to the youngest teens, injunctions against marriage were almost unequivocal. Speaking of her 1960

sample of 36 “child-mothers,” Kaufmann stated: “Only one girl in the group ... actually married the father of the child. In the age groups of 15 years and younger, neither the parents, nor the children believe they are ready for marriage, in most instances.” Marriages which did result in these circumstances, Kaufmann claimed, were “often ... disaster[s] for all ... concerned.”⁹³ Indeed, federal law validated popular thinking, banning the marriages of girls under 16 unless authorized by the parents.⁹⁴

To sum up, while we know there was broad social approval, even encouragement, of marriage at younger ages in these years, there was also a notion that many girls were “too young.” Perhaps even more important, male partners who were too young were simply not seen as marriage material. While it was generally acceptable to put an end to girls’ schooling (indeed it was officially mandated when pregnancy occurred), the notion of putting an end to boys’ schooling, especially for middle-class families, was seen as something of a social catastrophe. I would also wager that many had trouble picturing the teenage boy as the head of a household even when they could imagine teenage girls as dutiful wives. As I have argued elsewhere, teens of both sexes were configured more as children than adults in this period.⁹⁵ However, once teenage girls became pregnant, a changed future was more or less unavoidable for them, at least in the short, and often also the long run. Teenage boys, however, could still be protected from this fate. Teen sexual experimentation had its consequences, but these were distinctly gendered and unequal. Without question some teenagers did marry, but, in the end, girls perhaps not uncommonly also married adult men who were not the (teen) fathers of their babies. Alternatively, another aspect of the 1950s’ “sexual revolution” may have been a revolution in responses, namely, that “shotgun” marriages were less likely to take place than previously, because both partners were teens. This last possibility would have forced more pregnant, unmarried girls into public view and this also helps explain the increased demand for maternity home services in these years.⁹⁶

Steady relationships and early marriages offer one viewpoint on teen sex and pregnancy, but teen sex on casual terms was also

part of the postwar landscape. If "some thought they were in love," other girls admitted to Kaufmann that they "joined in the activities of their friends for 'kicks.'" ⁹⁷ Some of these other girls may have had their sights more on pleasure than on romance. In the case of her 58 subjects (all under 16), Atkinson found that over 40 percent had "had relations with several men or boys," ⁹⁸ while other studies noted relationships that were "casual" or "superficial." One BC study mentioned several cases of one-night encounters with sailors, ⁹⁹ while others mentioned girls who were completely "indifferent" to their sexual partners, men who "appeared to have little meaning as ... person[s]" for the girls. ¹⁰⁰ Though girls themselves may not have described their relationships with such words, clearly, not all were claiming undying love.

Whether such casual encounters were more frequent in postwar society is unclear, though some informed speculation is possible. If the "eyes of the village" or, more simply, the social pressures of living in places where one was more or less known traditionally helped keep youth in line, presumably the postwar growth of large urban centres may have had the opposite effect. While relationships forged in neighbourhood high schools may have led to the phenomenon of going steady, the increasing expansion and compartmentalization of urban life also allowed willing teens to exit their residential neighbourhoods, undertake urban adventures with relative strangers, and return home to their families all within the span of an evening, as Franca Iacovetta has shown for Toronto. ¹⁰¹ The postwar growth of the Canadian tourism industry may have provided escape from parental homes on a more extended basis, as in the case of Susan D. who became pregnant at the age of 19 while working at a summer resort in the Cypress Hills of Saskatchewan. ¹⁰²

Both mobility and contact between strangers were facilitated by another postwar development: the largest peacetime build-up of Canada's armed forces. ¹⁰³ To achieve this growth, early state-run publicity campaigns promised travel, adventure, and new experiences to young men up to the age of 29, even to those as young as 16 and 17. That some of these experiences

were sexual was never stated explicitly, but seems to have been a reality. Recruiting materials such as the 1948 booklet “Everybody Loves a Sailor” played on (and cultivated) the allure of these men in transit and the possibility of meetings of the sort already mentioned between girls and sailors. Even 16-year-old “Kay,” described by a caseworker as living in “a remote little town on Vancouver Island” in 1946, had the chance to meet sailors from other parts of Canada, though she was less fortunate in becoming pregnant from one brief encounter. In fact, though she met her sailor at a party, the circumstances were hardly festive; she indicated to the social worker that she had been raped. Upon questioning, Kay knew neither the father’s name nor where he lived, underlining again the fleeting nature of such connections.¹⁰⁴

If the armed forces offered young men opportunities to meet young women in new settings, they also offered the chance to evade them when pregnancy resulted (as they likely had during wartime). When pregnant 17-year-old Miss T. sought out the services of the Vancouver Children’s Aid Society in the early 1950s, her case file indicated that the putative father, a “frightened” Mr. S., “joined the armed forces in an effort to evade his responsibility.”¹⁰⁵ Not all cases, however, can be painted with the same brush. Sixteen-year-old “Nora,” who had grown up in the British Columbian interior, also became pregnant by a sailor, though she apparently was not awaiting any “white knight” to save her. Having quit school at 14 to help at home, she initiated her own mobility by leaving home at 16 to work as a clerk and a waitress in the growing city of Vancouver. Though her case file flagged indicators of the casualness of her encounter — that she had “picked up” a sailor in “one of the lower-class cafes” — once pregnancy resulted, this sailor was ready to marry. In this case, it was “Norah” who did not want “to settle down”; possibly she saw more mobility and adventure in her own future.¹⁰⁶ We should be careful, then, in casting girls solely in the position of abandoned lover.

Outside of steady relationships, girls were also probably more likely to identify situations that were non-consensual, another kind of situation that sometimes led to pregnancy. Cars,

for example, provided spaces of opportunity if intimacy was what one wanted; they also facilitated confinement in cases of non-consensual sex. In the study of so-called "normal girls," teenaged "Lori" explained her date "forced her to have intercourse while in a car, and that although he did not abuse or threaten her he would not let her go until she complied."¹⁰⁷ In another case, when a forced gynecological exam revealed she was no longer a virgin, sex delinquent "Jane" stated she had been sexually assaulted. Unfortunately for her, the test purportedly revealed only "normal intercourse," hinting at the troubles girls faced in proving a thing we might call "date rape." Making matters worse for "Jane," the fact that she had been "absent from home overnight" "more than once" allowed the social worker to conclude that "her story of having been raped may be discounted."¹⁰⁸

Other cases point to sexual assault at the hands of fathers and other family members and friends, often when girls were very young. While, in her study of "sex delinquents," Atkinson found that the majority of her 58 cases were between 13 and 15 years of age upon their "first sexual relationship," she also noted that 17 percent were between eight and 11 years old. The same study described one 11-year-old girl as medically "guilty of immorality" and as showing long-time and "abnormal interest in sex," a point left unexamined.¹⁰⁹ Likewise, when foster-child "Wilma," placed with an aging foster mother and her "grown-up son" became pregnant at 15, there seems to have been no criminal investigation of the "family" dynamics. The same studies described the adult men who showed unusual interest in girls as having "great attachment" to them and an indulgent tendency to "spoil" them. On the other hand, if criminal perspectives were sadly lacking, psychiatric ones were not. In Wilma's case, it was noted that she had a long-time behavioural problem, already at age six landing herself at the Vancouver Child Guidance Clinic which declared her "vain, domineering and self-willed."¹¹⁰ Indeed, despite the disturbing evidence of all kinds of coercive sex involving girls, power was the one thing these studies never truly investigated. Whether the power inherent in adult-child relationships, in age differences between sexual partners, or sim-

ply in gender relations as a whole, such analysis was upstaged by the ongoing obsession with girls and their presumed psychological weaknesses, issues which consistently captured the spotlight.

Conclusion

This study contemplates the possibility that sex was an increasing part of mainstream teenage experience in the early postwar period. Rising rates of unmarried teen pregnancy as well as qualitative comments of postwar observers both point in this direction. More heterosocial mixing, more free time, and more spatial freedom might help to explain this increase. But freedom is a tricky word to use when there were still so many constraints on female desire, when girls still paid enormously for pre-marital pregnancies, and when the gendered balance of power too often led to situations of coercion or, simply, regret. Though this study does not rule out the possibility of pleasure for postwar teenage girls (nor the fact that some boys also paid dearly for their mistakes), it certainly underlines the fact that active heterosexuality was a more complicated minefield for many girls than for their male counterparts.

To return to the question of pinpointing the origins of “the sexual revolution,” perhaps it would be better to abandon the term and consider a much broader “evolution” — from the 1920s through the 60s and beyond — and the different turns this evolution has taken as time has progressed. As with recent critique of the “waves” interpretation of the history of feminism, more nuanced understandings might be gained from seeing the continuities between eras and the long roots of what seem like revolutions. Finally, as not only a historian, but a feminist still concerned with these issues, I must state that the quantity of sex does not a revolution make. When it comes to assessing the power dynamics of postwar sex, continuity — and not revolution — seems the more apt descriptor, though this might also be said of “the Sixties.” Indeed, one wonders to what extent girls and women even today feel not simply free to engage in sex outside marriage — that seems clear enough — but also to be

firmly in control of their own sexual experiences and destinies. If that be the yardstick for revolution, how many of us — of whatever race, class, or age — have yet to fully realize ours?

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Endnotes:

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