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## Editors' Foreword

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## Editors' Foreword<sup>1</sup>

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What is peculiar in modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as a secret (Foucault 35)

In *Sex, Politics and Society* (1981), British historian and sociologist Jeffrey Weeks, along the same lines as Michel Foucault, described sex – the “supreme secret” – as having become the “general substratum of our existence”. Sexuality, he argued, had become central to our lives since the nineteenth century, coming to define our very sense of self, our moral and social identities: “[Sex] defines us socially and morally; its release or proper functioning can be a factor in health, energy, activity; its frustration is a cause of ill health, social unorthodoxy, even madness” (Weeks 12). In such a context, the complexities and ambiguities of contemporary discourse on sex education do not come as a surprise. The hypervisibility of sex clearly has an effect on our attitudes towards sex and how young people are educated on the subject in both the public and private spheres. The diversity of informal sources of sex education, whatever the time period, from early sources of pornographic literature such as the infamous autobiographical *My Secret Life* (Walter), guidebooks on married life (Venette), Victorian erotic literature (Devereaux), to postcolonial literature on sexuality (Darkoa Sekyiamah), eroticism in visual arts – comics in particular (Sanders) – or sexual representations in television shows for instance, lead us to look at the broad question of what counts as sex education, and the role that sex educators should/could play.

This issue of *Alizés* contains contributions which engage with competing forms of formal but also of informal sex education as they pertain to the English-speaking world. Keeping in mind Foucault's notion that sex is both hyper visible and taboo, the volume provides in-depth discussions which seek to better understand both formal and informal sex education and the cultural tensions and political feuds which surround it. If, as feminist activist Shulamith Firestone is sometimes credited as having said, “the personal is political”, sex and thus sex education (whether formal or informal) is particularly so. What constitutes a proper sex education for some is clearly antithetical to what counts as a liberating, positive sex education for others. Since sex education is steeped in identity politics, the possibilities for miseducation are vast.

Over the past fifty years, research in gender and sexuality studies has benefited from the extensive work of feminist or queer critics and gender theorists who have helped deconstruct some of the taboos and prejudices which were inherent to western society and conditioned people's attitude regarding sexual matters. For authors such as Audre Lorde who approached what she described as “the erotic” as an essential source of power, as “the nurturer and nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (Lorde 46), the taboos and stereotypes surrounding female sexuality were essentially a means of controlling women and maintaining them in a submissive role:

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We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society. On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence (Lorde 43).

A feminist oriented approach to the question of sex education became more visible and influential in the 1960s leading to reevaluations of the type of material that was formally provided in schools and to a sharper criticism of its ongoing inadequacy. In civil society, the great success of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973) and its multiple editions marked the beginning of a movement focused on women's health and also confirmed the impact of feminist informed approaches to questions linked to sexuality (Morgen). More recently, intersectional approaches have also enriched scholarship on sexuality studies and sex education. Patricia Hill Collins, in her influential *Black Sexual Politics* (2006), analysed for instance the unhealthy influence of contemporary pervasive images of Black sexuality, calling for a series of necessary changes in the way we think about sexuality. As she explained: "as part of the color-blind racism that has accompanied the erasure of the color line, ubiquitous inclusion of images of Black sexuality that permeate contemporary movies, television shows, and music videos can replicate the power relations of racism today just as effectively as the exclusion of Black images did prior to the 1960s" (Hill Collins 43-44). Other areas of interest which highlight the dynamism of the field include emerging scholarship on how hip hop and pop culture can be seen as an easily accessible potential source of sex (mis)education (Morgan 1999; Pough 2004; Souyri 2024).

Sexual health is now a matter of public health and efforts to disseminate information and change mentalities are ongoing. In its definition of the term, the World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledges the importance of positive sexuality and "pleasurable" sexual experiences:

Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled. (WHO 2006a)

In recent years, concern for LGBTQ+ sexuality, the promotion of emotional healthy relationships, sex positivity and questions linked to sexual pleasure for all have gained more visibility in sex education campaigns and in mainstream media<sup>2</sup>. Sex education is being promoted by influential organizations such as SIECUS in the United States or Brook in the United Kingdom as a necessary tool for social change and social justice. Trends however appear ever changing and a series of recent events and movements, from the passing of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) to the emergence of the "boysober" trend in the United States and 4B movement in Korea (Mahdawi) show that a whole range of topics linked to sexuality, sexual health and to the types of "lessons" we decide to pass on to the next generation have to be constantly readjusted and/or reaffirmed.

This volume adds to existing research on sex education in two ways. The first three articles confirm the lingering impact of Victorian standards with respect to sex education (or the lack thereof) well into the 1950s in the United Kingdom and in the United States while the final three articles highlight recent new trends in informal sex education through Irish and U.S. TV series and film as well as post-colonial literature. Although the articles allow us to note progress with respect to women's and LGBTQ+'s rights, they also foreground setbacks and a persisting prudery and sexism in both formal and informal sex education, confirming that there is no smooth linearity in the history of sex (mis)education, no unadulterated progress. In the first article entitled "'I Told Him My Condition He Gave Me Drugs': Premarital Sexual Knowledge and Birth Control in Late Victorian Britain", **Florence Pellegrin** tackles British attitudes to sex

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<sup>2</sup> See TV series like *That Sex Show* TV (2013), or campaigns such as Feminist Campus' campaign for Sex Positivity (2018)

education at a time when matters linked to sexuality were still silenced and relegated to tabooed margins and attempts at disseminating birth control information were perceived as obscene and immoral. The inquiry relies on primary sources found in the very intimate London Foundling Hospital archive and revolves around the question of the sexual knowledge of young people in late Victorian Britain, focusing on the obstacles which still stood in the way of a more effective dissemination of birth control information. Pellegrý's analysis allows us to get a direct insight into the intimate lives of the young women who were seeking to entrust their illegitimate children to the institution, underlining the confusion and ongoing veil of mystery which surrounded reproduction and the use of abortifacient drugs amongst the uneducated poor.

*Alizés* 44's next two studies are set in the United States in the twentieth century. First, **Jamie Wagman**'s article, "A Cultural History of the Condom's Symbolic Meaning in American Visual Culture, 1941-1987", proposes to look into policies linked to the dissemination of sexual health information in the United States through the prism of elements of visual culture such as military posters and magazine advertisements. Paying attention to who the main actors were in the history of condom discourse, the author describes the cultural shift which separates the World War II period from the late 1980s in terms of American attitudes regarding sex and contraception. Wagman's article also highlights how an early focus on male dreams of sexual prowess (often complete with racist fantasies of hypersexual oriental figures), combined with a frankly misogynistic view of the transmission of sexual diseases, gradually gave way to more women-centered concerns of protection and pleasure.

With "'Well, She's Just Growing Up Dear': 1950s Educational Films and Sex Education in The United States, Differences and Ambiguities" **Favian Mostura**, shows that World War II or, later on, the threat of the Cold war were strong incentives for "educational innovation". In this case while reproducing gender-biased perceptions of sexuality, the contents of educational films inspired by progressive trends in education, at least overcame the bigotry of the formerly prevailing Victorian morals that made any discussion of the topic completely taboo. Legitimized by the strong presence of a rather cold medical approach to sexuality, these movies attempted to reach out to youths and place themselves on their level but remained oblivious to the particular situation of youths of color, and even girls in general in some cases, as sexual taboos surrounded female bodies more than male ones.

Mainly informed by late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century literary and film works, the second angle of analysis examines contemporary sources of informal sex education, revealing the extent to which earlier sources had marginalized and overlooked issues of race, gender and sexual orientation. **Máire Ní Mhórdha** and **Aneta Stępień**'s article entitled "Sex Education on Screen: Power, Pleasure and Moral Panics" analyzes two popular TV series *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019-2024) and *Normal People* (Hulu/RTÉ 2019). For them, the obvious glamourization of sexual issues in both Netflix series does not subtract from the relevance of their foregrounding of gay and trans sexuality and of the question of sexual consent. *Normal People* with its grittier approach does a particularly good job at delicately discussing the complexities of sexual pleasure and consent, familial violence and its impact on self-image while interrogating the influence of class in the sexual education of both protagonists. Ultimately the article makes a convincing case for school sex education to incorporate media material reflecting a change of culture and thinking about sexuality, gender and relationships.

In "Eros as the Virgin Vampire: Monsters, Desires and Female Erotic Curiosity in the *Twilight* series, a retelling of Cupid and Psyche", **Adèle Hoareau** approaches the *Twilight* saga by Stephanie Meyer as a contemporary reinterpretation of the story of Cupid and Psyche. While the vast scholarship on this pop culture staple outlined the novels' blind spots on race or even on the reproduction of traditional gender roles, Hoareau argues that it overlooked its potential for the erotic empowerment of young women. Centering on the concept of "erotic curiosity", the author's reading of the novel, shows how delayed sexual gratification grants Bella the

possibility to explore her lover's body and soul at length all the while ensuring an even more rewarding climax. Overall, the article focuses on Meyer's paradoxical depiction of sexuality and on the importance placed on consent and female empowerment.

Valérie Baisnée's "Sex (Mis) Education in Sia Figiel's Novels, *Where We Once Belonged* (1996) and *Freelove* (2016)", demonstrates how Western centric perspectives on women and sexuality failed to encapsulate the complexity of young women's sex lives in Samoa in the 1980s. Baisnée shows how this autofiction uses Bhabba's concept of mimicry in a way that highlights correspondences with 18th century libertine fiction while overturning it. The reflection on the use of Samoan language to challenge an Anglo-centric education also contributes to defining views on sexuality and love that pertain to a world view that is authentically Samoan and contemporary. Baisnée shows how language in English uses sterile medical terms when referring to sexuality whereas Samoan employs metaphors and stories as the technical/medical words per se are taboo. The heroin's voice demonstrates that there are no "virgin states" as she interlaces pop culture and ancient Samoan mythology in constructing her own sexuality: one that is fearless, multilayered and independent.

The papers selected for this issue of *Alizés* help paint a richer picture of what has counted and what counts now as sex education in the English speaking world. They also, however, reveal how sex education remains and must remain a subject of constant adaptation and revision towards safe, empowering pleasurable sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

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