

The Moral Panics of Sexuality

Edited by

Breanne Fahs, Mary L. Dudy and Sarah Stage
Arizona State University, USA

palgrave
macmillan

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
Villains and Victims: Excavating the Moral Panics of Sexuality <i>Breanne Fahs, Mary L. Dudy, and Sarah Stage</i>	
Part I Female Desire	
1 Do I Have Something in My Teeth? Vagina Dentata and its Manifestations within Popular Culture <i>Michelle Ashley Gohr</i>	27
2 Vampires, Border Crossing, and Panic in Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla" <i>Ellen J. Stockstill</i>	44
Part II Creating Norms	
3 Bodies That Are Always Out of Line: A Closer Look at "Age Appropriate Sexuality" <i>Sara I. McClelland and L.E. Hunter</i>	59
4 Raising Bloody Hell: Inciting Menstrual Panics through Campus and Community Activism <i>Breanne Fahs</i>	77
5 Scary Sex: The Moral Discourse of <i>Glee</i> <i>Sarah Prior</i>	92
Part III Colonial Erotics	
6 Eating It Out: Cannibalism and Sexual Deviance in Nineteenth Century Travel Writing <i>Ayaan Agane</i>	117
7 Cyber Pinkwashing: Gay Rights under Occupation <i>Rachael Byrne</i>	134

Part IV Tactical Panics

- 8 What “Good Girls” Do: Katharine Bement Davis
and the Moral Panic of the First U.S. Sexual Survey 151
Sarah Stage
- 9 Gay Republican in the American Culture War:
Wisconsin Congressman Steve Gunderson, 1989–1996 164
Jordan O’Connell

Part V Critical Panics

- 10 Time to *Panic!* Disability Justice, Sex Surrogacy,
and Sexual Freedom 183
Brooke Willock
- 11 No to the Flow: Rejecting Feminine Norms and
the Reproductive Imperative through Hormonal
Menstrual Suppression 205
Bianca Jarvis
- 12 Cumming to Terms: Bareback Pornography,
Homonormativity, and Queer Survival in the Time
of HIV/AIDS 226
Michael McNamara
- Afterword: Insisting on “both/and”: Artifacts of Excavating
the Moral Panics of Sexuality 245
Deborah Tolman

- Index* 256

Introduction

Villains and Victims: Excavating the Moral Panics of Sexuality

Breanne Fahs, Mary L. Dudy, and Sarah Stage

It is precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality ... Disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity. Consequently, sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress.

Gayle Rubin (1984), "Thinking sex"

The now-infamous case of the "West Memphis Three"—three young men who faced life imprisonment after allegedly murdering three young boys in West Memphis, Arkansas in 1993—reveals the potential danger, volatility, and impact of the moral panics of sexuality. Faced with the devastation of finding three boys tied up and drowned in a nearby drainage ditch, the townspeople, police officials, and legal counsel constructed an elaborate story with all the elements of a moral panic: Satanic witchcraft, sexual torture and mutilation, and violent teenage masculinity. In reality, of course, the men faced eighteen years of imprisonment for a crime they did not commit. The so-called Satanic rituals never happened, the "sexual torture" had been committed by a group of turtles living in the ditch, and the supposedly violent men had never even spoken to the boys. The likely perpetrator, a stepfather visible in plain sight the entire time, had gone free, aided by the whirlwind of decades-long sexual panic (*West of Memphis* 2012). The town had, as Gayle Rubin warned, become "dangerously crazy about sexuality."

One great irony of moral panic—witnessed in legal cases like the one mentioned above, the therapy office, in politics, in classrooms, in

boardrooms, in relationships, and on television—is that it has an uncanny way of directing attention away from actual sources of danger. Once sexuality is thrown at something—whether to discredit, stigmatize, devalue, or heighten its sense of deviance—it deeply and profoundly affects how people see, read, and interpret the meaning of that thing. It becomes a thick tar that mars and distorts its target, cloaking it in shame, disgust, and misinformation and directing attention away from the real “boogey men.” The killer, it seems, too often goes free. Blowjob and marital infidelity scandals of politicians embellished by the media drown out punitive welfare policies, drone strikes, and unnecessary and immoral wars. “Breaking news” stories about homicidal mothers and missing white children largely divert attention from the quiet dismantling of programs to help the poor and the ever-intensifying pervasive violence against women. The swelling tide of panic around girls getting vaccinated for HPV forces a silence around rising rates of unprotected anal sex among heterosexual teenagers (something no public health campaigns will touch). The culture of panic—particularly surrounding issues of sexuality—has paramount importance in the composition of American culture today as it reinforces traditional moral codes and distracts from systematic forms of discrimination and violence against less powerful populations.

This wide-ranging interdisciplinary edited collection, *The Moral Panics of Sexuality*, addresses an issue that has been timely for at least the 700 years spanned in these pages: the collective frenzy of self-defined “moralists” who incite the marginalization, suppression, and even violent expulsion of all forms of sexuality not considered “normal,” where normal is defined by the majority of practitioners (or those who pretend to practice). The reactions we interrogate in this volume center on a form of mass hysteria operating under the cover of moral discourse—something scholars call “moral panics.” While these can take the form of institutional, legal, media, capitalistic, and empirical panics (Thompson 1998) we understand the dominant approach to sexual practice as driven by a normative teleology that is very often (though not exclusively) based in political hegemony and restrictive religious practices that distrust sexual impulses, condone sexual double standards between men and women, and despise same-sex relationships. As such, panic about sexuality gains its power through the often thoughtless adherence to symptomatic and ideological modes of thought that become ingrained and second-nature: in other words, if you’re panicking, you’re not thinking.

The term “moral panic”—often attributed to sociologist Stanley Cohen but first appearing in an 1830 issue of *The Quarterly Christian*

Spectator—typically refers to something that seeks to disrupt the established social order, an *upheaval* of the way a society typically sorts out the “moral” from the “deviant.” Drawing from the notion of American history as deeply rooted in Puritanical belief structures, moral panics emerged as a way to understand the exercise of labeling the deviant and “rooting out” sinful or problematic behavior. Cohen, who first wrote of moral panics in 1973, aptly noted that moral panics take aim when a “condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen 1973). Later, Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda contended that moral panics typically have in common a cluster of five characteristics: (1) Concern: awareness that the behavior or a group will negatively impact society; (2) Hostility: a clear division between “insider” and “outsider” forms; (3) Consensus: widespread acceptance that the group in question poses a threat to society; (4) Disproportionality: the actions taken to control the “threatening” group are disproportionate to the *actual* threat this group poses; and (5) Volatility: interest in the moral panics appear and disappear rapidly due to the volatile temperament of the media and the public (Jones and Jones 1999). Today, the moral panics of sexuality may function primarily as a countermovement, akin to a political movement bothered by the liberalizing of social practice and in need of expressing a “resistance to the loss of advantages” (Mottl 1980, 621). As conservatives lose ground, lose elections, and lose sight of popular opinion, moral panics may step in as a proper solution to their waning popularity.

The construct of *morality*, here, has paramount importance when understanding the creation and deployment of the moral panics of sexuality. Indeed, notions of what constitutes a “good sexual citizen” or a “righteous sexual citizen” carry with them a variety of narrow prescriptions about *good* bodies, *good* sexual practices, and *good* discourse surrounding sexuality. As the old saying goes, “If I like you, you can do nothing wrong; if I don’t like you, you can do nothing right” (Romei 2011). Those charged with deciding whose sexuality is met with disdain, suspicion, and revulsion are, not surprisingly, those with the most socially inscribed power. Even the study of sexuality itself is riddled with moral panics in its history, as the classification of “good” and “bad” sexual behavior emerged during the panicky days of London’s Victorian age, in which vampires, sadists, and homosexuals sought to collectively “destroy” proper (white) society (von Krafft-Ebing 1886).

The ability to moralize—whether through diagnostic criteria disguised as science, “heterosexual training camps” disguised as sex

education, or sermons about “the word of God” disguised as spiritual instruction—has always maintained close ties to those with access to power and privilege. Moral panics, invented on an as-needed basis, have served as strategies for passing legislation (for example, mobilizing anti-gay-marriage conservatives to get to the polls so that other conservative laws get passed), demonizing black and brown bodies, attracting television viewership, and distracting the masses from the issues that directly impact their lives.

Historically, moral panics have taken on a fairly broad range of subjects, many of which have veered quite far from sexuality. Sociologists have framed moral panics as social problems that organize and contextualize the deployment of social norms originating in nodes of institutional power (Ben-Yehuda 1990; deYoung 1998; Ungar 2005). From panics about Satanic worship to the “Red Scare” and the much-caricatured fury about Communism and Socialism, from outrage about gun control to anti-Semitic sentiments, moral panics have not always had an overtly sexual overtone. Still, in a climate where the Catholic Church, cultures of war, weapons of mass destruction, loss of faith in the media, and the brave new world of reproductive technologies have all framed contemporary discourses of panicking, it is essential to see how these aspects of contemporary public life infect and unsettle attitudes about and “frenzies” over sexuality. Panic and anxiety have a way of bleeding over into other aspects of people’s lives, of taking apart and exploding the seemingly rational. Chris Hedges (2003), an international war journalist, has aptly noted that *war is a force that gives us meaning*, in part because it creates a context for cultural amnesia and radical repositioning of *who is responsible* and *how to resist*. Instead, the flurry of nationalistic, patriotic, and battle-hungry sentiments so deeply entrenched in war discourse simply take over (Bonn 2011). The same, we argue, can be said of sexuality.

We have designed this book to showcase the ways that—in the context of crises over unjust wars and unbridled capitalism (familiar players in the landscape of widespread panic)—contemporary manifestations of moral panics have more often than not taken on the *sexual* as their primary marks, often attracting the taboo, abject, shocking, or “unmentionable” discourses of the sexualized body as their targets. Because the union between militaristic impulse and capitalistic greed often work together, sexuality has become the necessary scapegoat to “contain” the weight of the economic grievances that should be directed toward Washington, D.C. and Wall Street. When the government bans images of coffins and body bags returning from war and

makes only half-hearted attempts at lessening poverty, blowjob scandals and “slutty” teenagers become apt attention-diverting replacements.

Still, if we agree with Rubin (1984) that sexuality becomes a scapegoat in times of great social stress, too often we forget that we have disproportionately saddled the weight of moral panics onto the bodies and sexualities of those marked as “Other,” particularly female, queer, colored, poor, fat, old, “foreign,” and disabled bodies. Never is there a more elegant fusion of oppressions than when U.S. culture seeks a target for its social and cultural anxieties—suddenly, marginalized bodies carry huge amounts of baggage as they become simultaneously sexualized and demeaned. In fact, the denigration of these “Othered” bodies is so closely linked to sexual panic that separating them is nearly impossible. For example, the fat body all too often takes on the affective states of (sexualized) panic such that the mere mention of the term *fat* inspires anxiety; one cannot, it seems, call oneself *fat* without seemingly degrading oneself, even if the word is a mere descriptor. Further, the bodies of privileged white heterosexual men—Wall Street tycoons, lawmakers, and even school shooters—continually evade such burdens, as their gender, race, sexual identity, and class simply disappear from the public radar. Even the Occupy Wall Street movement rarely critiqued the sexual panics created by those in power or the structural gendered inequalities within the elite 1 percent *and* within the Occupy movement itself (Lewis 2012).

The current machine of moral panicking has conscripted the phenomenon of the moral panic, neatly limiting it to anxiety about sexuality and thereby preemptively shutting down conversations about matters such as dirty wars that could legitimately lay claim to panic. When the focus is shifted to sexual targets, the range is so vast that there is little to fear from competition offered up by nonsexual news (consider prostitution, “dirty sex,” human trafficking, Catholic Church sexual abuse, pornography, “sexting,” birth control, sex education, gay marriage, sex offending, Penn State’s systematic abuse of boys, and sexually-explicit television as a mere starting point). As a perfect example, take U.S. politician Todd Akin’s comment about pregnancy not usually resulting from “legitimate rape.” Even if Representative Akin’s comments were pandering to religious conservatives and not deliberately irresponsible, the media firestorm he provoked ensured that at a time when the country should have been discussing foreign policy, the economy, the environment, the 2012 election, and a host of other dangerously pressing topics, the conversation veered toward sex. The moral panics of sexuality easily tear through contemporary media

culture, policy making, political campaigns, and public frenzies with breathtaking speed and regularity.

This book makes several claims that nuance the contemporary conversation about moral panics in relation to sexuality. First and foremost, we argue that *nonsexual events become sexualized via moral panics* just as *sexual events become nonsexualized via moral panics*. This reversal—one of the most insidious and dangerous features of moral panics—inverts what we know about “villains” and “victims.” The villains—*those who dangerously and shamelessly propagate moral panics onto others*—and the victims—*those who live with the material, physical, social, and psychological damage of moral panics*—are often inverted or obscured so that the ways to distinguish between the two become invisible. Sexuality becomes a funnel through which moral panics inevitably seem to flow.

For example, some religious conservatives have blamed gays (and those in support of gays) for a host of natural disasters: of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Rabbi Yehunda Levin said, “All this in sync with a 2,000-year-old teaching in the Talmud that the practice of homosexuality is the spiritual cause of earthquakes. We plead with saner heads in Congress and the Pentagon to stop sodomization of our military and our society. Enough is enough”; and of Hurricane Sandy (October 2012), Biblical analyst John McTernan said that the hurricane was “a huge bucket of vomit in America’s face during the election” that forced a choice between “a pro-homosexual Mormon along with a pro-abortion/homosexual, Muslim Brotherhood promoter, Hard Left Fascist” (Guarino 2012). More commonly, the culture of moral panics attributes blame for Hurricane Katrina (August 2005) and Hurricane Isaac (August 2012) to the way New Orleans celebrated gay culture and Mardi Gras. Buster Wilson of the American Family Association of Tupelo, Mississippi, said, “There is example after example after example where, if the people don’t live right, God will come in sometimes—not always, but sometimes—and literally destroy a place ... I’m not saying that’s exactly why the hurricane comes to New Orleans this week ... but I’m saying it does fit a pattern that there is an abundance of in scripture” (Guarino 2012).

Just as moral panics work to sexualize overtly nonsexual events, they also work to desexualize events that do have clear implications for gender and sexuality. As an example that encapsulates both halves of this paradigm, the media reactions to the Newtown, Connecticut shootings of December 14, 2012 symbolize this very problem, as the bodies of children in a classroom took on the “face” of gun violence, thereby obscuring the usual face of gun violence, for example, adult women involved

in domestic violence disputes, poor women and women of color who face disproportionate gun violence in the street and at home, young soldiers—often poor and people of color—who do the “dirty work” of fighting overseas in order to maintain the gender, race, and class privileges of the elite back in the homeland, and so on. The reactions to this school shooting showcase how moral panics erase the “inconvenient” bodies and redirect attention away from the less sensational victims onto something else entirely. Privileged bodies—young, wealthy, white schoolchildren, who rarely face problems of gun violence in comparison to their older, poorer, and non-white counterparts—become the “victims,” while underprivileged bodies face total erasure from the picture of gun violence. In fact, among over 20,000 gun fatalities in a year, there is a disproportionate concentration on low-income young men and women (Cook and Ludwig 2000). The vulnerable and highly specific bodies of women who face domestic battering because of their gender become overshadowed by (asexual) schoolchildren who signify more immediate representations of “innocent victims.” Here, moral panics serve a dual function: *they incite us to talk about sexuality when we should talk about something else* (as seen with Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy, 9/11, the shooting of Gabrielle Giffords, or the Iraq war), or *they incite us to ignore sex, gender, and power altogether when they underlie the actual problem* (as seen in the December 2012 school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut).¹

This reversal of villains and victims represents one of the most dangerous aspects of the moral panics of sexuality—whenever panic arises around an issue, bringing with it the anxiety of sexuality, a mass hysterical forgetting and silencing seems to occur. For example, in the case of child beauty pageants (something that inspires great moral panic), the media constructs the victims as the children and the villains as the parents (“how could *those people* subject their daughters to this?!”), when in actuality the *audience who consumes* this material, not to mention those who produce, film, and showcase it in mainstream media, represent the true villains for enabling this programming. These sorts of inversions and reversals leave the public ill equipped to respond to those who seek to exploit them, just as it paralyzes and dumbs down American audiences, making it almost impossible for them to recognize their own complicity in producing, inhabiting, and perpetuating moral panics.

Thus, sexuality also becomes a mirror, or perhaps a prism, through which we see moral panics—embedded in “what we know” about moral panics exists the cultural imaginary surrounding the white, middle-class,

sexualized bodies of adolescent girls, the assless-chap-wearing gay men on a pride float rolling down a San Francisco street, the openly breast-feeding woman, the greasy-haired middle-aged sex offenders, the suburban *50 Shades of Grey*-reading thirtysomethings, and so on. Moral panics become infused into the cultural lexicon *via sexuality*, conveyed in everyday thought, writing, speech, and linguistic practice. They write certain bodies into the mainstream stories of society, and they obscure, silence, and marginalize other bodies. Contemporary moral panics of sexuality influence how we “read” key events in history, how we remember, and how we move forward. Moral panics also connect directly to the sexual furies of today. The agitation surrounding teenage sexting and sex offending—namely that teenagers could earn the label of “sex offender” if they sent nude photos of their body parts to others at school—represents a clear example of this. Inciting parents everywhere to monitor and restrict their children’s texting behaviors, lest they become “sex offenders,” the mass hysteria surrounding sexting never tackled the absurdity of the forever-labeled-a-deviant term of “sex offender” while valiantly ensuring that parents had yet another excuse to attempt to control their children’s sexual behaviors and practices. While parents worry about their children sexting, they ignore the more pressing issues of sexual coercion in their own homes, let alone how to teach their children to negotiate sexual agency, fight against stereotypes, work toward sexual equality, and gauge their readiness to make informed and mature choices about sexual activity.

As such, the question of whether moral panics reflect a retrenchment of conservative culture is one this volume takes seriously. Are moral panics a by-product of the growing strength of conservative culture in the United States? Are people simply more willing to stand by and allow conservative culture to gain momentum—often couched as a moral panic of sexuality—while progressives sit back and passively await their own demise? While conservative culture and its particular brand of panicking about sexuality have not gone unnoticed, they certainly have been underanalyzed, undercritiqued, and under-commented-upon. In other words, Americans today have a tendency to *see* and express moral alarm, but not to *act*. This is a peculiar and sharp departure from the previous generations’ methods of dealing with moral panics, as, historically, those burdened with moral panics were widely and publicly acknowledged, often via social movements, popular culture, and the presence of the Left. Groups who took on more than their fair share of the panic had some means to redress their suffering (for example, a well-organized women’s movement or ACT UP!). Today’s culture of

the moral panics of sexuality is burdened with a sort of “Stockholm Syndrome.” That is, people targeted by a culture of moral panics often accept, collude in, and promote those panics that restrict their freedoms and pleasures. Rather than fight back against sexualized language, for example, many young women will employ terms such as “slut,” “whore,” and “bitch” against others and, indeed, against themselves. (The SPARK movement, headed by Deborah Tolman, represents one key departure from this trend, as discussed in the afterword). One need go no further than the closest newsstand or grocery store for a copy of *Cosmopolitan*, itself a global phenomenon, for an example of the latter’s use by women against women: “You know how some chicks get the guy and the gig and own any room they walk into ... all without breaking a sweat? Well, there’s a two-part mind trick that can make you better than those bitches” (Lovsin 2012).

To push this further, we might ask the question: why have women not better resisted the framing of birth control as a sign of their inherent “slutty” natures? Why have we not developed a more sophisticated way of addressing “age-appropriate” sex education? How have women stood by and allowed their menstrual cycles to become vessels of corporate shaming, product placement, and enforced secrecy? The moral panics of sexuality cause a sort of political resignation and progressive cannibalism where people believe that they lack the resources, ability, and collective culture to resist them. Resistance, then, becomes more diffuse and multiplied, subversive, and individual, and too often evades cultural commentary. We cannot “point and say *there*,” as singer Ani DiFranco once mused. Boys armed with guns “saunter off to make the news,” while the collective resistances to the moral panics of sexuality continue to flounder.

Consequently, one could argue that the best approach to studying the moral panics of sexuality would focus either on media studies or on teenage sexuality, as this fusion tends to produce the most specific and dramatic moral panics of sexuality (Elliott 2010; Giroux 1996; Luker 1997). We disagree, as analyzing sexual panics more broadly and in more contexts better reveals the political and social workings of moral panics as a *device of power*. We have designed this volume to tackle more broadly and collectively about moral panicking, to provide a sort of radical vision for how we might collectively resist moral panicking, especially around issues of sexuality. *We want new stories for old problems, and new frameworks for emerging problems*. We want to provide a more thorough consideration—drawing from the force of multiple disciplines—of how moral panics begin, how we can better recognize them, and,

ultimately, how we can fight back. The moral panics of sexuality affect not only how we engage with issues of sexuality, but also how we see, filter, process, and construct the world. Moral panics disappear people into history, draw forward irrelevant details and miniature anecdotes, and back innocent people up against walls while letting the guilty go free. Consequently, resistance to moral panics may take many forms: women marching together in SlutWalk protest marches to combat the moralizing use of the word “slut,” lawyers banding together to fight against custody hearings that unfairly portray adults’ sexual behavior as “deviant,” students raising awareness on campus about the secrecy and shame attached to the vagina, and so on. Resistance is necessary and must spring up from a multitude of sources; ideally, resistance should become the key framework we employ when turning on the television or engaging in any way with the moral panics of sexuality.

Stated again: *We want new stories for old problems, and new frameworks for emerging problems.* For example, the problem of female sexual agency often takes up the tone and qualities of moral panics, as female desire becomes a threat both within women themselves and within the cultural context that frames and punishes such desire. For women, having sexual desire becomes a portal for social castigation, even while so many cultural forces clamor to define and possess women’s sexual desires. Now more than ever we see signs of just how threatening a desirous woman can be: women learn to drink heavily or get high before sex so they “aren’t themselves”; desirous women are blamed for a range of social ills; women are dichotomized into virgins/sluts or “good”/“bad” (for example, the most recent *Wizard of Oz* movie produced by Disney in 2013 actually had Mila Kunis’s “good” witch character bite into an apple—Eve style—before becoming “evil,” making the 1939 version seem oddly progressive in comparison); some BDSM literature, which notably leaves women on the bottom, advises women to surrender their power to others, or perform as virginal and mindless, in the name of erotic thrill; Victoria’s Secret models prance and preen to provide a corporate framework for the “right” kind of desirous body. In sum, the whole notion of sexual agency, particularly for women, is packaged as so-called liberation, often by the very people seeking to *remove and undermine actual sexual agency*. Even some progressives simply repeat the libertarian line that ignores social hierarchies: *But if women like it, then it’s fine!* Without collective resistance, mass critique, and clever ways of “unworking” this system, people start to forget that the very terms of their imagination and fantasies are often corralled by corporate interests, conservative religious institutions, and patriarchal and white

supremacy. This volume asks, at its core, what does it mean when the boundaries of what we *imagine* are already contained by the forces of capitalism and social conservatism?

As a case in point, consider that the line between accepted expressions of sexuality and the overtly pornographic has become so thin that the potential for the “pornification” of everything appears constantly in American culture. This creates a host of somewhat strange consequences and ironies: those in pornography tout their work as “sexual liberation” (for example, Katie Morgan on HBO); people increasingly adopt their fantasies and behaviors from pornography, often uncritically (leading, for example, to dramatic increases in engaging in anal sex without enthusiastic consent and pleasure); the far Right and certain segments of radical feminism argue together for caution and find themselves on the same side (though both often wholly disavow the alliance!); the very modes used to resist often become appropriated as ways to disempower women (for example, conflicts about SlutWalk); (neo)liberal feminists, sex positives, and corporations bed down together to fight against the far Right and radical feminists; young people know less and less about equitable intimate relationships and more and more about pornography’s sexual techniques, often with dramatic power imbalances between the “desirous” boys and the “passive” girls; all while social policies around sexuality continue to frame the debates entirely outside of pornography or even *sexual desire* (for example, public health, birth control, “legitimate” rape, the reversal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, and so on). Ultimately, even though no one effectively *controls* sexuality as a commodity, there is nevertheless a constant attempt to do so along with a constant disavowal of doing that very thing. Much like the Budweiser billboard that tells drivers to never drive drunk, or the Philip Morris advertisement that offers “support” to those who want to quit smoking, Americans love to both *create the desire for something* and then *disavow that they have done so*. We create the context for the very thing we later rebuke, a cycle that can lead to something much more dangerous.

Pleasures, paradoxes, pivots

The chapters in this volume took inspiration from a conference of the same title held at Arizona State University in the Fall of 2011 where presenters were challenged to examine anxious and even angry cultural responses to sexual practices, including representations of sexuality, that have been understood as deviant and treated with corresponding shock and disgust. The response—embodied in the range of presenters,

topics, and perspectives—introduced an overwhelming amount of sophistication, range, and breadth to a topic most often attached only to a small range of topics: adolescent teenage girls, unprotected gay sex, and political scandals. Instead of staying with these familiar topics, panelists and keynotes queried the deeper and more sinister implications of widespread revulsion prompted by such objectively natural parts of human physiology as body hair and menstruation. They explored the links between readings and misreadings of literary texts that have as their goal the containment of female sexuality. They examined the psychological damage done to young girls forced to confront a hypersexualization produced by a media only too aware of its audiences' demands for salacious material objectifying the female body. They questioned the exclusion of all but able-bodied straight young women and men from the open enjoyment of sexuality. They turned an unflinching gaze on an age-old myth of vaginal terror and forced it to be responsible for its vicious reproduction of destructive cultural practice.

The significance of this volume, which is not the published proceedings of a conference but rather the invited and revised pieces of a select number of conference attendees, can be summed up in an anecdote, a bit of history about the "Sexualities in Research and Practice" group who conceived of and hosted the conference, and who now present this volume as a published book. Ironically, the planning and implementation of a conference on moral panics created its own local panic. One week before the event, a group of allegedly scantily clad young women were reported to have been seen (by a staff member of a politician) promoting the conference at a busy traffic intersection near Arizona State University by using their bodies and screaming slogans such as "would you like to learn about masturbation?" Immediate moral panic ensued, the staff member notified the conservative anti-university legislator who then called the president of the university, and we received the troubling news that state funds, upon which our conference depended, were being pulled. All of this resulted from the unholy combination of a few unsubstantiated rumors about breasts and masturbation on a street corner and the prospect of open scholarly discussion about the dangers of hysteria about sex. In the end, photographs proved that the young women—and young man, who was conspicuously absent from the narrative—were fully dressed and taking part in a project about menstrual activism (the man even had tampons stuck up his nose!). In short, they had no official connection to the conference, and their alleged promotion of masturbation had actually targeted *menstruation* rather than *masturbation*—a slip that carried lofty consequences. (That said, even if

they *had been* promoting masturbation—something we certainly would approve of—it still reveals how moral panics erupt and erase certain stories about sexuality and the body.) Simply daring to engage in the relatively tame scholarly exercise of hosting an academic conference to talk about the destructive manner in which people both willfully and unknowingly stigmatize human sexuality made us, and these earnest young people, vulnerable to attack (see Chapter 4). For a moment, our scholarly legitimacy was questioned, and the very healthy sexuality that the students on the streets promoted was perverted, in the true sense of



Figure 1.1 “Menstrual Sex Activism”: A group of Arizona State University students protest shame and secrecy about menstrual sex

that word, and used against them, with their very bodies serving as the site for contestation.

The moral panics of sexuality infect public and private spaces, universities and corporations, the news media and kitchen table conversation. Even in the short span of writing this volume, we witnessed in November 2012 yet another moral panic about sexuality research enacted upon one of our students at Arizona State University, as university officials declared her scholarly work—an Institutional Review Board approved ethnographic study on heterosexual women's coercive experiences of anal sex—inappropriate and indecent. After being confronted by a team of white male administrators, she heard at the 11th hour that her student poster was pulled from a university scholarship event for fear that it would "lose the university money." An administrative assistant who printed the poster had panicked, which started a spiral of panics that eventually resulted in censorship of "indecent research." Such decisions, made by development officers at the university and couched as "marketing decisions," speak to the continual infringements on academic freedom that scholars and students face, not to mention the frank unwillingness people have toward dealing directly with the contemporary challenges of sexuality today, particularly when the bodies of women, sexual minorities, and people of color are at stake. In a world where even the possibility of open conversations about "scary sex" can provoke such reactions, a book about the moral panics of sexuality cannot arrive too soon.

We thus take aim in this collection with chapters that champion radical perspectives about American sexual politics, focusing on a range of subjects and access points to allow a broad exploration of how moral panics circulate in public and private discourse, on a local and global scale. We interrogate moral panics that occur in the minutiae of everyday life (television viewing, menstruation, sex during cancer), as well as in larger stories that reflect deep-seated cultural values and histories (vagina dentata stories, postcolonial travel writing narratives, and radical critiques of masturbation). The book asks: How do we grapple with the unique contemporary and historical aspects of the moral panics of sexuality, both locally and globally? Why do moral panics matter, and what can we do to counter these panics? What resistances—artistic, political, cultural, and social—can we imagine, both on campus, at home, and in our larger communities? How do people frame their sexual subjectivities in light of the moral panics of sexuality (seeing themselves as "excessive" or "troublesome" or "different," for example)? Also, how do seemingly *nonsexual* events become absorbed into the emotional

outrage surrounding moral panics? In an age where right-wing politicians understand hurricanes as a divine reaction to moral offenses (Corley 2008) and blame 9/11 on pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians, and the ACLU (Falwell 2001) such questions have particular relevance.

We want these chapters to speak to both the core of “mainstream” sexuality as well as to the fringe, to those firmly self-identified as “righteous” and “moral” along with those deemed “rowdy” and “deviant.” Instead of quarantining concerns about children’s sexuality as a panic, we take a more sweeping, multi-dimensional look at the moral panics of sexuality, entering many previously uncharted territories and inviting new perspectives on a topic that carries great relevance in these socially and politically tumultuous times. *The Moral Panics of Sexuality* takes many stances that themselves produce panic: feminist, postcolonial, antiracist at its core, the volume unpacks this subject beyond the “usual suspects” that incite moral panics, instead constructing a web of topics that reveals how the moral panics of sexuality inform sexual subjectivities across the political spectrum. As a collection in which each chapter wields a mixture of thoughtfulness and political force, as a volume featuring sites of fascination, disgust, and abjection, it invites you to contemplate these complexities and charge forth into these ever-evolving portraits of “scary sex.”

Chapter organization

In the Torah, the Hebrew “to know,” often used in a sexual context, is not about facts, but about connections. Knowledge, not as accumulation but as charge and discharge—A flow of energy from one site to another. Instead of a hoard of certainties, bug collected, to make me feel secure, I can give up taxonomy and invite myself to the dance: the patterns, rhythms, multiplicities, paradoxes, shifts, currents, cross-currents, irregularities, irrationalities, geniuses, joints, pivots, worked over time, and through time, to find the lines of thought that still transmit. Jeanette Winterson (1998), “Gut Symmetries”

The Moral Panics of Sexuality approaches sexuality as site of knowledge, where knowledge is figured not as a collection of facts but rather as a mode of charging a diverse set of practices, affects, ideologies, materialities, and institutions that circulate through complex networks of race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies. The chapters here track the patterns and paradoxes that emerge as energy is released and transmitted

during (and in the wake of) the moral panics of sexuality. In order to foreground this particular formulation of sexuality-as-knowledge, we have chosen to organize the book thematically, rather than chronologically, geographically, or disciplinarily. This thematic orientation invites readers to look at some of the most highly charged critical, aesthetic, political, and pedagogical connections that form and are formed by the moral panics of sexuality in a sustained and interdisciplinary way. Through the juxtaposition of different (inter)disciplinary perspectives, the following five parts offer readers the opportunity to move as moral panics do, by leaping across uncomfortable gaps and moving through all-too-familiar sites suddenly made strange.

After analyzing some of the historical and contemporary shifts in the moral panics of sexuality in the introduction, the collection shifts its focus to four highly charged nodes in the tangled network that constitutes and is constituted by the moral panics of sexuality—female desire, creating norms, colonialism, and state power. We begin with Part I: Female Desire, which centers on literary and pop cultural representations of panic-inducing, active female desire, and it commences with Michelle Ashley Gohr’s “Do I Have Something in My Teeth? Vagina Dentata and its Manifestations Within Popular Culture,” a piece that asks readers to look more closely at science fiction films, video games, and even a multinational corporation’s logo for traces of the centuries-old vagina dentata myth (that is, the vagina with teeth that devours the phallus). Gohr presents contemporary manifestations of this enduring anatomy, arguing that it is still a ubiquitous element of contemporary popular culture in the U.S., in order to read the myth as a powerful warning against female sexuality. We then turn to Ellen J. Stockstill’s “Vampires, Border Crossing, and Panic in Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*.” In a reading of the 1871 novel, Stockstill argues that the titular female vampire frightens her victims because, as an aggressive, phallic, beautiful, and seductive creature, she does not abide by nineteenth century patriarchal notions of acceptable femininity. Stockstill goes on to suggest that moral panics around sexuality are still embodied in the vampire, even though we are 140 years removed from Le Fanu’s influential text.

Next, we turn to the ways in which we can learn to incorporate, challenge, and engage sexual ideologies in the U.S. today. Part II: Creating Norms presents education as a space for producing, preventing, undermining, and radically resisting the moral panics of sexuality. The three chapters in this section investigate the ways in which people engage panic and explore how people physically and affectively embody panics. Part II begins with Sara McClelland and L.E. Hunter’s “Bodies That

Are Always out of Line: A Closer Look at ‘Age Appropriate Sexuality,’” who use a study of women who are living with metastatic breast cancer to discover how early exposure to messages about “appropriate” sexual norms travel with women late into life. Looking at political campaigns, sex education, and research settings, they deconstruct notions of “excess” and “appropriateness” to interrogate the moral panics that ensue from such phrases. In “Raising Bloody Hell: Inciting Menstrual Panics through Campus and Community Activism,” Breanne Fahs presents the feminist university classroom as an important battleground in the fight for embodied justice. Beginning with a menstrual activism assignment performed at Arizona State University, Fahs makes a case for the utility of menstrual activism as an undergraduate consciousness-raising exercise, while also exploring the ways that public challenges to the silence and secrecy surrounding menstruation can incite unique and intense panics among conservatives and liberals alike. Finally, Sarah Prior’s “Scary Sex: The Moral Discourse of *Glee*” looks at how the popular television show *Glee* both challenges and reinforces dominant representations of adolescent sexuality as seen in abstinence-only sex education and in the public panics about teen sex. Read together, these texts raise important questions: How do we learn and unlearn “appropriate” forms of embodying sexuality? How do secondary and post-secondary education and popular cultural representations of sex education reinforce and resist one another? How does what we learn, and how we embody those teachings, change or endure over a lifetime, particularly in how we choose to engage and disengage with panicky sexualities?

In Part III: Colonial Erotics we look at how sex and colonialism are intertwined to secure the efficacy of colonial projects. Examining nineteenth century travel writing by Herman Melville and Charles Warren Stoddard as a characteristic form of imperial discourse, Ayaan Agane’s “Eating it Out: Human Consumption and Sexual Deviance in Nineteenth Century Travel Writing” draws our attention to the repeated conflation of homosexuality with cannibalism in these texts. As in most travel writing of primitive locations, these accounts of idyllic, virginal islands showcase the unlimited sensuality of the natives while portraying the Other as an object of male sexual fantasy. Agane argues that as desire for sexual experimentation shifts to fear of its realization, homosexuality transmutes into fears of cannibalism. The eating of human flesh serves as a more obvious cause for fear and obscures the erotic anxieties experienced by the narrators. Situated within the discursive emergence of sexual minority rights as a measure

of democracy, Rachael Byrne's "Cyber Pinkwashing: Gay Rights Under Occupation" investigates how the rhetoric of gay rights (as a signifier of human rights in Occupied Palestine) is used to obscure human right violations and legitimize military and colonial violence. Focusing her analysis on the Canada-based website "israelissogay.com," Byrne identifies three ways that "pinkwashing" operates: by using racialized tropes to align Israel with the global North and against other Middle Eastern countries; by deploying Israeli, Jewish, and sexual exceptionalisms through homonormativity and homonationalism; and by claiming multiculturalism and diversity as a route to the regulatory mechanisms of Foucault's biopower.

In Part IV: Tactical Panics we look at how state institutions strategically produce and/or benefit from a moral panic about sexuality. Within the contexts explored in these chapters, sex is used as a reagent or material for attracting and intensifying change that actually begins elsewhere or that is not predominantly sexual. Moral panics in these instances become tactics in a battle that is not, at its core, really (just) about sex. This is, of course, not a new practice, as Sarah Stage demonstrates in "What 'Good' Girls Do: Katharine Bement Davis and the Moral Panic of the First U.S. Sexual Survey." In 1927 Katharine Bement Davis was fired from her position at the helm of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s Bureau of Social Hygiene after ten years of service, largely because of her lead role in the first scientific survey of women's sexuality. In this chapter, Stage argues that the history surrounding the publication of Davis's survey provides a window through which to examine not only sexual practices in the 1920s, but also the attempts to replace women of Davis's generation who had achieved prominence during the Progressive era with a newly masculinized group of "scientific professionals." With "Gay Republican in the American Culture War: Wisconsin Congressman Steve Gunderson, 1989–1996," Jordan O'Connell uses previously unemployed academic sources to craft a biographical narrative that articulates the political implications of the moral panic that preempted Wisconsin Representative Steve Gunderson's departure from the U.S. House of Representatives in the 1990s. O'Connell argues that in the wake of highly public claims that Gunderson was a closeted homosexual, the Congressman temporarily leveraged his frightening new public identity for his own professional gain. His identity became a measure of difference that allowed him to carve a niche as a Republican Party outsider and strategy critic in an increasingly hardline Republican Congress. He eventually adopted a persona of political independence from the agenda of his Party

leadership, packaging himself as an unpredictable Republican who supported both the Contras and the arts.

The book ends with a section that uses three practices that incite the moral panics of sexuality—sex surrogacy and disability, menstrual suppression, and bareback pornography—as tools for critiquing (neo)liberal sexual rhetoric. Part V: Critical Panics, like the previous part, shows the moral panics of sexuality doing tactical work. This time, however, the tactical work performs a *radical left critique* instead of an innovative maneuver in the operations of state (read: masculine and white) power. In “Time to *Panic!* Disability Justice, Sex Surrogacy, and Sexual Freedom,” Brooke Willock uses a discussion of panic surrounding disabled bodies to critique rhetorics of privacy, autonomy, and health at the core of liberal sexual rights discourse and categories of “human” in the U.S. Bianca Jarvis’s “No to the Flow: Rejecting Feminine Norms and the Reproductive Imperative through Hormonal Menstrual Suppression” examines feminist panics over menstrual suppression in order to make a case for the de-coupling of menstruation from its associations with essential, biologically-based femininity, which would render “womanhood” more accessible to trans and postmenopausal women and those with menstrual disorders. Finally, in Michael McNamara’s “Cumming to Terms: Bareback Pornography, Homonormativity, and Queer Survival in the Time of HIV/AIDS,” the moral panics that erupted within the gay pornography community in response to the rising popularity of bareback (unprotected gay male) pornography become an opportunity to examine how moralizing is used to generate shame and actually inhibit safer-sex efforts. We conclude the volume with Deborah Tolman’s insightful commentary, “Insisting on ‘both/and’: Artifacts of Excavating the Moral Panics of Sexuality,” in which she returns once more to the embodied experiences of adolescent girls to further unsettle the culture of moral panics and the contributions of the volume as a whole.

While this method of grouping the chapters foregrounds a particular way of conceptualizing sexuality as knowledge, there are still many opportunities for tracing lines of thought across parts of the volume. By connecting, for example, analyses of “age-appropriate sexuality” (McClelland) and America’s first sexual survey (Stage) with readings of *vagina dentata* myths (Gohr), and vampire narratives (Stockstill), we notice that the concept of duration plays an important role in the network of “scary sex.” Certain stories about sexuality persist, sometimes hiding in plain sight under the cover of the Starbucks logo, fantasy genres, or the “natural,” while other potentially panic-inducing stories

are more sporadic and are made to disappear rather quickly and completely. By moving across the book's parts we can also appreciate the role that blood, in the forms of menstrual anarchy (Fahs), menstrual suppression (Jarvis), cannibals (Agane), and vampires (Stockstill), plays in creating a powerfully charged moral panic. Alongside "duration" and "blood," a third key term might emerge as we read Willock's, McClelland's, McNamara's and Prior's contributions side-by-side. We see that the prevalent contemporary discourses around normative sexuality are invested in and rely on certain notions of "health." Within these discourses, only healthy, autonomous bodies can have sexual desire. Only certain sexual desires are healthy for young people, gay people, people with cancer, or people with disabilities. "Health" becomes both literal and metaphorical. For example, some consider it unhealthy for high school students to learn about safer-sex practices, and, likewise, some consider it unhealthy for gay men to enjoy representations of unprotected sex. In sum, the chapters in this book are arranged in such a way to suggest a method of moving through the text, though we are cognizant that other methods of progressing through the text may be equally fruitful.

Indeed, the moral panics of sexuality are likely a lasting and never-ending problem, one that will continue to evolve, change, and grow into new, and perhaps more insidious, manifestations over time. The moral panics of sexuality do not necessarily disappear; rather, new panics replace old panics, creating a kind of archeology of panics layered upon one another. We intend for this book to have many possible uses: provoking conversation among those on the left about how to combat and cope with the sex panics created on the right; pushing liberals to imagine more radical dismantling of their current sexual politics and practices; showcasing the sheer force and power of interdisciplinary works that target a contemporary problem as substantial as the *creation* and maintenance of panic; and highlighting the perilous nature of panic as a political and social response. That which blinds, or obscures, or distorts, or distracts from much-needed analysis and critique—in this case, the way the moral panics of sexuality obscures the bigger and perhaps more obvious critiques of gender, race, power, and culture embedded within narratives of sexuality—should be taken seriously.

As a key example, in January 2011, a prominent Arizona senator, Linda Gray, was quoted saying that the tragic Tucson shooting of elected congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was not caused by a lack of gun control, but rather by the pro-choice agenda that "refuses to

respect the culture of life” (Wing 2011). It is here that we see the insidious workings of the moral panics of sexuality, as the bodies of women who choose abortion suddenly become the receptacles not only for a relatively bizarre attribution of violence, but for a *man’s* violence *against* a woman, and even for the moral degeneracy of our world. This volume seeks to directly and radically challenge assertions like these. It outlines the costs of living in a culture that creates moral panics around sexuality while denying its citizens comprehensive sex education, consistent access to birth control, and movement toward sexual freedom and sexual diversity. These chapters recognize how the bodies of women, people of color, fat people, queers, the disabled, and the poor become saddled with the toxic sludge of these trying political times. This book urges an evaluation of how expensive it really is when our discourses of empowerment, resistance, and autonomy are swiftly appropriated and distorted by the forces of cultural and moral panic.

Part of our work in this volume asks us to outline collectively, in some way, the future of the moral panics of sexuality. How do we combat the moral panics of sexuality when no one really floats above the allure of panic and all of its narrow-minded, judgmental, and limiting visions for sexuality? How do we create entry points for progressives to fight back against moral panics when we all face the paradoxes and challenges of constructing a vision for sexuality that is at once expansive, self-conscious, and reflective? Can we imagine, for example, a sexual ethic that prioritizes the fundamental *humanness* of sexuality—the slow, understated, fundamentally caring ways that sex transpires between and among people? Can we work to keep people away from demonization and caricatures (so efficiently concocted in the petri dish of the moral panics of sexuality) that limit the potential of sexuality? Can we envision a sexual politics that sees sexuality as more than something “dirty” or shameful, but rather as expansive, connected, politically-compelling, full of possibility? Such a problem as the moral panics of sexuality, in their complexity and nuance, not to mention their stunning pace and aggression, can only be addressed by a collective.

Notes

1. Though the full ramifications of the fatal shooting of Reeva Steenkamp by Oscar Pistorius are still unknown, this has all of the hallmarks of a diverted moral panic. Rather than beginning discussions about violence against women, the media is busy lamenting the blow to disability sport, to the Olympics, and to professional sports in general. All of this in a country,

South Africa, that sees endemic levels of violence against women. The ugly irony is that across the world the media has instead opted to use highly erotic photos of this swimsuit model's body to sell the news of the tragedy that befell that body. While her violated body lay in the morgue awaiting autopsy, her objectified body was being commodified to sell sex to hundreds of thousands of people.

References

- Ben-Yehuda, Nachman. 1990. *The politics and morality of deviance: Moral panics, drug abuse, deviant science, and reversed stigmatization*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Bonn, Scott A. 2011. "How an elite-engineered moral panic led to the US war on Iraq." *Critical Criminology* 19(3): 227–249.
- Cohen, Stanley. 1973. *Folk devils and moral panics*. St Albans: Paladin.
- Cook, Philip J. and Jens Ludwig. 2000. *Gun violence: The real costs*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Corley, Matt. 2008. "Hagee says Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans because it was 'planning a sinful' 'homosexual rally'." *Think Progress*. <http://thinkprogress.org/politics/2008/04/23/22152/hagee-katrina-mccain/?mobile=nc>.
- deYoung, Mary. 1998. "Another look at moral panics: The case of Satanic day care centers." *Deviant Behavior* 19(3): 257–278.
- Elliott, Sinikka. 2010. "Parents' construction of teen sexuality: Sex panics, contradictory discourses, and social inequality." *Symbolic Interaction* 33(2): 191–212.
- Falwell, Jerry. 2001. Interview by Pat Robertson. *The 700 Club*. <http://www.actupny.org/YELL/falwell.html>.
- Giroux, Henry A. 1996. "Teenage sexuality, body politics, and the pedagogy of display." *The Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* 18(3): 307–331.
- Guarino, Mark. 2012. "Fear the almighty wrath: Five natural disasters 'caused' by gays." *Salon*. http://www.salon.com/2012/10/30/fear_the_almighty_wrath_five_natural_disasters_caused_by_gays/.
- Hedges, Chris. 2003. *War is a force that gives us meaning*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Jones, Marsha and Emma Jones. 1999. *Mass media*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Lewis, Holly. 2012. "Occupy gender: How women and queer people find their voice in mass movements." *Journal of Research on Women and Gender* 5: 111–132.
- Lovsin, Tasha. 2012. *Bitch Please*. <http://www.fuckyoucosmo.com/post/17373853136/bitchplease#.USAImfKynf0>.
- Luker, Kristin. 1997. *Dubious conceptions: The politics of teenage pregnancy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mottl, Tahl L. 1980. "The analysis of 'countermovements'." *Social Problems* 27(5): 620–635.
- Romei, David. 2011. "Beware the zealot." *Kresher Exclusive Report*. <http://www.kresher.com/public/article/beware-the-zealot>.
- Rubin, Gayle. 1984. "Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality." In *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality*, edited by Carol S. Vance. 267–294. London: Pandora.
- Thompson, Kenneth. 1998. *Moral panics*. London: Routledge.

- Ungar, Sheldon. 2005. "Moral panics, the military-industrial complex, and the arms race." *Sociological Quarterly* 31(2): 165–185.
- Von Krafft-Ebing, Richard. 1886. *Psychopathia sexualis*. Stuttgart: Verlag Von Ferdinand Enke.
- Wing, Nick. 2011. "Arizona state senator cites abortion rights as factor in Tucson shooting." *The Huffington Post*, January 25. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/25/linda-gray-roe-v-wade-arizona-shooting_n_813388.html.
- Winterson, Jeanette. 1998. *Gut symmetries*. New York: Vintage.