

Speech

I had envisioned speaking in this forum about my Māori sexual violence prevention research project in the Hokianga, conversations with esteemed kaumātua and practitioners who all too often work for free behind the scenes of their communities to create supportive and safe contexts for their whānau and hapū, and the rangatahi whose sexual lives are often sadly characterised by ongoing colonisation. Along with my masters student Fern Smith, we have identified pornography as a social formation that is a barrier to the sexual learning experiences of rangatahi Māori living in rural areas.

Preliminary facebook conversations about this forum have pulled me into a slightly different direction, although I will weave through relevant strands that speak to some of the broader research findings associated with this study. There were questions raised about whether or not there was representation of sex workers on this panel. This raised an uncomfortable issue for me. How much do I disclose about myself, to whom, and on whose terms. I can't overstate this discomfort, feelings of dread moving through te whare tangata, my premenstrual womb, that branched out expansively to my fingertips and to my toes. This feeling reminds me that my sexual history is no one else's business, but my own.

In being asked directly about whether or not I was a sex worker, in coming to speak on a panel about pornography, I'd like to start my talk, not with my pepeha, speaking about the complex subjectivities that inform my identity as Māori, but within a form of locating myself, and subjectivities, with these earlier caveats in mind. Rest assured, I will come back to my pepeha at the end. I am, first and foremost, a daughter. I am a sister, a niece, a granddaughter, an aunty, and through my partner's whānau, a grandaunty – a nanny, if you will. I am a sexual violence survivor. I grew up in rural poverty out in the sticks in Hokianga, Northland. I also grew up in a wealthy area, in circumstances known in academic terms as 'relative deprivation'. My Pākehā father was a factory worker, and my Māori mother, a mother – as a career and occupation. I am a survivor of the mental healthcare system. I am an academic. I am a postgraduate student supervisor. I am an undergraduate student lecturer. I am a colleague. I am a scholar activist.

Sometimes, my life can be one of extremes. As you can imagine, the various and differently inflected psychosocial fields that have crisscrossed my life at different ages, stages, and across vastly different contexts, have proven difficult to navigate at times. They do however, lend themselves to relating well, and empathising, with others. Make no assumptions though – I am nobody's victim or fool, and I love my life.

With some more direct relevance to the question about whether or not I was a sex worker, I'd like to share a story about one of the highlights of my career, giving a presentation to a symposium on pornography led by Nicola Gavey, who also went out of her way to work with me on crafting a presentation I felt comfortable speaking about, in my own skin. In it, I spoke about working as a stripper, and analysing these youthful memories from my vantage point as a feminist scholar. I also discussed memories of relationship violence, and the ways in which these were shaped and informed by racism, sexism, colonialism – but also the psychosocial fields informed by being a woman confident in their sexuality, and being a stripper. This was important to open up the dialogue and space for thinking about how young Māori women may carve out agentic pathways in social contexts that limit and foreclose some possibilities over others; how a young Māori woman might find her own way of reclaiming her sexual agency after an early teen experience of rape. Of course, however, the social landscape for young people becoming sexual beings has vastly changed, and I have been interviewing rangatahi Māori about what it is like becoming sexual beings in this new era of new technologies, social media flirting, hooking up, and the normalisation of pornography.

As an academic, engaged in that work, some might ask, why would a young Māori woman sexuality academic, marginalised in the context of the academy, make detailed disclosures of this kind? Here, it is important to mention that this disclosure served a broader purpose beyond my own self-aggrandisement or self-sabotage, depending on your perspective. The intent was to open up the academic conversation beyond a binarised dialogue about porn's potential to harm, or porn's potential to achieve permissive sexual bliss for us all. As someone who has spent most of their life trying to heal from the impacts of sexual violence, I was also quite personally invested in the idea that something could open up a space for sexual bliss, healing, and respectful relationships.

What was quite clear, through the analysis of my own experience, was how powerful the vectors of oppression can be, in informing the dehumanisation of sex workers particularly during a time of criminalisation, of Māori women in colonial spaces, and of victims of sexual violence, or even colonial violence, speaking about the nature of their experiences and how that has psychologically impacted them. Understanding the social contexts that young Māori women and men are navigating in becoming sexual beings, where they may be in contexts of poverty, cultural marginalisation, and are subject to diminishing perspectives about who they are as men and women from colonial systems – is important background information to understand how the use, interpretations, and meanings of pornography might be derived.

Sadly, in my current research, many of the young women I have been speaking to have been victims of sexual violence. This can't be discounted in understanding the social and personal contexts in which pornography may be understood, and derived. Where even speaking about some of the harms of pornography and the predominance of representations that undermine the treatment of women, can be met with righteous indignation. Much like in talk about sexual violence, talk that seeks to raise these questions, can often be dismissed as an over-reaction. Much like the healing pathway that speaking on a panel about my experiences of sexual violence offered – the opportunity to speak within a network of supportive people who are concerned about the impacts and effects of pornography is also very important.

I can't say that I am persuaded by the argument that porn can be a pathway to sexual wellbeing. More often than not, porn depicts women enjoying sexual acts eroticised *because* they hurt and humiliate. In my research, young Māori women tell me that their partners have forced them to watch porn. Key stakeholders working in the community tell me they have met children who have sexually abused their younger relatives in scenarios where they have just been acting out what they have seen, after accidentally coming across pornography on an open browser of one of their parent's phones. Some of the young men and women told me they liked porn, but *all* have told me that they have come across content that has disturbed them. Some of the young men and women told me they thought porn was bad, but seemed to be replicating what they expected an elder in authority might like to hear – an outcome that equally concerns me, because I wonder whether they will have the tools to critically engage with pornography and its influence on the people around them, and how they might be unknowingly impelled to replicate that.

By and large, many of the sexually active young women I spoke to told me their first sexual experience was with a friend, who they weren't into, and who they wouldn't have chosen to have sex with, but they were drunk, and they aren't sure how it happened. I'm not saying that pornography directly creates that – but we are living in a context where the dominant forms of visual sexual material do not support the sexual autonomy, agency, and self-determination of women, and girls – beyond a particular kind of gender performance where women represent an artifice, or an orifice, for men's sexual pleasure.

What are the impacts of pornography on the relationships of people who are becoming sexual beings? Among those who have come from homes where they have observed and watched relationship violence? Where they have been victimised by violence – sexual or physical, already? How might people, who are searching and yearning for connection in their lives, try to find that through the kind of sex that they observe in pornography? What does it mean to be aroused by your own subjugation? What does it mean to become aware that your understanding of yourself as a sexual being has been formed upon your arousal to your own subjugation? Your own participation in the denial of your dignity? Or the reversal of this – your eroticisation of the denial of another's dignity and agency? These questions come back to what do we consider intimacy in its most broadest sense? Emotional, psychological, physical – and what does that mean for how we enter into relationships with one another.

I would like to end my talk with a brief note about Māori understandings of sexuality and wellbeing. Where marae often feature carvings of ancestors depicted with erect penises and vulvas embellished with babies. Where these displays of sexuality are seen to be conceptually and visually representative of vitality of the next generation. Where the principal cultural process of engagement, a pōwhiri, is visually and conceptually representative of sexual consent, coital heterosexual, and reproductive conception. On that note, I would like to invite you to reflect on how you are supporting the vitality and sexual wellbeing of the next generation, in your work.

Ko Ngatokimatawhaorua te waka

Ko Hokianga Whakapau Karakia te awa

Ko oku maunga karangaranga ko Rakautapu me Whiria

Ko Ngāpuhi me Te Rarawa nga iwi

Ko Ngati Korokoro, Ngati Wharara, Te Pouka, me Ngāi Tūpoto nga hapū

Ko Maraeroa me Ngahuia nga marae

Nō Motukaraka me Pakanae ahau

Ko Jade Sophia Le Grice toku ingoa.