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**Education in Disguise: Sanctioning Sexuality in
Elementary School Halloween Celebrations
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Given the pervasive silence that surrounds sexuality in elementary schools, Halloween provides a rare opportunity to explore its tangible manifestations. Schools sanction overt displays of sexuality and transgressions of certain school norms on this day. A time of celebration, it is perceived as a festive event for children, innocent and fun. Yet, because Halloween is the one school day where sexuality is on display, sexuality literally becomes a spectacle. Halloween serves as a magnifying glass to examine the operation of sexuality in the institution of elementary schools, illuminating a nexus of attendant relationships—social, economic, political, and cultural. These relationships lie buried beneath the veneer of fun and play that is popularly imagined as integral to the holiday. Drawing from ethnographic data collected over the 2010-2011 school year, I explore how processes of citizen creation through schooling are abetted by the U.S. consumer market, which strategically targets children, and girls in particular. This paper examines the ways in which elementary school Halloween celebrations bring to light the significance of sexuality in a culture that creates and exploits children's desires.

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Introduction

In elementary schools, sexuality is largely silenced and erased. Contrary to the belief that the absence of sexuality in elementary schools corresponds to a “natural” asexuality for children, silence is structured, as Weis and Fine (1993) have put it.¹ Framed this way, the ostensible absence of sexuality from elementary schools is an intended result of practices and policies and not an accidental bi-product of aggregate choices of individuals. Sexuality that is on display during elementary school Halloween celebrations stands in stark contrast to the silence that more commonly shrouds it in this institutional space. Given the pervasive silence that surrounds sexuality in elementary schools, Halloween provides a rare opportunity to explore its tangible manifestations. Schools sanction overt displays of sexuality and transgressions of certain school norms on this day. A time of celebration, it is perceived as a festive event for children, innocent and fun. Yet, because Halloween is the one school day where sexuality is on display, it literally becomes a spectacle, or the “thing” to be noticed. Halloween serves as a magnifying glass to examine the operation of sexuality in the institution of elementary schools.

Examining Halloween celebrations in elementary schools brings to light a nexus of social, economic, political, and cultural relationships. On Halloween, these relationships lie buried beneath the veneer of fun and play that is popularly imagined as integral to the holiday. In this article, I pay particular attention to the ways in which socialization of children through schooling is abetted by the U.S. consumer market, which strategically targets children (Kapur

¹ In my dissertation, I demonstrate how sexuality in elementary schools is both silenced and erased. These are related but distinct operations that function together to drive sexuality from school grounds. Silencing and erasure are integral parts of the organization of sexuality in elementary schools. Thus, contrary to what many might think, sexuality exists in these children’s spaces, but it is highly regulated.

2005, Linn 2004, Levin & Kilbourne 2009, Olfman 2005). The position of children as subjects of these distinct yet mutually informing projects demonstrates that they have an absolutely significant role in reproducing the desires of the nation. This article, with its focus on a single day, appears to be a “day in the life” story as I zoom in on the Halloween festivities celebrated at Unity Elementary, a school comprised of majority low-income immigrant students. However, the intention is simultaneously to present a “life in a day” by showing how macro social, political, and economic factors are manifested in specific place and time.

One purpose of this paper is to examine how Halloween as it is celebrated in an elementary school illuminates the entanglements and articulations of sexuality, gender, race, and class in a socio-economic system that creates and exploits children’s desires. Focusing on four discrete but related moments during Halloween that took place at Unity Elementary School², located in a low-income neighborhood in the eastern San Francisco Bay Area, I explore the ways in which these articulations interplay with the forces of consumer culture that are increasingly targeted at children (Kapur 2005, Levin & Kilbourne 2009, Linn 2004, Olfman 2005), and girls in particular (Driscoll 2002, Harris 2004, Walkerdine 1998). Capitalizing on existing gender constructs, products sold to children produce and reproduce ideals of femininity and masculinity. These constructions depend upon the sexualization of bodies, which is most poignant in representations of girls’ bodies (Levin & Kilbourne 2009, Olfman 2005, Opplinger 2008, Reist 2010).³

I seize on a break from the normal school day activities to attend to the tensions that arise on Halloween with regard to sexuality. Because of the school’s intense emphasis on academics,

² The names of the school and the people who appear in this paper are pseudonyms.

³ While consumer forces affect both girls and boys, I focus on girls because the economic-social system has historically capitalized on the commodification of women’s bodies. I do not mean to assert, however, that men’s bodies are never sexualized. It has been well documented and argued that men’s bodies, and especially those of men of color, queer, and othered men, have been and are currently subject to sexual exploitation and commodification. Nevertheless, in a male-supremacist society, girls’ and women’s bodies are more frequently and more overtly objectified for the purposes of social control and economic advantage.

this holiday stood in contrast to the other days. Once lunchtime hit and the costumes came out, all academic activities came to a halt. To capture a sense of the dynamic complexities of this holiday, in this paper I present specific aspects of Halloween as they manifested in the school. The first section is the story of Kati and her “risqué” Halloween costume that led to my interest in exploring expressions of sexuality during Halloween. In the second section, I show that the consumer culture that buoys Halloween celebrations is a major acculturating force in elementary schools. Building on this second point, the third section is devoted to examining how gender is, for girls in particular, co-constructed with sexuality. Finally, I present the teachers’ interpretations to show how sexuality is also constructed through conceptions of race, culture, and class. These interpretations of sexuality are bound up in consumerism, which manufactures desire, especially, those desires of the acculturating immigrant students that populate Unity Elementary School. Moreover, I demonstrate that the consumer market is inextricably linked to expressions of fantasy and desire and illuminates sexuality’s relationship with capitalism. This paper shows that schools continue to be important sites for learning social norms and behaviors, and that knowledge formation is facilitated through aspects of school life that are not readily or easily recognized.

Locating the Study in Scholarship

This study sutures together two main bodies of literature: historical and critical analyses of Halloween and scholarship on girls and consumer culture. Interestingly, while Halloween has garnered much media attention, made it into Thorne’s (1993) ethnographic account of elementary level schooling, been analyzed for its impact on gender (Belk 1990, Levinson et. al. 1992, Nelson 2000, Thorne 1993) and its influence on sexuality (Rogers 2003), no published

scholarly work has specifically focused on sexuality in elementary school Halloween events, nor how analyzing Halloween specifically may deepen our understanding of school-assisted processes of assimilation. For this reason, it is necessary to stitch together available literature across disciplines and theoretical perspectives to create a foundation for this particular study. That is, I aim for a more robust understanding of the role of elementary schools in propagating consumer culture through Halloween.

Socio-historical studies on Halloween and holidays provide necessary background for contextualizing this study (Rogers 2003, Skal 2003). Within this field of work, there has been some, albeit little, attention paid to analysis of the holiday as consumer ritual (Belk 1990, Schmidt 1997, Rogers 2003). Rosenbloom's (2006) newspaper articles on gendered and sexualized costumes is representative of the kind of short descriptive mainstream pieces that link Halloween to these constructs, while Nelson's (2000) "The Pink Dragon is Female" examines Halloween costumes for children and their potential contribution to gender stereotyping. To my knowledge, hers is the only scholarly article that specifically explores the relationship between gender and Halloween, and none takes up its relationship to sexuality. Her study classifies 469 costumes into the following categories: feminine, masculine, and gender-neutral. She finds that only 41 of the costumes fall into the gender-neutral category with 195 masculine costumes and 233 feminine ones.

In 1998, Walkerdine wrote, "There is so little research and writing on the subject of young, pre-teen girls and popular culture" (2). Since then, there has been growth in literature about the consumer market and its targeting of children (Kapur 2005, Linn 2004, Olfman 2005, 2008) and girls in particular (Driscoll 2002, Harris 2004, Mitchell & Reid-Walsh 2008, Opplinger 2008, Reist 2010, Spade & Valentine 2008). Much of this literature falls under an

alarmist approach to comprehending the phenomenon of the loss of childhood in modernity.

Such analyses can be found in Olfman's anthologies *Childhood Lost* (2005) and *The Sexualization of Childhood* (2008), Levin and Kilbourne's *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids* (2009), and Opplinger's *Girls Gone Skank: The Sexualization of Girls in American Culture* (2008). These works describe a consumer market that aggressively targets girls and makes them into sexual subjects who are almost sure to meet a tragic fate. For example, Olfman (2009) writes in her introduction:

When I witness a little girl who is sexualized, her playful, curious nature is palpable just beneath the surface. But when a girl or boy is not rescued from these soul-destroying scripts, in 15 years they may become, either a young woman with damaged self-esteem and an eating disorder or a young man who cannot experience sexual pleasure with a woman whose body has not been surgically altered to reflect the pornographic images that he has been compulsively downloading since he was 10 years old. (3)

Olfman's language reflects her sense of urgency in this matter as well as her objective to convince readers that there is a world of horror waiting for young people if we continue down this path of sexualization.

Other literature, such as *Daddy's Girl* (Walkerdine 1998), *Seven Going on Seventeen* (Mitchell & Walsh 2008), and *Coining for Capital* (Kapur 2005), analyze the sexualization of girls with the objective of contributing to the academic field of gender and sexuality studies. Such studies do not necessarily identify an outcome; they represent the sphere of sexuality as one that is simultaneously imposed from the outside onto an innocent soul and inhabited from the inside. That is, sexual subjectivity is not simply a passive subjection, but also the work of an active subject-in-the-making (O'Connell Davidson 2005, Walkerdine 1998).

I draw on both the aforementioned perspectives and begin from the theoretical conception of girlhood as a socially constructed, fluid, and temporally situated category. These studies also, to varying degrees, identify the consumer market as a product of capitalism, a system that is governed through the logics of patriarchy or male domination. Together, the theoretical pieces

present the ways in which consumerist desires for costumes and candy mix with the commercialization of sexuality and gender in childhood as Halloween “migrates off the streets and into the malls” (Schmidt 1997, 303). Adding to this discussion, I demonstrate how consumerism also informs race and sexuality in processes of acculturation as manifested in schools.

Methodology and Setting

This paper draws on dissertation field research conducted during the 2010-11 school year at Unity Elementary. Situated toward the eastern side of a sprawling urban San Francisco Bay Area city, the school’s reputation for good, dedicated faculty made it a shining star surrounded by chain-link fences and barking pitbulls pacing their perimeters. That year, the school’s approximately 460 K-5 students were made up of 94 percent first- and second-generation immigrant students from Mexico and Central America. 83 percent of the students were designated English Language Learners (ELL). Close to 90 percent of the students received free or reduced price lunch. On average, I spent three full school days per week on the campus with the majority of the time in Ms. Lee’s fourth grade class. Participant observation furnishes an appropriate method to understand present day social relationships that are organized within social structures.

On Halloween, I was with Ms. Lee’s class, as usual. However, during the actual parade I separated from them to observe the entire K-5 school as they walked around the block and back into the school for the Halloween rally. I did not dress up in full costume, but I wore a witch’s hat that came with an orange wig that I had bought at a chain drug store nearby my house. I spent the day talking to the students and teachers, singing with them, and taking pictures. I had been

looking forward to documenting and observing the Halloween festivities since a teacher had commented on the “sexy” costumes that some of her girl students had chosen the previous year. This roused my attention to the potential of Halloween to shed light on the operation and organization of sexuality in elementary schools. Having been an elementary school teacher for five years, I had participated in various Halloween celebrations. Memories of being a student also inform my interest in and analysis of this subject. During the course of my study, I referred back to events that I had experienced as I examined the political discourse that emerged throughout the time of data collection and writing. I also followed the consumer market in Halloween through documentation and analysis of images from seasonal “pop-up” Halloween specialty stores and Halloween websites. These observations at Unity Elementary School, interviews, and socio-cultural analysis provide the data for this study, and the above-mentioned theoretical fields give support in interpreting Halloween’s impacts beyond the immediate setting of this one elementary school.

The broader dissertation project focuses on the social processes and mechanisms that inhere in schools to construct and organize sexuality. This paper hones in on a single school day – a day that depends upon the rest of the year to manifest in the way that it does – closely analyzing specific moments. This approach allows for the relationships among teachers and students as well as the relationships among social and economic forces – sexuality, acculturation into the United States, and the consumer market – to become more sharply illuminated by magnifying how they play out in interactions, conversations, and embodied practices. In the next section I introduce Kati, whose “risqué” Halloween costume drew the attention of her teacher.

Kati, *that* Kind of Cop

“There were some risqué costumes,” Ms. Lee, a Korean American woman who had been teaching in various capacities for almost a decade, related to me about Unity’s Friday Halloween celebration the following Monday as we perused the pictures she had taken. “Kati had told me that she was going to be a police officer,” Ms. Lee recalled. “But when I saw her on Halloween, she was *that* kind of cop.” I smiled, understanding the reference to the “sexy” sort of cop that I had seen become popular in Halloween costumes over the past few years.

We examined the picture together, commenting on the “break” from the masculine, austere cut of the standard navy blue uniform. With cap perched atop her head, Kati, a nine-year-old girl of Mexican descent, wore a navy blue bikini-type tank top, a matching navy blue pleated miniskirt, and over-the-calf black boots. A longer white undershirt covered her rounded belly from under the bikini top – an addition and not part of the costume package. The pudgy body of a nine-year-old appeared dissonant in these clothes. In the picture, Kati stares away from the gaze of the camera, perhaps watching her schoolmates as she often did. However this time, her face glimmered with bright fuchsia lipstick and silver, shimmery eyeshadow from eyelid to brow.

This image remains clear in my mind. It was uncanny to see a fourth grade girl dressed this way, even on Halloween. It is difficult to put into words exactly what is “not right” about it. The short bikini top, to start, wraps tightly around a to-be-developed chest, announcing the fact that there is nothing look-worthy there – yet. Somehow, the bikini provides a cue for us: it tells us that bikinis are supposed to cover the bare minimum (the breasts), but on a girl it signals that the body has not yet developed the parts that are supposed to fill a bikini. The clothing piece serves as a placeholder, a reminder that in not too much time this body will look differently. The

white tank top underneath the short navy blue bikini further reveals a consciousness of the pre-pubescent body; someone decided that the bikini tank would not be worn on its own and no bare midriff would be shown. The tall boots and miniskirt, a fashion not associated with girls but with women, popularized by go-go dancers of the 60s, appear odd on a girl of nine. Moreover, she is a police officer, a figure usually associated with masculine authority and state power, which contrast starkly with the overt gendered sexualization of her costume.⁴

Kati's costume may be humorous and fun for some as it disturbs others. But either way, it provokes questions about the sexualization of children, and of girls in particular. She is not a unique case – on Halloween, girls across the United States choose what they want “to be” on this day and into the night. When I asked Kati how she had come up with the costume, she told me that she had chosen the costume herself because she thought it was “pretty” and “cool.” She had gone to the store with her mother, and they'd picked it out together. Halloween was fun, she explained to me, because she liked to dress up, have a Halloween party at school, but mostly she liked going trick-or-treating with her cousins because she *really* liked candy.

Kati provides standard reasons for choosing the police uniform costume and for enjoying Halloween. Many, though not all, of the girls in the class chose “pretty” costumes, or at least costumes where they could embellish their faces with make-up, wear lacy tights, put glittery goop in their hair or on their skin, and use hairspray to keep the correlating hairstyle in place. These are Halloween customs in which girls participate throughout the country. Some teachers commented on the “sexy” costumes that many of the girls chose to wear and on the girls' expressed desires toward a hyperfeminine look on Halloween. A couple of the teachers, Ms. Lee and Ms. Alexander, explained the phenomenon through a racial-cultural framework, which I

⁴ I hesitate to call this Kati's representation because it is unclear who chose this costume for Kati, and also, for reasons that I will soon go into, these costumes are marketed and created by commercial businesses. It would be misleading to suggest that the female cop costume is Kati's own choice in representation.

detail later in this article. The teachers understood students' choices as being part of a larger cultural context that influenced decisions on costumes and self-representation. While culture is certainly inextricable from factors that influence children's choices, as I will continue to show, this is only a part of the nexus of influence that informs how and why we make particular choices in our processes of becoming.

Maribel and the Acculturating Forces of Halloween

Like elementary schools in many parts of the U.S., Unity held an annual Halloween parade and celebration. Weeks before October 31, students and teachers were already talking about their plans for the day and evening – what costume they would wear, where and with whom they would go trick-or-treating, the rules their parents set for them on that night, and how much candy they predicted they would acquire. They asked me many times if I would be there that day. I told them that I couldn't wait.

I arrived at Unity just after the lunch hour had begun. In the hall I ran into Ms. Leslie, a white (Jewish) teacher who spoke fluent Spanish, consoling Maribel, a fourth grade student, whose eyes shone wet and red from crying, because she hadn't brought a costume to school that day. The girl's father was there, having come to school to take her home. Ms. Leslie, showing care in her matter-of-fact way, explained the options. "No necesitas un disfráz. Puedes ir al desfile sin disfráz – está bien. O te puedes ir a casa. Es tu decisión." Maribel hugged her father as he stroked her back, and Ms. Leslie continued. "Nos vamos a divertir, pero es tu decisión." (*You don't need a costume. You can go to the parade without a costume – it's ok. Or you can go home. It's your decision. We're going to have fun, but it's your decision.*) The girl nodded, paused, turned to her father and said quietly, "No me quiero quedar." (*I don't want to stay.*) The

father nodded back, turned to Ms. Leslie, thanked her with a smile, and left holding Maribel's hand.

Maribel's response to Halloween, her father's involvement in it, and the dialogue among the three people in the snapshot above show cultural distance that becomes magnified during an event such as Halloween. A time that is supposed to be fun and celebratory exacerbates pressures to belong, and it would be difficult to achieve belonging on Halloween without a costume. But Maribel did not have one, so instead of joining in spite of this, she chooses not to stay at school, and her father agrees to her decision. In fact, many students at Unity did not bring a costume to school that day, and although these students did not leave school, they also did not participate in the festivities with the same exuberance as their costumed counterparts. Those dressed up compared their costumes, discussed who they were and why they'd chosen to be that. They ran and skipped through the parade, while the minority of children not in costumes appeared less enthusiastic, standing at the end of their class lines, showing fewer smiles.

I was not surprised to see many costumeless Unity students on Halloween day.⁵ The school's majority population of recently immigrated families, most of whom come from rural areas of Mexico and Central America, may have been unfamiliar with the customs of the day, they may have opted not to participate, or they may not have had the financial means to do so. Celebrated across the United States, Halloween is a major, if unofficial, North American holiday. Interestingly, there are few signs that Unity celebrates Día de los Muertos, the Mexican and Central American holiday honoring the ancestors who have passed. Unlike other schools in which I have taught and worked, schools with fewer Latino students, there are no *calaveras* or altars honoring the dead or the tradition. Moreover, the school is located on the periphery of a

⁵ There was also a small group of Jehovah's Witness and strict Evangelical Christian families that opted out of the entire school day.

Latino neighborhood that celebrates Día de los Muertos on the streets each year, thus the absence of these cultural celebrations from the school is notable⁶. While Principal Jimenez dressed up as *la muerte*, painting her face white, blackening her eyes, and drawing details to create a representation of a traditional sugar skull, her costume was revealed during the Halloween celebration. Meanwhile, hundreds of costumed Unity students, teachers and parents paraded through the school and around the block, dancing to Michael Jackson's "Thriller," sharing and eating candy. The costumes on display were, aside from Mrs. Jimenez's, distinctively part of the U.S. holiday of Halloween, if for nothing else, because they are mostly ones found in Halloween stores that pop up throughout the country toward the end of summer (Nelson 2000). That Unity itself promotes Halloween as the official holiday to be celebrated over Día de los Muertos implicates everybody more strongly in the broad-reaching U.S. consumer culture that is represented and perpetuated by Halloween celebrations.

The Halloween ritual takes place across the U.S. in the months leading up to Halloween. Beginning as early as July, temporary Halloween stores open up in vacated shops, inviting people in to buy costumes, decorations, candy totes, and candy. This children's holiday is big business. And it has increasingly become a holiday for adults as well⁷. Signs in some Halloween stores read: *Adult only section – No children under the age of 18 allowed*. The consumer market

⁶ Rogers (2003) explains that while contemporary Halloween rituals originate in Christian festivals honoring all souls as early as 650 AD (23), Halloween as the solidly North American holiday and commercial enterprise that we now celebrate did not begin until the 1920s (78). Given the majority Latino new immigrant population at Unity, it is appropriate to briefly provide some background on the relationship between Halloween and Día de los Muertos. Jasper and Turner (1994) write that in the Southwest U.S., the tradition of Día de los Muertos and Halloween are increasingly becoming linked celebrations (134). Halloween, or "All Hallow Even," the evening before All Saints' Day (Nov. 1), is related to Día de los Muertos, or All Souls' Day (Nov. 2). While many distinctions exist between Halloween and Día de los Muertos (see Jasper and Turner 1994), one of the major differences between the northern and southern regions of the Americas is the invocation of religion. Halloween has become a secular celebration in which the spirit world is represented mainly through costumes. On the other hand, Día de los Muertos honors the dead with altars and offerings, trips to familial graves, and memorials. Día de los Muertos is a holiday primarily informed by the living descendants' sense of responsibility to the spirits of their dead (Jasper and Turner 1994, 135), whereas Halloween is a tradition born of "rascality" (Rogers 2003, 78) and revelry (78-90) even if the two holidays share Christian origins.

⁷ Contrary to popular belief, Halloween has not always been a holiday for children. All histories of the festival depict it as an adult tradition (Belk 1990, Rogers 2003, Santino 1994, Skal 2003). Rogers (2003) explains that the trick-or-treating ritual took off in the postwar era and gained momentum in the 1950s (85).

has benefited from the public attention to Halloween. As Rogers demonstrates, representations of Halloween infiltrated the mainstream media with stories and movies that capitalized on the public scares of Halloween where razor blades and poison were found in the candy of trick-or-treaters. Businesses have used the popularity to sell, in great volume, their Halloween goods. Far from the innocent and fun children's holiday that appears to be merely about candy and costumes, contemporary Halloween practices are mired in contradiction. With its consumerist motivations, market imperatives largely drive today's Halloween rituals where commercialism heavily influences the expression of fantasy and creativity that is perceived as a major part of the celebration (Nelson 2000, Rogers 2003). Clearly, the ideal of Halloween as a holiday where children can indulge in creative fantasies and sweets is complicated by greater social and political forces. The conflicts that arise throughout the U.S. regarding schools' rights to celebrate the holiday provide ample examples of Halloween's fraught relationship with schools. Schools serve as places where enduring social, political, and cultural tensions can be closely observed (Spring 1991, Tyack 2003).

The annual festivities at Unity parallel those that happen at schools in many parts of the country. Rogers (2003) suggests that the rise of Halloween as a children's festival is directly related to its major place in schools; he writes, "Halloween parties and parades at school are an important fixture for the fall term, one of the first large festivals that children might experience outside their home environment" (160). And this is true from what I have seen – on no other day in the school year does the entire school organize a trip outside of the school's gates and doors. The elementary school I attended in San Francisco and the schools at which I have worked have all engaged in similar events during Halloween. So close to the beginning of the school year, candy and costume manufacturers display their goods near the Back-to-School sections of major

stores like Target and Walmart. Children have become the target market of this multi-billion dollar industry⁸ (Rogers 2003, 160). In the section that follows, I delve deeper into Halloween as a consumer ritual. However, the point here is that becoming American for these children also seems to mean becoming integrated in this country's consumer culture, and this is (even if unwittingly) facilitated by schools.

The students at Unity, most who come from families who recently immigrated from Mexico and Central America, exuberantly embrace this holiday at school, and the majority of the children go trick-or-treating on Halloween night. The force of school in solidifying what is also a family ritual should not be underestimated. It is difficult to imagine a child who could not resist a day where school work is put aside, tricks are tolerated, the standard dress code is replaced with costumes, make-up is encouraged, and candy is permitted. But as we saw, Maribel chose not to participate, overwhelmed by the fact that she had no costume. While the specific reasons for this were unclear to me, for children like Maribel, those whose parents do not speak English and are unfamiliar with the customs of the U.S., this holiday is one of many instances of acculturation into ritual, and the pressures to participate are great.

At Unity, most of the students wear store-bought costumes from either a Halloween store or the nearby Wal-Mart, illustrating that Halloween is a commercial holiday, like most other U.S. holidays (Schmidt 1997), driven by consumerism – buying things becomes integral to having fun, and consuming gender is part of the entertainment. Sexuality here becomes tied up in the production of femininity. Below, I explain how the “carnavalesque” (Bakhtin 1941) feeling of revelry and a topsy-turvy world that becomes Halloween is manufactured and consumed through sexuality. I do this first by showing how corporations capitalize on children's desires, largely by reproducing gender. Then I show how gender, specifically in the case of girls, is sexualized

⁸ Rogers puts the 2000 product sales for Halloween goods at \$2 billion, up from 1998's \$950 million.

through product marketing. Halloween, then, becomes a major boon for an industry that commodifies sexuality.

Witches, Bumble Bees, Nurses, and (Sexy) Cops: Girls Consuming Culture

When her interaction with Maribel and her father appeared to be over, I greeted Ms. Leslie in her blue checkered, full-skirted dress. She had asked to borrow some red shoes from me since we both wore about a size six.

“Hey Ms. Leslie. I like your dress, but who are you supposed to be?”

“Hello?!” She responded with her typical sarcasm. “Look at my feet.” She did a little shuffle with her feet. White ankle socks poked out from red Mary Janes. Suddenly the light blue and white plaid dress and braids made sense. “Ah, you’re Dorothy,” I declared. As we walked toward the upper grades wing, she told me that the fourth grade teachers had each dressed up as a character from the *Wizard of Oz*. I peeked inside the classrooms where I saw an adult dressed as a witch reading to a rug full of kids in costumes. Parents dotted the perimeters, leaning on desks, or sitting in the short chairs. Ms. Leslie and I walked onto the schoolyard and into the new building that housed the fourth and fifth grades. Excited, the kids clamored in the halls even though the normal rule was that they enter after the bell rings. Ms. Moon and Ms. Sharp, two fifth grade teachers, both Korean American, came out of the classroom in Hershey Kiss costumes made of silver fabric gathered at the neck and flowing out to a hula hoop bottom. The student teacher was also dressed as a Hershey’s Kiss, and together their paper tags read “trick” “or” “treat.”

Once I arrived at Ms. Lee's classroom, she was nowhere to be found. I decided that I should use the time to visit students, but as I was opening the door to leave the classroom, a couple of boys came in. I asked them if Ms. Lee knew that they were there, and one replied, "Yeah, she's downstairs." I went down to Ms. Montely's room to see her. Instead, I found the Tin Man. And in place of Ms. Montely, I found the Cowardly Lion. Ms. Lee and I walked upstairs to her classroom, and I complimented her on her costume – silver spray painted thermal shirt and jeans under a silver box with a big red heart painted on it that she wore over her chest and torso. Later, after Ms. Lee's Tin Man costume went unrecognized by her entire class, I realized that the *Wizard of Oz* was completely unfamiliar to most Unity students. Then, Ms. Lee and I would discuss whether this was a generational or cultural issue. Based on recent experiences working in elementary schools, and the fact that many of my non-immigrant students knew about the *Wizard of Oz*, I concluded that this lack of familiarity represented cultural distance rather than a temporal one.

Ms. Lee told me that she had been so busy running around that she hadn't even had time to eat. She pulled out her lunch just as the bell rang, and we started down the stairs. There were no kids in line when we got there, but Javier was the first to show up. He gave me a big hug when he saw me. It was time for the kids to get into costume. All the boys who had brought costumes were some variation on the angel of death or the Scream character, and all of them wore masks and no make-up as part of the costume. The girls were much more varied, representing a bumblebee, a doctor, a witch covered in spider webs, a wizard, and another witch. The girls applied make-up and black hair dye on each other as I talked to the students about their costumes and Halloween plans. In her usual way, Mayra was in charge of the make-up, and she meticulously and tenderly applied it to the spider web witch's face, reminding me of my own

first adolescent bonding experiences with make-up and girlfriends. By the time Mayra had finished, the witch was embellished with dark black eyebrows, black eyeliner lining her eyes, and reddish-black lipstick covering her lips. “You are really good at doing make-up,” Ms. Lee complimented Mayra.

“I like how she does make-up,” the witch, named Lila, responded. “Hers looks so nice.” Mayra had applied her own make-up in the bathroom. Her chestnut brown hair pulled back into a tight ponytail and thin, straight bangs cut to her eyes, the swirls she had drawn from the edge of her eyes outward to the top of her jaw line and end of eyebrow were exposed. This make-up design complimented her bumblebee costume: a yellow and black striped tank top, a headband adorned with a daisy and two antennae, a black lacy double layer tutu with a yellow ribbon running along the bottom hem, black tights and black Mary Janes. Later she strapped on wings to complete the look. I wondered how often these fourth grade girls had the sanctioned opportunity to put on make-up as a group, especially at school. Halloween, it seemed, offered this chance.

At 1:30 we went out to the parade. Each class lined up behind a sign designating their classrooms. Most of the kids were in costumes, although some were not. Many of the girls had princess costumes or witch costumes. There were a few she-devils. I recalled that Ms. Lee had said that some of the girls’ costumes were very risqué in the past, which repeated this year. One student she-devil with fishnets stood out along with two women on the playground. One was a police officer with a short skirt and a low cut shirt, and the other was a nurse dressed in a black mini skirt with a Red Cross emblem. Later, I will discuss the conversation Ms. Lee and I had about these two women.

The parade left the school grounds and marched halfway around the block, the students a dazzle of colors in mostly store bought costumes. One girl wore a lacy black and purple witch

dress, another was a superhero in a shiny magenta top and skirt with matching sunglasses. I watched the parade go by, noting the pre-gendering of the costume choices. As Nelson's (2000) study showed, if children purchase their costumes from retailers, gender is almost always part of the package. Once all classes were back in line, Mr. Gin, the music teacher, announced that they were going to dance. He and Tammy, the school counselor, asked the group of fifty to one hundred parents with their younger children to back up against the wall. The music began, with Tammy in a red leather Thriller jacket and black Michael Jackson hat. She struck a pose, which the students were supposed to follow. The first attempts at the dance did not go well, but eventually, after two false starts, they performed it to satisfaction. At the end of the group dance when they had individual students dance on the cardboard square, a few students went up to showcase their break dance moves. Then, we went back to the classroom. The day was over, and the students began going home, the teachers preparing themselves for a "Halloween hangover" the following Monday.

At Unity and at schools throughout the U.S., Halloween retains elements of the carnivalesque. School rules are put aside for the sake of fun. The official dress code of dark pants or skirts, no tank tops, no jeans, goes unenforced. On Halloween, girls wear strappy tops, go to the bathroom in groups to get ready, stand outside the classroom without teacher supervision as they apply make-up to one another, and they bring candy to school – eating it with impunity while on most days the no candy rule is strictly enforced. A feeling of disorderliness and misconduct pervades the school day even if the structure of the day has been well organized by the teachers and administration. The school, like other schools across the U.S. and not unlike the Catholic church during Carnival and Mardi Gras, sanctions what Lyotard (1984) called the "slackening" of rules and order on Halloween, an example of Bakhtin's (1941) notion of the

carnavalesque. As on these holidays, the expression of sexuality also becomes more apparent during Halloween, especially for girls, for corporations target their wares at gendered subjects, making Halloween a major marketing opportunity. Costumes for girls are highly sexualized starting from a very young age. The combination of the carnivalesque feeling of Halloween and the strong role of the consumer market results in little girls manifesting a sexuality that seems beyond their years, beyond school rules, but well within the logic of capitalist patriarchy⁹ where women's bodies are sexualized toward the objective of economic profit and social control.

Halloween transformed from a religious holiday to a festival of revelry in the 19th century to a consumer holiday beginning in the 1920s, thus coinciding with the rise of the child as innocent, pure, and in need of adult protection (Kapur 2005, 23; O'Connell Davison 2005). Zelizer (1985) writes that expelling children from the labor pool meant that their monetary worth became tied to transforming them into a consumer market. Children were not yet a target audience of the market (as cited by Kapur 2005). Rather, adults were made to believe that showering children with gifts was an important way of demonstrating affection.

Following World War II and the growth of television, both children and parents became a focus audience for advertising. A 1997 *Business Week* article put children's direct purchasing power at \$20 billion with children under fourteen influencing their parents to spend another \$200 billion (Kerwin & Leonhardt 1997). Clearly, children comprise a huge market for multinational companies.¹⁰ In this sense, they are treated like their adult counterparts, as consumers with purchasing power. While the products advertised to them are not precisely the same as those targeted for adults, as Kapur (2005) points out, many children's products are "straightforward

⁹ See Hartmann (1976) and MacKinnon (1982) for some of the foundational works in socialist feminism where this term was coined.

¹⁰ Children also continue to provide labor for these companies overseas as global capitalism encourages monetary growth by any means necessary, including the exploitation of child labor.

replications of adult products for children with essentially no difference between the two other than packaging” (30). In addition, many of the products aim to “adultify” children. For example, selling cosmetics to girls is one of the most obvious strategies for achieving this. Such products clearly demonstrate that gender is a major force for the market – girls are sold Barbies, Bratz dolls, make-up, and Betty Crocker mini kitchen sets while boys get GI Joes, Transformers, and action figures of all varieties. But for girls, because gender operates through sexuality, overt sexuality is also marketed to them, sexualizing girls through consumerism.¹¹ Halloween brings this relationship to light, as evidenced through Kati’s cop costume.

A heavy navy blue shirt and pants, black combat boots, and black belt – this is the standard uniform for a cop. The police officer is traditionally thought of as a masculine profession, a position of authority that has only recently become more open to women. Kati’s police officer costume for girls is clearly representative of the standard uniform in color; in addition, the identifying badge and cap make it unmistakably a cop uniform. The short tank top and skirt, however, serve as an unobvious giveaway that this costume was made for a female. Remarkably, the feminization of this costume is achieved through overt sexualization by exposing Kati’s body in ways that become legible as sexy, even when placed on a nine-year-old girl’s body. The uncanny juxtaposition of such attire on a girl gave cause for Ms. Lee to comment that Kati was “*that* kind of cop.” Immediately I knew to what “*that* kind of cop” referred.¹²

The sexualization of elementary school age girls is on the rise with the toys and clothes available to girls becoming increasingly “sexy” (Olfman 2009, 68). But what does this mean? Is

¹¹ Boys’ sexuality is also marketed but takes the form of strong and violent characters.

¹² In this statement, Ms. Lee’s “*that*” signifies sexy and symbolizes the social derivation of the signifier. I understood what she meant by “*that*” because we understood the context of our conversation (sexuality as manifested during Halloween) but also because of the ubiquity of sexy cop costumes for women during Halloween.

it enough to describe and assert that Kati's costume sexualizes femininity? That her costume is sexy and objectifying? Clearly, this is subjective terrain, and any interpretation is by definition subjective. It is tautological to continue to characterize these costumes as sexy, yet it is difficult to interpret phenomena from the cultural inside. As Foucault (1990) is persistent in reminding us, sexuality cannot be defined *a priori* to social and political forces; that is, it is created through social practice and is wrapped up in politics. In this way, interpretations of sexiness are also bound up in how a society understands and lives sexuality and in complicated ways: sexy is as sexy is interpreted. Certainly, however, deeming a Halloween costume "sexy" connotes a taboo, or at least its haunting, by U.S. standards. Moreover, are to be sexy and to be sexualized different? Olfman (2009) writes that the sexualization of childhood is a social phenomenon that is done *to* children. She claims that it is "a consequence of cultural values, beliefs, norms, and practices that treat children as if they are sexually mature because of the outward trappings of wardrobe, makeup, or precocious puberty" (2). While an objective reading of Kati's costume is therefore impossible, it reveals the patterns of social formation. For example, Kati's costume was not unique in its exposure of flesh or its adult-like theme. On that Halloween many girls wore fishnets; lacy material; strappy, tight and midriff-revealing tops; and make-up. These encompassed the "risqué" costumes to which Ms. Lee referred in our conversation about Halloween. However, as will be shown later, the sexiness of Kati's costume is attributed, at least in part, to Latino culture.

In 2006, the *New York Times* ran an article entitled, "Good Girls go Bad, for a Day" in the Fashion & Style section. In it, Adie Nelson, author of "The Pink Dragon is Female: Halloween Costumes and Gender Markers" (2000) is quoted as saying that "girls' costumes are designed in ways that create the semblance of a bust where there is none." The temporal

developmental gap demonstrated through the dissonance between Kati’s child body and the clothing she had chosen to don for Halloween is not unique to her. This is not a phenomenon unique to Unity, either. Rather, the Halloween costume she chose, bought, and then put on is only one of millions manufactured for girls’ bodies to exhibit on this day. A trip to any Halloween store will render clear that sexy costumes for girls are abundant among the options. Or, an internet search can provide an ample sampling of the costumes available to children. I chose the following three examples (see Figure 1). These costumes, in different variations, are common and ubiquitous – the police officer, the nurse, and the geisha (sometimes called “Madame Butterfly”).



Figure 1: Girls’ Costumes. Source: partycity.com (retrieved June 8, 2011)

These three costumes represent some that are currently being marketed to girls, and while the “Kimono Cutie” costume comes sized for girls five-years-old and up, all of them fit sizes 8-10, which means that they will fit, on average, a nine-year-old girl. These costumes, however, do not coincide with our image of little girls’ clothing – short skirts and heels are mostly associated with clothing for adults. Moreover, the girl models in these shots hold their bodies in the “unnatural” positions of female adult models. Their hips jut to the side, chests thrust slightly forward with backs arched, one hand on waist or hips. The body, and certain parts in particular,

are accentuated. Like the products themselves that are marketed to children (Kapur 2005, 30), these girls are made up to look like women in miniature. The images are prescient because for every girl costume, an adult counterpart exists. The adult versions may present an elevated sexiness (see Figure 2), but comparing the images is striking.



Figure 2: Women's Costumes. Source: partycity.com (retrieved June 8, 2011)

Observing these images in juxtaposition, the girls' costumes are miniature versions of the sexualized adult costumes. Again, as in the case of Kati, these girls' costumes serve as placeholders for becoming women. But, if the girls' costumes are miniaturized versions, because of how fantasy operates in Halloween, the placeholder is not necessarily about the representation of women that the girls want to inhabit, but also about inhabiting the fantasy of adult women's fantasies. So the girls' desires to become women are also desires to become a fantasized type of woman in addition to the character the costume replicates. Like performers in child beauty pageants, on Halloween many girls "become" sexualized, adultified fantasies of their possible future commercial selves. Yet, the question of choice remains. Are girls, as Mulvey argued in

1975, victims of a capitalist patriarchy whose inescapable male gaze turns them into consumers of themselves as commodities? Or are they exercising an agency not commonly attributed to girls? I turn now to a look at explanations offered by Ms. Alexander and Ms. Lee, whose perspectives align more with those of Mulvey.

Explaining Children's Choices

I visited Ms. Alexander's classroom following the school's Halloween celebration. The students had gone home, the class was cleaned and cleared with lights dim on a late afternoon in the fall. Ms. Alexander, a white teacher in her early 30s from an upper middle-class family, had taken off the defining features of her Scarecrow costume – straw hat and hay that had padded and poked out from her oversized blue denim shirt. We began talking about the costumes, and she remarked that Latino culture gives kids much more exposure to and knowledge about sexuality than she had when she was a child. She said she was ignorant of sexuality. When I asked why she thought that Unity girls chose sexy costumes, she made the point that the costumes are not necessarily their choices because they are store-bought and not about creativity and their imaginations. Ms. Alexander recalled her own upbringing again and went on to explain how her mother always made her costumes, pondering aloud how her mother was able to make all the costumes that they desired. She stated that there is a discrepancy in resources between her family background and those of her students. Here Ms. Alexander draws upon cultural and class difference to analyze why the girls at Unity choose, or as she explains, are given, revealing, sexualized costumes.

From what I could see, no Unity students wore costumes made at home. "It's what's available to them," Ms. Alexander explained about the choices in costumes that Unity students,

and girls in particular, had made for their Halloween costumes. She thoughtfully considered the reasons for the distance that she perceives between her students and herself, explaining that class and culture are key factors that influence expressions of sexuality and gender. Here she reveals a perception of the market in Halloween costumes that caters to a sexualized, hyperfeminine taste found in abundance at local Halloween pop-up stores, Wal-Mart, and other department stores that sell Halloween goods.

In Ms. Alexander's logic, her female students are locked into specific variants of sexual and gender expression because consumer culture makes this available to poor children. These episodes resonate with Walkerdine's (1998) ideas in the sense that Ms. Alexander understands her girl students' choices as being determined by structural class forces. Walkerdine writes about the significance of fantasy and desire in popular culture's representation of girls. After asserting that images of an eroticized "child-woman" (165) are ubiquitous, she follows by refuting Mulvey's claim that the male gaze fixes femininity and thus defines female desire. In Walkerdine's view, female desire is never fixed; it is constantly being constructed. Walkerdine (1998) paraphrases Mulvey's thesis, "There are no fantasies that originate with girls, only those projected on them. All that girls can do then is to hold up for analysis the fictions and fantasies through which they are formed. Patriarchy wins...and there is no escape" (166). Critiquing this argument, she responds to the perception that little girls are – even more so than their adult women counterparts – exploited when they are represented as sexualized child-women, writing, "I have always felt that it has been misunderstood by feminism, which has wanted to blame working-class girls for a femininity which they could not leave behind" (167). The subtle difference for Walkerdine is that the perceived hyper-sexuality of working-class girls needs to be

complicated from the dimensions and dynamics of class. For her, this is an expressive outlet available to them in a world where their choices are limited by structural constraints.

Ms. Alexander's commentary illustrates Walkerdine's (1998) statement, "Class, then, plays a central role in the regulation of femininity, and the production of Otherness" (171). Yet, an analysis of race remains missing, just as it is in Walkerdine's early work. Ms. Alexander draws upon clear differences in her upbringing and that of her students. Her words do not express an explicit moral judgment about right and wrong – she did not overtly assert whether she thought the girls' costumes are good or bad choices. But it is clear that she is uncomfortable with the limits of expression available to low-income girls on Halloween, and she asserts that Latino culture exposes children to sexuality.

I also spoke to Ms. Lee at the end of the day. She asked how my research was going, and I responded that I thought Halloween was really interesting, that I was thinking about writing an entire article on the day. I asked what she thought about the costumes this Halloween, and she told me that some of the costumes on display would not have been tolerated at a middle-class school, that kids would be told that they were inappropriate. We discussed the two women in the cop and medical nurse costumes, and Ms. Lee said that if the principal with whom she had worked at Fairfield Elementary School (a middle-class school about a mile-and-a-half away) had seen them on her campus, she would have told them that they needed to leave the school. She then commented that she is not sure if it is culture or class that makes the kids at the school so "hypergendered." She talked about how on the playground only the boys play soccer, basketball, and volleyball even though the spaces are open to everyone. Ms. Lee concluded, "They [students] bring in what they learn from their homes." She explained that within Latino culture

there is more of a “courting culture,” where girls are more feminized and boys more masculinized at an earlier age, and where early sexualized flirtations are encouraged.

The women in the cop and nurse costumes had arrived together for the Halloween parade that day, and I assume they were the students’ relatives. The nurse carried a toddler dressed up in a lavender and white fairy costume. They walked around taking pictures. It never became clear to me which student(s) they had come to see, but they appeared at ease in the hullabaloo of the festivities, both Latina and looking to be in their late twenties. Their costumes were similar but for a couple of small details. The nurse costume was black with the detail of a white cross inside a red circle hanging from her skirt and stitched into her black medic cap. The uniform itself was a t-shirt and a mini-skirt. She wore nothing to cover her legs, but the high heeled boots she wore rose to a couple of inches below her knee. A plastic silver police badge marked the navy blue cop uniform. A t-shirt and three-tiered mini-skirt clung tightly to the young woman’s body. She wore black stockings under her skirt and also had black high-heeled boots. Both women’s t-shirts revealed their cleavages, demonstrating dissonance with the white, middle-class culture of U.S. elementary schooling (Delpit 2006, Ogbu [1986] 2004), which holds that children should not be exposed to such displays of the body, especially within the bounds of the school (Boas 2012).

The explanations of difference that Ms. Lee and Ms. Alexander draw upon to account for the sexualized and gendered spectacle of Halloween at Unity rely on perceptions of race and class. Race and class, in their analyses, are implicated in a concept of culture. It is Unity’s culture that allows for some girls to remain in their risqué costumes during the school day when, according to Ms. Lee, they would have been sent home had they been at Fairfield Elementary School. This same permissiveness tolerates the adult nurse and police officer costumes at the school instead of telling them that their costumes were inappropriate and to go home. The

question as to whether the difference is class or culture is a telling one, but before getting into what it tells, it is important to first explore the use of “culture” here.

Culture is often used as a proxy for race. In the color-blind era (Bonilla-Silva 2009, Omi & Winant 1994, Wise 2010) race is treated as taboo even if its discourse and practice is alive and well, ensconced in both social institutions and public language. As Bonilla-Silva (2009) explains, race discourse operates under the guise of cultural terms, resulting in insidious practices of racism that cannot be spoken of in precise terms (39-42). Race is cloaked in the language of culture – a cultural explanation for difference is based in a racial concept, which is why Ms. Alexander can say “Latino culture gives kids much more exposure to and knowledge about sexuality than I had” signifying racial difference without stating it in direct terms¹³. The racialization of sexuality, then, becomes overt in her comparison between the treatment of sexual manifestations during Halloween at Unity and imagined at Fairfield.

The teachers’ statements regarding sexuality and gender and Latino culture are reminiscent of popular depictions of Latinas. Their comments on the hypersexual costume choices of the girls and women at Unity resonate with images of Latinas that proliferate in popular media. Scholarship on Latina/o popular culture interrogate relationships between media and public policy representations and popular beliefs (Asencio 2010, Cepeda 2003, Rodriguez & Massey 2008, Vargas 2009). Vargas (2009) discusses the origins of “hegemonic hypersexual representations” (121) of Latinas in popular media, explaining that the image of the hypersexual Latina has deep historical roots and a far reach. Such representations inform “the popular belief in an inherent link between Latina corporality and hypersexuality” (Cepeda 2003, 221). The

¹³ While Latinos are variously described as a racial, ethnic, or cultural group, this is beside the point in this instance. As a major group of the school-going population in California, Latinos are treated as a racial group, spoken of as a racial group, and politicized as a racial group. So while “Latino” may not be an official category of race, they are racialized, or discursively positioned as a coherent racial group.

perception that Unity students and their families are culturally predisposed to hypersexual expressions is informed by popular depictions. I discuss the explanatory framing of the relationship between schools and homes in more detail in my dissertation, but as can be seen here, teachers perceive the students' home cultures as corrupting an otherwise benign and innocent school culture.

While it remains a question for Ms. Lee, the idea that race, class, and sexuality are mutually informing is conceptually resonant in her statement, "I'm not sure if it's culture or class that makes the kids at school so hypergendered." While Ms. Lee speaks of gender, she is referring to the overt sexualization of the young girls' costumes, illustrating a couple of points: First, sexuality and gender become entangled in their expressions. Second, sexuality, much like race in a society that purports colorblindness, is a loaded term especially when applied to children. Because children, and elementary school age girls in particular, are not supposed to "have" sexuality, even using the term in association with them becomes taboo. Ms. Lee and I had not discussed the frilly princesses that had pranced around the playground that day nor the pink skeleton costumes that were embellished with a frayed pink tutu. We were clearly discussing the "sexy" costumes, the ones that children and adults alike would have been kicked out for wearing had they been at a school of a different dominant culture and class.

Conclusion

In this article I have offered a narrative of Halloween at Unity Elementary School and sought to demonstrate how sexuality and gender intertwine and how these become entangled with race and conceptions of culture. These articulations play out during Halloween, a holiday that has become increasingly a consumer holiday through the years. Clearly, the consumer

market, which targets children as a major market sector, capitalizes on gender, sexuality and race to sell its wares. Halloween does not exist in a vacuum – it has evolved over time, and the manifestations of fantasy and desire on this occasion reflect the changing contours of sexuality. And therefore, of childhood. While teachers use cultural frameworks to explain the costume choices that their girl students make, it is clear that these choices are also structured and organized by a U.S. commercial market that limits and directs consumer desires. On Halloween, these desires manifest in the costumes that the elementary school students literally parade around in. The pressures to conform to a certain self-representation are illustrated in Maribel’s resolution to go home instead of participating in Halloween activities without a costume. For Maribel and other immigrant students at Unity, the materials of self-representation on Halloween are also choices to “try on” U.S. cultural practices.

The strong role of elementary level schooling in facilitating the becoming of a consumer of American culture cannot be denied. In effect, school is where the girls in Ms. Lee’s class are able to share in the excitement of purchasing and then putting on makeup together. It is also made evident through Unity’s decision to ritualize Halloween over Día de los Muertos, which is furthermore a choice to conform to the consumerist holiday that Halloween has become. These first- and second-generation immigrant children are learning what it means to be an American, a process largely facilitated through schooling. On Halloween it means participating in a consumer ritual that, for most of Unity’s students, requires that they participate in consumer rituals. In turn, U.S. consumer culture shapes sexuality, demonstrating the existence of a complex relationship between elementary schools and the construction of sexuality.

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