“Just Say No”: Public dissent over sexuality education and the Canadian national imaginary

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Abstract:

Scholars of sexuality have argued that “moral panics” about sexuality often stand in for broader conflicts over nationality and belonging. Canada has spent decades cultivating a national image founded on multiculturalism and democratic equality. The Ontario sexuality education curriculum introduced in 2015 drew audible condemnation from a variety of groups. Drawing from Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Race Theory, we argue that the public discourse surrounding these protests exposed the limits of Canadian pluralism, fueling a meta-debate about the “Canadianness” of recent immigrants and the incompatibility of liberal values with those of non-Westerners, especially Muslims. We explain this in terms of contextual factors such as Ontario’s publicly funded Catholic school system and anti-Muslim xenophobia in the post-9/11 era. Our analysis speaks to the importance of intersectional social justice efforts as part of the movement for comprehensive sex education.

Key Words: sex education; national identity; public discourse; critical discourse analysis; critical race theory; multiculturalism; Ontario, Canada

Sexuality education is a known lightning rod for divisive questions of social and political values (Archard, 2003; Halstead & Reiss, 2003). Unlike most areas of common curriculum, educational policy about sexuality provokes heated commentary and predictable backlash from parents and non-parents alike, both because of its potential friction with denominational values that exceed the scope of public schooling and because of the intuition that “we are all ‘experts’ regarding religious and sexual identity” (Shipley, 2015, p. 106). The nature of public debates about sexuality educationⁱ often reveal more about the identities of particular groups and

individuals and the cultural narratives they represent than about any pedagogical issues related to youth sexuality.

In this article, we focus on the backlash against, and response to the backlash against, the introduction of the 2015-revised Health and Physical Education curriculum in Ontario, Canada.ⁱⁱ As has become common in Western democracies, the comprehensive sexuality portion of the curriculum exposed the fault lines of religion and public policy and featured polarizing discourses about sexual minorities, gender identity, and youth sexuality. Yet, additionally apparent was the use of sexuality education as a proxy for sensitive debates about race, belonging, and national identity in Canada. Unlike in 2010, when a very similar curriculum had been introduced then promptly retracted in response to vocal conservative White Christian opponents, in 2015 the Ontario curriculum drew audible condemnation from a variety of racial, ethnic, and religious groups (Rayside, 2017). The media particularly seized on the role of non-White Canadians, especially Muslims – many of them first-generation – fuelling a meta-debate about the “Canadianness” of recent immigrants and the incompatibility of liberal values with those of the majority/non-Western world. This juxtaposition of “moral panic” over sexuality with a kind of “multicultural panic” over race and religion was additionally complicated, we argue, by contextual factors such as Canadian social conservatives’ Islamophobic attitudes and the publicly funded Catholic school system in Ontario. The nuances of these local controversies shed light on uniquely Canadian conceptions of national identity, while echoing phenomena witnessed in other Western countries such as the Australia and the Netherlands.

As a means of disentangling some of the layers of this public conversation, we employ Critical Discourse Analysis (Rogers, 2011; Rogers et al., 2005) and Critical Race Theory (Gillborn, 2006; Thobani, 2007). These frameworks facilitate an examination of power relations in the construction of social meaning, identities, and national imaginaries. Our analysis of the recent Ontario sexuality education controversy is informed by mainstream and niche newspaper articles, images circulated by journalists and laypeople, the websites and distributed materials of protest groups, popular web forums, and the policy documents and verbal statements of the Government and its representatives. A critical interpretation of these sources will illuminate the stakes of participants’ involvement in this controversy and draw out some of the paradoxical discourses that contoured the discussions.

While we stress the unique features of the Ontario landscape that gave recent events their particular flavour, this research feeds into emerging international work on the intricate relationships between youth sexuality, educational policy, religion, and identity discourses (Rasmussen, 2016; Allen et al., 2014). Indeed, “Scholars of sexuality...view sites of sexual panics as windows through which to investigate issues that are seemingly unrelated to sex at first glance, particularly ‘race’-based discourses such as nationalism, colonialism, and multiculturalism” (Lee, 2015, p. 70). The political and cultural context of sexuality education demands scholarly attention, not only for the insights it can provide into public discourses in general, but also for very practical purposes. Researchers and advocates passionately stress the importance of comprehensive sex education for achieving public health goals, sexual self-determination, and equality for girls and sexual minorities (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011; UNESCO, 2009; SIECUS, 2009). Yet the potential of such curricula is always circumscribed by and negotiated within the realities of complex, pluralistic societies, shaped by such factors as colonialism and immigration. It is tempting but dangerous to be lulled into facile equations between secularism, Western culture, and progressivism, on the one hand, and religiosity, non-Western cultures, and conservatism on the other (Rasmussen, 2016). The sustainability of

comprehensive sex education in diverse societies depends on our ability to challenge simplistic and discriminatory notions of cultural or religious difference, while taking seriously profound differences among citizens at the level of values and sexual paradigms.

Using Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Race Theory to Understand Sexuality Education

In order to explore the dynamics of the public imaginary following the reveal of Ontario's revised curriculum, we draw from some of the conceptual tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a methodological framework. CDA emphasizes that cultural ideas are interpreted through representational systems (of which language is one), which are in turn constituted by and constitutive of social relations of power. Though there are many approaches, "Critical Discourse Analysis" (Fairclough, 1989) and its variants represent what Rogers (2011) calls a "transdisciplinary set of theories and methods" where analysts "are generally concerned with a critical theory of the social world, the relationship of discourse in the construction and representation of this social world, and a methodology that allows them to describe, interpret, and explain such relationships" (p. 1-3). Moreover, CDA is *critical*, that is, aware of intersecting oppressions that cannot be abstracted from global politics (Rogers 2011, p. 1-2). Through CDA, "inquiry into meaning making is always an exploration into power" wherein "political, social, racial, economic, religious, and cultural formations are linked to socially defined practices that carry more or less value in society" (p. 1; see also Bloomaert, 2005).

The media debate over the revised sexuality curriculum in Ontario provides a unique historical moment to investigate the discursive construction of particular bodies and ideologies. Sexuality education is a ripe phenomenon for study through CDA because of the potency of discourse in establishing sexual norms. Foucault (1990) argues in *The History of Sexuality* that the policing of discourse and the proliferation of categories of bodies and behaviours to be monitored ("child onanism" "sodomite," etc.) constitutes a "regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world" (p. 11). Contemporary scholars of sexuality education also draw attention to the functions of words, and their omissions, in discussing whether and how students should be taught about particular topics (Shipley 2015). For example, while the Ontario curriculum refers to its audience simply as "students," protesters opted for more affective language that emphasized children's innocence and implicit asexuality, using slogans such as "Let Kids Be Kids." After a year of controversy, one central Toronto school finally implemented the new curriculum with an optional modification to appease angry parents. Now, instead of learning the words "penis" and "vagina," students in Grade 1 could be placed in classes where only the term "private parts" was used (Rushowy, 2016). Such "compromises" clearly indicate the stakes of language choices in sensitive debates about youth sexuality. Moreover, the attempt to sanitize and gloss over specific sexual terminology has the ironic effect of inciting further discourse, as Foucault's theory explains (1990).

What appears to be a controversy about sexual values can be revealed, through CDA, to also serve as a battleground for inarticulate fights over national identity. This analysis of the sexuality education controversy in Ontario follows Rogers' (2011) observation that "images, gestures, or words," are called upon "to accomplish something – build relationships, knowledge, identities, and worldviews" (p. 5). Public discourse is a means of tackling particular social issues as well as configuring larger patterns of power and membership.

As “meanings are always embedded in social, historical, political, and ideological contexts,” the discourses circulating as part of the controversy in Ontario were necessarily ideologically motivated, and speak to Canadian anxieties about political subjectivity (Rogers 2011, p. 5). To this extent, Critical Race Theory, or CRT (Gillborn, 2006; Thobani, 2007), is complementary to CDA and indispensable to a fruitful understanding of this kind of controversy. CRT, like CDA, does not have one set of methods or theories to analyze problematic discursive constructions, yet both approaches acknowledge the systemic, nuanced, and often intersecting, quality of various social injustices. Gillborn (2006) explains that “CRT does not offer a finished set of propositions that claim to explain current situations and predict what will occur under a certain set of conditions; rather, it is a set of interrelated beliefs about the significance of race/racism and how it operates in contemporary western society” (p. 19). Drawing from CRT and CDA, we analyze the discourses that shaped the sexuality education protests as deeply related to systemic racism and processes of “othering” those deemed non-Western.

The sources at our disposal for this research were numerous. Between the announcement of the new curriculum in early 2015 and the time of this writing, the “sex ed” controversy was regularly in the news, both mainstream and alternative. Important perspectives arose through a variety of media, including radio, television, newspapers, blogs, and informal pamphlets, and resonated with scholarly literature, policy documents, and faith-based texts from numerous fields and time periods. Rather than conducting a systematic search with pre-established terms of reference, we followed the controversy daily and attended to the most widely read, frequently cited, and clearly opinionated sources to obtain a representative sample of the range of discourse. We pored over the curriculum documents, read the statements of elected leaders, and listened to activists and protesters. Over the course of the research, CDA and CRT emerged as the most logical, and fruitful, means of analysing these manifold sources.

Ontario Sexuality Education in Context

Canada has spent decades cultivating a national image founded on diversity, peacefulness, and benign liberalism. Its policies and public discourses have often served to distinguish it from the more culturally assimilationist, jingoistic, and hawkish United States. Canada’s relative silence on highly divisive social issues, in contrast to the American “culture wars,” has marked it one of the more progressive nations on such questions as sexual diversity and the separation of church and state. These overt symbols of unity and progressivism, however, occlude more complex experiences at the levels of individuals and communities, as well as the continuing effects of Canada’s history as a settler-colonial state.ⁱⁱⁱ

Central to Canada’s international image and domestic imaginary has been its official policy of multiculturalism, which was ushered in by Pierre Trudeau in 1971 and has significantly shaped the nation’s demographics, as well as its self-concept. The Government of Canada’s website declares:

Canadian multiculturalism is fundamental to our belief that all citizens are equal. Multiculturalism ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging. Acceptance gives Canadians a feeling of security and self-confidence, making them more open to, and accepting of, diverse cultures. The Canadian experience has shown that multiculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding (2012).

While there is some truth to this optimistic description of Canadian policies and aspirations, the multiculturalism narrative has been sharply criticized by, among others, critical race scholars, who deplore its denial of the power relations associated with difference, not to mention Canada's nationhood being predicated on the violent appropriation of Indigenous lands (Thobani, 2007; Bannerji, 2000). Indeed, the national narrative of peaceful, pluralistic coexistence, in which "all citizens are equal," can obfuscate ongoing institutional racism and structures of domination, particularly for those in privileged positions. To the extent that the ideal of equality is believed to be a *fait accompli*, it also licenses such violations by denying the very possibility of their existence.

In *Exalted Subjects* (2007), Sunera Thobani argues that the Canadian identity produced through discursive gestures like the multiculturalism policy depends on the "exaltation" of particular subjects as desirable Canadians, to the exclusion of others. Exaltation, she says, "delineates the specific human characteristics said to distinguish the nation from others, marking out its unique nationality" and "gives rise to the desire among insiders to defend and protect this valued nationality from the perversions and pollutions of the Other" (Thobani, p. 20-21). Ironically, such divisions between "insiders" and "outsiders" are accomplished through the rhetoric of inclusion itself. For example, "the national is tolerant of cultural diversity where the outsider is intolerant, placing loyalty to ties of kin and clan above all else" (p. 5). These stereotypes particularly impact Muslims in North America, especially since the start of the so-called "war on terror" (Thobani, 2007; Razack, 2008). Western identity depends on Islam being regarded not simply as a religion but also as "the quintessential Other of the west" and hence "also as a racialized category" (Thobani, 235). In Canada, this attitude toward Muslims may be refracted through the self-congratulating filter of multiculturalism. It also obscures the ongoing influence of Christianity in supposedly secular Canadian spaces.

These intersections of racial and religious othering in the name of Canadian identity were pushed to the fore during the 2015 controversy over sexuality education in Ontario. Toronto, the hub of most of the protests, is one of the most diverse metropolises in the world, with 51% of its residents foreign-born (City of Toronto, 2011). Of further note is that approximately 30% of Ontario's 2 million school-aged children attend fully funded Catholic schools, which retain significant autonomy over curricular content (Fraser Institute, 2015, p. v). No other religious school or school system in the province is publicly funded, a fact that we return to below.

Prior to the controversy that erupted in the spring of 2015, the Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum – in which all formal instruction related to sexuality is embedded – had not been changed since 1998. An update introduced in 2010 would have rendered Ontario's curriculum more consistent with its counterparts, and more fitting of the 21st Century world in which its students were being educated, but then-Premier Dalton McGuinty retracted it after just two days, citing inadequate consultation (Ferguson et al., 2010).

In 2015, an updated version of the never-implemented 2010 curriculum took effect. It includes earlier and more comprehensive instruction about puberty and safer sex; discussion of the social and emotional risks posed by new technologies (such as cyberbullying and "sexting"); more thorough inclusion of LGBT identities; and a thematic thread relating to consent and healthy relationships (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015a and 2015b). Premier Kathleen Wynne (Liberal) described it as "the most widely consulted upon curriculum in the history of the province," involving "thousands of school council chairs, 70 health organizations and parent groups" (Jones, 2015). Research shows that the vast majority of Ontario parents support sexual

health education in schools and approve of most of the topics included in the new curriculum (McKay et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, the stark message conveyed to Ontarians in the wake of the new curriculum was one of opposition. Thousands of children were pulled from school, large protests were organized, and newspapers were filled with images of angry, mostly non-White, parents wielding placards with slogans such as “Math Not Masturbation” and “Just Say No.” In one elementary school located in one of the hotbeds of opposition, a Toronto neighbourhood with a dense population of recent Muslim immigrants, half of the enrolled students – approximately 350 – were absent on the first day of school in 2015. Journalists’ images showed them seated on the lawn outside the school, being taught by community members, mostly women wearing headscarves. Later calculations showed that, as a direct result of the protests, public school enrolment had dropped, teachers had lost their jobs, and new private Islamic schools were springing up around southern Ontario (Brown, 2015b; Ross, 2016).

The backlash against Ontario’s new sexuality education could be viewed as a failure of public education. Evidence from interviews, websites, and printed materials suggested that many protesters’ objections were driven by misinformation – about the efficacy of comprehensive sex education, about the actual risks posed by various sexual acts, and about the contents of this particular curriculum. Parent and community organizer Khalid Mahmood described the curriculum as “an open invitation for early pregnancies and STIS including HIV,” (quoted in Taekema, 2015) flouting extensive evidence to the contrary. The website of Campaign Life Coalition (CLC), a conservative Christian group, decried the one mention of anal sex in the Grade 9-12 portion of the curriculum, claiming falsely that “anal intercourse, in the context of male-on-male sex, leads directly to the death of a large percentage of those who practice it, and is generally unhealthy for all practitioners [sic]” (CLC). And according to a journalist for *Toronto Life*, “an anonymous letter in Arabic was posted throughout Peel Region [outside Toronto]” containing gross misrepresentations of the curriculum, for example “warning parents that kids would learn to reveal their private parts in Grade 1 and that ‘Grade 6 is about the promotion of self-discovery through masturbation’” (Hune-Brown, 2015).

These misconceptions and fearful responses to a highly evidence-based curriculum are alarming, especially to the extent that they proceed from and perpetuate a kind of hysterical homophobia and hostility to sexual pleasure. Some groups even hurled the language of “gay conspiracy” at Ontario’s openly lesbian premier, who introduced the curriculum (CLC). This type of reaction in fact underscores the necessity of comprehensive and progressive sexuality education (Author, forthcoming). Unfortunately, the problematic nature of these reactions was juxtaposed onto pre-existing anxieties about cultural diversity, with the effect of essentializing protestors by race and religion, as we argue in the next section.

In response to dissent that appears to emanate disproportionately from certain ethnic groups, defenders of comprehensive sexuality education could refer to the aims of the curriculum, using evidence to clear up misinformation; learn more about the cultural and religious context of dissenters’ views; and engage dissenters in dialogue about their educational aims to establish the nature of the friction.^{iv} Yet the media firestorm that tracked (and, no doubt, inflated) these protests in Ontario between 2015 and 2016 was more antagonistic. Instead of broadening the educational discussion, “sex ed” became a proxy for a conversation about national identity – about who the “real” Canadians are, and who has a right to dissent.

The Limits of Multiculturalism

Reflecting on the response to Ontario's failed 2010 curriculum reform, Shipley (2015) writes that "identity challenges and debates become posited as a 'clash' between the right to freedom of religion and equality rights based on sex, gender, and sexual orientation" (p. 101). Rayside (2017) agrees that the 2010 retraction was prompted almost exclusively by a small number of vocal evangelical Christians with a long history of opposing LGBT and abortion rights. In 2015, however, the religious and ethnic make-up of the curriculum's opponents was much more complex. While most protesters appealed to some religious values to ground their opposition, it was racialization that ultimately framed the perception of the sides in the debate. The claim to "freedom of religion" for Muslims, Sikhs, and non-White Christians, where such freedom purportedly entailed keeping the state out of sexuality education, was used to "other" Canadians with darker skin and recent immigrants, even when very similar values were being expressed by subjects whose Canadianness never came into question.

The focus on national identity could be seen in the media's coverage of the curriculum's introduction and its aftermath in early 2015. Newspapers ran articles with headlines such as "Immigrant Parents Feel Undermined by New Ontario Sex Ed Curriculum," (Cadiz & Qiao, 2015)^v and "Sex-Ed Controversy Exposes How Different Religions, Cultures Fit Into Ontario's Mainstream" (Cohn, 2015), clearly signaling a rift between non-immigrant, "mainstream" Canadians and the "others." Articles like this were accompanied by images of large contingents of protesters, mostly non-White and many in characteristically Muslim or Sikh garb, shouting on streets and rallying outside the provincial legislature. Marcus Gee, a well-known columnist for the national newspaper *The Globe and Mail*, summarized the issue thus: "How does a liberal society cope with immigrants who don't share its values?" (2015). His framing of Canadian society as "liberal" in opposition to "immigrants" (when, in fact, all non-Indigenous Canadians are immigrants) exemplifies the "exalted subject" position that Thobani (2007) critiques: "we" must "cope" with "them."^{vi} Then Gee, a White man, explained to the backwards immigrants: "in Canada, certain things are a given. Men and women are considered equal. Bigotry, against gays and lesbians or any other group, is not acceptable. And, oh yes, sex ed is taught in the schools." (Gee, 2015).

In even less refined public spaces, observations about the racial complexion of many protestors led to more explicitly Islamophobic and xenophobic commentary. A thread on the unmonitored digital community Reddit, titled "New Sex education in Ontario Canada, rejected by mostly muslim [sic] community," featured this exchange between anonymous posters:

- The more the[y] veil as themselves in their insular community with religion and tradition, the tighter that noise will pull on then [them]. They have so much opportunity to better themselves. To get rid of the cultural baggage that holds them back. And what do they do [when] that opportunity presents themselves?
- Nothing.
- Such a shame.
- ...Actually they do worse than doing nothing. They try to ruin the progress that makes them better by implementing the backwards cultural practices that made their home countries the shitholes they are (Anonymous, 2015).

The "othering" of non-Whites who appear to depart from "proper" Canadian values shows the fragility of the Canadian ideal of pluralism. Canadian national identity purports to protect and celebrate a diversity of traditions and beliefs. But when the protesters disrupted that facade by speaking from "othered" religious and cultural positions, they were discursively produced as

outsiders who failed to understand how free Canada is, and whose opinions were categorically unwelcome. Reports of the protests, with their obsessive attention to country of origin and religious identity, trumpeted Canada's openness while maintaining the crucial barrier between "us" and "them" that constitutes national identity. In this case, liberal attitudes toward sexuality education constituted "the specific human characteristics said to distinguish the nation from others, marking out its unique nationality" (Thobani, 2007, p. 20).

Constitutional Protection for Some

The dominant story told about socially conservative recent immigrants in the wake of the new sexuality curriculum would be more resonant if it were not for vast contingents of White, Christian Canadians of earlier European descent who harbour the same reservations about sexuality, queerness, premarital sexual activity, and many other flashpoints of comprehensive sex education that resulted in the racialized protesters being marked as "backward." As noted earlier, a very similar curriculum was retracted in 2010 in response to the efforts of a fringe group of evangelical Christians (Rayside, 2017). Some Christian organizations with predominantly White membership were also responsible for disseminating misinformation about the curriculum and sexual health, organizing school walk-outs, and defending religiously-inflected "family values" in the wake of the 2015 curriculum (for example, Campaign Life Coalition). A number of these protesters were visible in the throngs captured in media images, although the reporting centred unmistakably on Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and non-White Christians.

Most pertinent to the context of Ontario's 2015 curriculum debacle, however, is the ongoing presence of a far-reaching, clerically controlled Catholic education system in Ontario, which is fully funded by the public from kindergarten to Grade 12 (McGowan, 2013). A vestige of the Constitution, Ontario's legally enshrined right to public Catholic education means that over 600,000 students in the province are taught faith-based approaches to health and sexuality, regardless of their compatibility or lack thereof with other educational mandates. In contrast to many other jurisdictions, such as Australia, which fund a variety of religious schools, Catholic schools are the only denomination to receive state funding in Ontario (Rasmussen, 2016, pp. 147-9). And in contrast to Ireland, where the majority culture is already Catholic, Ontario Catholics are technically a religious minority who have historical cause to protect denominational resources.

Sexuality has been taught in the Catholic school system for several decades through the program known as *Fully Alive*, sponsored by the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario (ACBO). This curriculum teaches that "sexual relationships between single people are morally wrong" (ACBO, 2007-11, 182) and declines to provide comprehensive instruction on contraception, sexually transmitted infections, or sexual consent. Further, the Catholic curriculum is structured around themes such as "Created Sexual: Male and Female," and makes clear that sexual and gender diversity are not part of "God's plan for sexuality" (ACBO).

When the new Ontario curriculum was announced in 2015, Catholic school trustee Angela Kennedy declared that "substantial parts of the curriculum contradict Catholic teachings" (Brown, 2015a). Cardinal Thomas Collins (Archdiocese of Toronto), invoking the Catholic school board's right to adjust curriculum for ecclesiastical approval, announced that a third party, the Institute for Catholic Education, would "produce resources that support Catholic teachers so that the new curriculum is implemented in a way that is consistent with our Catholic teachings"

(Everyday For Life, 2015). Although it is too early to report on how the new sexuality curriculum is actually being taught in Catholic schools, any adjustments that this constituent of Ontario's public education may make – whether overhauling *Fully Alive*, or paying little more than lip-service to the new curriculum – remain, constitutionally, at their discretion.^{vii}

The ability of Catholic parents and activists to have their voices heard regarding the sexuality education curriculum differs vastly from other religious groups in Ontario. Catholic opposition to the 2015 curriculum could be registered through “civilized,” “Canadian” channels because of educational infrastructure that has protected their denomination since Confederation. Muslim or Sikh religious traditions, by contrast, may be practiced by a large minority of the population, yet they are not afforded the same recognition in terms of public funding for religious schooling. This may help explain why the make-up of protesters appearing in news media were predominantly non-White, but it does not explain why the “Canadianness” of these protesters was challenged any more than Christian protesters.

While the Catholic education system's approach to sexuality education may be writ large incompatible with comprehensive approaches, not all Catholic or Christian Canadians rejected the curriculum. Yet even media accounts of Christians' debates about the acceptability of the curriculum positioned these subjects in allegiance to “Canadian values,” whereas children who were new immigrants or of a different religious denomination were “un-Canadian” and would face cultural clashes in the classroom that required them to adopt a new identity (Barber, 2016). Susan Mabey, a former United Church minister and a teacher at one of the schools that operated as a hotbed of opposition to the curriculum, spoke publicly about being gay and fearing for teachers' safety because of the explicit homophobia underlying protests (Rushowy, 2015). An article about Mabey in the *United Church Observer* quickly glosses over the sensitivity around homosexuality within Christian communities and the opposition to the curriculum expressed by many prominent Catholics, claiming, “the revised sex-ed curriculum was seen as long overdue by most educators and was welcomed by the Institute for Catholic Education. But alarming rumours about its content flew through the Muslim community...” (Barber, 2016). This lopsided focus on Muslims' opposition to the curriculum erases heterogeneity in the Muslim community and positions Muslims as a threat to Canadian society, while the discrepancy of opinion on the curriculum between Christian Canadians is discursively invisibilized.^{viii} The Canadian “tolerance” of Christians like Susan Mabey is underscored with references to her comfort with the niqab, while the un-Canadian attitudes of the Muslim families are described as “religiously inspired intolerance” (Barber). As Barber writes, “Canadian multiculturalism works because it ignores culture, affirming universal rights and values in the place of blood and belonging” (2016). Conveniently for Christian Canadians, their values are unconsciously subsumed under “universal” values—even in the sex-wary Catholic school system.

Protesters' Self-Construction Through Discourses of Canadian Identity

While discourses that circulated around the sexuality education debates presented protesters who were people of colour as not “truly” Canadian and thus not entitled to dissent, some of those protesters strategically employed discourses of “Canadianness” to further their cause. They deliberately aligned themselves with other discourses of “real” Canadianness to counteract the apparent un-Canadianness of their views on sexuality.

If the main charge against protesters was that they were “intolerant,” namely of sexual minorities, but perhaps of secular Western society in general, then the counter-strategy was to

position the new curriculum and its supporters as intolerant of religion. Yacoob Bayat, director of an Islamic school that opened in September 2015 in response to the Ontario sexuality education curriculum, was quoted in *The Globe and Mail*: “We are not asking anybody else to follow our beliefs, but we would like to follow our beliefs and to not let anybody else tell our kids otherwise,” he said. “That freedom of belief is something that I think is pretty Canadian” (Ross, 2015).

Bayat’s comments echo dominant understandings of Canadian multiculturalism and liberalism as being defined by a diversity of beliefs and values without an imposing, majority culture. However, as Critical Race Theorists have noted, multiculturalism in Canada celebrates the more superficial elements of racial and ethnic differences, such as food, music, and dress, while remaining skeptical of deep differences in values and beliefs when expressed by non-Whites (Bannerji, 2000). This posture has arguably sustained the privileging of Whiteness while avoiding meaningful discussions about the lived experiences and histories of colonialism and imperialism (Calliste & Dei, 2000). Hence, discourses of multiculturalism or freedom of belief, even when deployed by people of colour to legitimize dissent, can end up reifying colonial and imperial relations of power.

In addition to appealing to freedom of belief, the protesters’ self-construction as legitimate Canadians drew on the value of interfaith cooperation. Jotvinder Sodhi, a vocal protester, appeared in an article in *Toronto Life* saying that “opposition to the curriculum has helped him break across racial and religious lines that can sometimes seem impermeable. ‘When Muslim members come to our meetings, we take a five-minute break for their prayers. Christian members come. Jewish members come. Can you imagine?’ he says, eyes wide... ‘It’s happening every day now’” (Hune-Brown, 2015). Sodhi asserts that he participates in and observes religious pluralism and multicultural values to legitimize his “Canadianness,” despite rejecting the values underlying comprehensive sexuality education. In contrast, Catholic and other Christian opponents were not politically required to form multicultural allegiances, and yet their fidelity to essential Canadian values was hardly questioned.

The resistance to sexuality education among racialized, religious minority and recently arrived Canadians had another counterintuitive effect. By opposing such a mainstay of liberal ideology, these protesters simultaneously distanced themselves from their natural allies – liberals who champion immigration and decry racial oppression – and approached conservative Canadians – a group that is overall less friendly to immigrants. Indeed, during the outcry over Ontario’s new curriculum, then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Conservative) was campaigning for re-election with a commitment to ban the niqab. When a new Canadian wanted to utter the citizenship oath in the face-covering garb that some Muslim women wear, Harper tweeted, “That’s not the way we do things here.” This authoritative rejoinder about what it means to be “Canadian” (“we”) exemplifies Thobani’s observation that Muslims are regarded as the “quintessential other of the *West*” (“here”) (Thobani, 2007, p. 10).^{ix} Meanwhile, media images showcased rows of women in headscarves protesting the Liberal Government of Ontario’s “radical” sexuality education and aligning themselves with conservative educational policies. These juxtapositions mirror the awkward alliances seen in other Western nations (Zimmerman, 2015), and indicate the priority people attach to certain kinds of belonging over others when they are forced to choose.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis of the backlash against Ontario's new sexuality education curriculum exposes some of the layers that lurk behind conspicuous battles over educational policy or sexual mores. As CDA predicts, the public discourses circulating in Ontario collected and refracted citizens' ideas about identity and relations of power. In keeping with other studies of "moral panics" over sexuality and the insights of CRT, tensions surrounding race, religion, and national identity emerged as the pretext for conversations about youth sexuality. Furthermore, our analysis of the 2015 Ontario controversy is revealing of the beliefs and anxieties that animate Canadian public discourse in particular. The norm of multiculturalism appears to cloud the reality of ongoing racism, while instructing new Canadians on how to earn their *bona fides* as national subjects.

By allowing sexuality education to become a sensational fight over who is a "real" Canadian, Ontarians missed an opportunity to contemplate how sexuality education can better respond to complex questions about identity and belonging—which is precisely what the controversy proved was necessary. It is difficult to examine actual attitudes toward sexuality, and the degree to which they may or may not be influenced by other recognizable forms of difference, when those differences are taken for granted from the outset and exploited in highly imbalanced and exclusionary ways. Pluralism cuts across all social categories. Negotiating these delicate, and often overlapping, forms of difference with respect and consistency is an ongoing project in a liberal democracy.

Sexuality education may prophesy its own opposition by playing into widespread prejudices about what "real" Canadians believe. For example, in Whitten and Sethna's analysis of sex education curricula in Canada between 1999 and 2008, they found that the wording of curricula themselves reinforced anxieties about incompatibility between "Canadian" values and those of non-White or non-Christian students: "Race, ethnicity, culture and religion in these documents are depicted in a problematic manner based on racial essentialism and erasure of race. They are presented as barriers to be overcome in providing sex education, as markers of traditional or non-progressive values related to sex and sexuality and as markers of difference and conflict in the classroom" (Whitten & Sethna, 2014, p. 422). In order to overcome these messages, and to better align social justice goals, critical sexuality education must go beyond "comprehensive" education to anti-oppressive education that is framed by intersectional approaches.

In the wake of the Ontario controversy, it has been encouraging to see activism that disrupts the stereotypes and forces a more open discussion about the purpose of sexuality education. When it became clear that the backlash against the new curriculum was being framed in antagonistic and racially charged terms, coalitions of supporters emerged, such as Muslims for Ontario's Health and Physical Education Curriculum. One of the founders, Rabea Murtaza, said that "most Muslims are supportive of the curriculum or they think sexual health education is important and I wanted to make sure that voice came forward" (CBC News, 2015). Murtaza and her supporters acknowledge the sensitivity around discussing sexuality in more traditional communities – "This kind of dialogue is sorely needed in our families," she said (2015) – as well as the strategic othering of Muslims by Canadian policies, popular narratives, and the media. She thus takes on the dual burden of being reductively re-cast as a "good Muslim"^x in mainstream discourse and being potentially received as a traitor within her own community, where a public front of ideological solidarity may be viewed as the only appropriate response to systemic discrimination—and where this manufactured solidarity may inadvertently reinforce the very stereotypes that sustain Islamophobia.

From an educational perspective, Ontario's controversy should remind teachers and policy makers that comprehensive sexuality education for children is about much more than the health needs or beliefs of the students in class. Without appropriately addressing power-laden dynamics at the levels of family, community, and state, a curriculum document may fail to resonate with students' positionalities, or worse, unconsciously perpetuate oppressive relations. Our analysis speaks to the importance of intersectional social justice efforts as part of the movement for comprehensive, and progressive, sex education. Furthermore, it confirms a growing body of research about the power of public discourse to slant social controversies and fuel unresolved anxieties about democracy, pluralism, and national identity.

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ⁱ Many scholars use the term “sexuality education” as opposed to “sex education” to emphasize the multifaceted nature of this kind of education and reduce the focus on sexual activity as such (Fields, Gilbert, & Miller, 2015).

ⁱⁱ Ontario is Canada's largest province with about 40% of Canada's population (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2016).

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, a study published in 2016 demonstrates that the worst poverty is experienced by status Indigenous children (51% live in poverty, rising to 60% for those living on reserves) (Macdonald & Wilson).

^{iv} Many such efforts did take place, though rarely in the media.

^v This article was published in the small outlet *Canadian Immigrant*, reflecting the fact that many recent immigrants were in fact concerned about the curriculum.

^{vi} Eventually, the fact or timing of one's immigration to Canada becomes irrelevant, as the hierarchy devolves into one of race rather than nationality. As Thobani (2007) argues, “Racialization renders the distinction between citizen and immigrant all but meaningless in the eyes of nationals” (p. 246).

^{vii} As Rasmussen (2016) notes, the religious label of a school is not absolutely indicative of the kind of sexuality education its students receive, and secularism is no guarantee of progressiveness. Our point is that opposition supposedly rooted in Catholicism can be accommodated more easily in Ontario than opposition supposedly rooted in non-Christian faiths.

^{viii} A similar phenomenon has been seen in both the UK and the Netherlands. For example, the Dutch's notoriously liberal sexuality education has been protested by Dutch-born Pentecostals and newcomers from Morocco and other predominantly Muslim countries. Media portrayals of the protests tend to focus on the values of Muslim newcomers

as incompatible with Western society, rather than on the traditional values of their White counterparts, just as Ontario's Christian protestors garner little media attention (Zimmerman, 2015).

^{ix} Note that Susan Mabey's comfort with the niqab is referenced as evidence of her Canadian tolerance whereas Harper's opposition to the niqab is also constructed as proof of some essential Canadianness. It is telling that such antithetical positions on Muslim women's dress could both be casually provided by non-Muslim-identified speakers, and in both cases, corroborate the speaker's credentials as a national subject.

^x "The good Muslims are the assimilated ones; they berate other Muslims for their cultural backwardness" (Thobani, 2007, p. 237).