Chapter 8
Agency, Institutional Blindness, and Vocabularies of Choice

If you want us to be mature adults, you have to give us the freedom to pick what we want to do.
—Boy, Year 10, School 2

Yea it is a big choice thing.
—Girl, Year 10, School 2

It’s been right in front of us the whole time, and we didn’t think about it.
—Girl, Year 10, School 2

Well, they want you to be able to decide what you want to do for the rest of your life, but you can’t look at things that are natural, like... it makes no sense that they just choose that you’re meant to know what you want to do for the rest of your life, but you can’t look at boobs!
—Girl, Year 11, School 1

Introduction
In the previous chapters, the case was made that despite fears vis-à-vis “anything goes” and a rampant sexualization that is “out of control,” pornified culture is very much in control. Public illicits do mark a new normal, but the bordering strategies employed by young people make very clear that “anything does not go.” Public illicits are distanced through the use of humor, parody, and spectacle, and bordered as respectable or otherwise through historically salient notions of the respectable. These strategies employed by young people point to well-grounded claims to agency, signaling some significant counter-discursive possibilities.
This chapter devotes systematic attention to the question of agency in relation to the new “public illicit,” by considering how young people sift through the smorgasbord of public illicits available to them. It will do this by considering school contexts as the institutional framework in which young people spend a large part of their lives, and which are charged with educating young people about sex, sexuality, relationships, and identity. In view of the hyper-panics surrounding young people’s submersion in supposedly pornified quicksand, what is possible and allowable in terms of critical interrogation of the illicit and sexualized culture? What decision-making processes support young people in their sifting and sorting? How do they select which images and presentations of the sexual to “let in”? How do they decide what representations of the sexed are suitable to attach to their identities and senses of self? How do they think through what effect this culture of images has on them?

Just as notions of respectability predominate in constructions of the acceptable from the unacceptable, choice held pride of place in the decision-making processes of the students, articulating a moment of freedom, exploration, entitlement, skill building, and education, with age providing the prism through which to establish their legitimacy to choose. This marks a clear expression of agency. However, it will be shown that choice is articulated by young people in ways that mirror hegemonic contemporary discourses of choice, sex, and sexuality. Jackson and Scott’s (2010) meditations on the rationalization of sex in contemporary culture will provide a framework through which to explore this. I also draw on postfeminist work in relation to choice discourses and young women.

In the first section of the chapter I explore how “rational choice” and “rational-choice models of sexuality” hold a hegemonic position in cultural life, which helps to explain young people’s recurring use of choice as a default position. I then move on to explore what young people mean by choice, and tease out the ways in which they claim a position of agency, while simultaneously drawing on the hegemonic discourses of rationalized choice and sexuality. The final section focuses on the institutional blindness of schools, which points to a missed opportunity—despite the desire by young people to “speak back” to the panics through a language of choice, and for their claims in relation to the “normal” to be taken seriously, little to no space is given to a critical interrogation of pornified culture within school contexts. The pornified images young people are using and seeing (pornographic material that is very much “in their hands”) are left unexamined in