

**“Social Discourse, Subjectivity and Spatiality in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*:
A Model for Interpreting Virginitly Narratives”**

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Abstract

English/Anglais:

This thesis examines virginity as a social construct, contextualizes the relevance of first sex for contemporary youth, and presents a model for reading themes of virginity and first sex in popular media. Through discursive analysis, the central sections of this thesis – Virginity, Femininity, and Masculinity – analyze themes of sexual abstinence across the four books of the *Twilight* series. Examining contemporary and historical contexts placing gendered value on virginity and virginity loss, this project suggests that virginity narratives reflect whose bodies are considered to be valuable in society and for what purpose. The conclusion argues that virginity narratives are fundamentally colonial narratives, requiring the fantasy of unclaimed spaces, conquerors, and those to be conquered.

Français/French:

Cette thèse examine la virginité comme étant une construction sociale, contextualise la relevance des premiers rapports sexuels pour les adolescents contemporains et présente un modèle pour la lecture sur les thèmes de la virginité et de leur première relation sexuelle dans les médias populaires. Grâce à l'analyse discursive, les tronçons centraux de cette thèse - la virginité, la féminité et la masculinité - analyse les thèmes de l'abstinence sexuelle à travers les quatre livres de la série *Twilight*. Ce projet examine les contextes contemporains et historiques de la mise en valeur sexospécifique concernant la virginité ainsi que la perte de virginité et cette thèse suggère que les récits de virginité reflètent quels corps sont jugés utiles à la société et à quelles fins. La conclusion argumente que les récits de virginité sont fondamentalement des récits coloniaux, nécessitant la fantaisie de lieux non réclamés, conquérants et ceux qui seront conquis.

1. Introduction and Methodology

Why research virginity? Why and how does virginity matter?

I lost my virginity somewhere between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one. As I will assert, virginity is not one thing unto itself and it does not have any true physical manifestation to be lost; instead, to be a virgin is a social identity that may be claimed, tested, lost, reclaimed or contested. The social meaning of virginity – who is perceived to be or not to be a virgin, and at what point in time virginity may be claimed or lost – has tangibly shaped the course of countless lives throughout history. Virginity has been particularly relevant to the lives of women as it is typically assumed to be mapped out physically within their bodies. A judgement of non-virginity upon a woman at the time of her marriage – or while invested in a sacred capacity that requires virginity – has both directly and indirectly cost women their lives, invoking executions as well as affecting access to economic protections and the privileges of social status and access that enable survival. Social norms about virginity represent a form of systemic control over those bodies that vessel reproduction through gestation and birth, the subject of virginity overlapping with historic and contemporary struggles for reproductive autonomy. Although the landscape of meanings for virginity and virginity loss in North America at the turn of the 21st century often carry more subtle consequences than life or death, the narratives and meanings invested in the timing and circumstances of first sex are still relevant to the lives of millions of youth; they were relevant to me.

For this project I rely on the popularity of virginity as a research topic that led to the publication of several books on the meaning and history of virgins and virginity loss between 2000 and 2009 (Kelly 2000; Carpenter 2005; Bernau 2007; Blank 2007; Valenti 2009). I knew I wanted to investigate virginity for my master's thesis because of my ongoing fascination with the topic as an informal research project, so when I began reading these books the summer before I enrolled at the University of Ottawa I paid particular attention to the personal contexts given by each author. In her introduction to *Virgin: The*

Untouched History, Hanne Blank (2007) recounts how she began to research medical definitions of virginity in order to answer questions asked of her by youth she worked with in her capacity as a sex educator. Humbled by her investigation, Blank admits that she initially assumed virginity to be a topic of minor importance, one she already knew everything she might need to know about. Assuming the same of her readers, Blank jokes that the subtitle to her book should have been, “Everything You Think You Know About Virginity is Wrong” (ix). Concluding her introduction stating that she is “honoured to be at the helm for this maiden voyage into a fascinating untouched history,” Blank jokes about the subject while hinting at one reason for the eroticization of virginity: the excitement of a journey into the unknown, the idea of “untouched” or unexplored territory (xi). Her choice of words in “maiden voyage” aptly point towards what I will highlight throughout this thesis as a colonialist function of virginity: the link between virginal bodies and lands that have been presumed to be uninhabited, unclaimed.

Other authors whose work I rely upon cite their own interests in writing about virginity as springing from similar disconnects between their own clear-cut personal experiences of first sex with the changing and complex landscape of popular meanings attributed to virginity loss in the late 20th century. Laura M. Carpenter (2005), a sociologist who revised and published her doctoral dissertation as the book *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrayal of First Sexual Experiences*, became interested in virginity as a research topic upon her shock at seeing the headline “Virgin Cool” on a cover of *Newsweek* magazine in 1994 (1). Speaking of the geography she came of age in – 1980s suburban Maryland – Carpenter had only experienced virginity as what she calls “the antithesis of cool,” reflecting on how when she and her friends sung along to Madonna's “Like a Virgin”, they all knew “that 'like' was the operative word” (2). The changing cultural contexts for virginity that led to the publication of “Virgin Cool” surfaced out of a sexual counterrevolution emerging in the 1980s, a backlash against the perceived increase of sexual freedom in North America shaped by the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This Christian based sexual purity movement, reminiscent of the social purity movement of the late 19th century, inspired feminist blogger Jessica Valenti (2009) to write *The Purity Myth: How American's Obsession With*

Virginity is Hurting Young Women. In this book, Valenti provides an anecdote about her own experience of first sex when she was sixteen. Describing how immediately afterwards her partner in first sex took a pen and drew a heart around that day's date on the wall of his bedroom, Valenti explains that “[t]he date seemed so important to us at the time, even though the event itself was hardly awe-inspiring” (17).

Valenti frames her motivation to write a book on purity as not “entirely altruistic,” reflecting on personal experiences negotiating sexuality and the moral judgements she perceived upon her choices as a sexually active teenager (11). I argue that any investigation into virginity loss should remember and privilege the experiences and desires of youth, including those that valorize sexual abstinence.

Rather than approaching this project from the standpoint of an impartial academic observer – or a voyager into the unknown – I am personally invested. Unlike the authors I draw upon who write from standpoints shaped by clear experiences of first sex, I am writing from personal knowledge of a liminal space where virginity and non-virginity overlap. I never assumed I knew everything there was to know about virginity loss as my own status as a virgin or non-virgin was a subject of contention for years with both friends and those with whom I was intimate. Never being able to pinpoint my first real sexual experience undermined the universality of the narratives I was taught about virginity loss and made me curious about other exceptions, wondering how many experiences are left out of virginity discourse. It is these experiences I want to ultimately centre through the pulling apart of virginity discourse. I suggest that virginity is not an unclaimed or untouched research topic, but instead it belongs to those who inhabit spaces where virginity is both relevant and contested. Virginity research more rightfully belongs to youth than to any individual adult researcher, particularly those youth whose lived experiences are on the margins of virginity discourse, or who are left out entirely.

Despite a diverse reality of lived experiences, the idea of a clear line between virginity and non-virginity is a prominent reoccurring feature of virginity discourse. Discussing the dominant narrative of virginity as either present or lost, Blank describes exceptions as “inevitable” asking “what if he only put it in a little bit?” and “what if she didn't bleed?” (4). Framing similar questions away from assuming

specific gender or biology, I have asked my peers: Exactly how much penetration is required to count as sexual intercourse? What about penetration with fingers, a fist, or a non-bodily object? Is sex necessarily about genitals? What about other sexualized practices that do not require penetration such as bdsm? From these conversations I collected at parties and in other young social spaces, it became clear that part of the problem with my virgin or non-virgin status and that of some of my friends was our queerness. Could first sex be reframed to never assume heterosexuality, to never assume cissexuality? Through discussions with my peers surrounding the definitions and meanings of first sex, another salient theme emerged as well: What if you never consented to sex? What if you do not remember what happened? What if you did not know what sex was?

The question of rape and the impact of assault on virginity has been discussed over thousands of years from ancient writings by early Christian theologians to modern day virginity scholarship. To problematize the definitions of virginity first offered by her interview subjects, Carpenter asked, essentially, what about rape? While every survivor of sexual assault Carpenter interviewed “maintained that virginity could not be lost through coerced sex”, the rest of her subjects were divided, factoring in both potential psychological and physiological changes as to whether or not an individual could still consider themselves a virgin following sexual assault (52). It is not a question among former victims – an individual who has never consented to sex has every right to the identity of virgin – but that does not mean virgin is an identity that fits comfortably for each individual, or that virginity is necessarily worth claiming. In her critique of sex-positivity published in *The Huffington Post*, activist Kelly Rose Pflug-Back (2013) writes of her own life: “I didn't realize I wasn't a virgin until the day, after coming home from Grade 1, I finally worked up the courage to ask my mother what sex was”. While discussing the process of writing my thesis with a close friend, she told me that my interest in virginity had been causing her to reflect on why virginity never seemed relevant to her life, and then we talked about childhood sexual abuse. Although perfectly relevant to Carpenter's research – and valuable for my project to know the answers she received – it is revealing to me about the nature of virginity discourse that individuals

who have not experienced sexual assault could entertain rape as a thought experiment for clarifying personal conceptions of virginity loss and first sex rather than seeing the reality of sexual violence as undermining the construction of virginity as a culturally valuable identity. While the scope of this thesis does not venture into a detailed history of virginity and sexual assault, I hold questions about the relationship between virginity discourse and sexual violence in my motivation and framework for this project: Who is privileged when first sex is discussed as a meaningful or important experience? How might narratives of virginity reify violence against those who have experienced trauma?

This project is about the fantasy of virginity and the fantasies of gender that are woven into dominant narratives of virginity and first sex. Virginity was an avenue through which I personally learned about heteronormativity as a younger woman, but virginity can teach a myriad of lessons about worth and exclusion. Dominant narratives about virginity and virginity loss frame what desirable first sexual experiences are, consequently framing who and whose experiences are undesirable. Contemporary youth navigate contradictory messages about virginity as both valuable and stigmatized, and are frequently taught that the timing and circumstances of first sex matters deeply, even shaping the course of the rest of their lives. Virginity narratives tell stories about what gendered bodies are supposed to be shaped like and how they are meant to perform sexually, reflecting and reifying broader discourses of concern to social justice surrounding gender, disability, and body shape. Virginity narratives are revealing about the expectations of binary gender, of certain bodies as receptive territories to be conquered or explored while others are deemed explorers and conquerers. Where do these stories leave the experiences of non-binary youth and emerging adults? What do they say to young women and men whose bodies do not coincide with the expectations of young femininity or masculinity? Although the construct of virginity has always been gendered, the prominent historical concern with the virginity of women has never applied equally to all women, it is always contextualized by classism and racism. While understanding virginity as an oppressive construct, I also argue that virginity – and to some extent, the studying of virginity – functions as a privileging mechanism, as the value placed on virginity frames

whose bodies are considered valuable enough to be concerned with. One of the goals of my project is to contribute to virginity scholarship without creating a text focused on promoting sexual freedom and agency for women who are privileged on most axes other than gender to the exclusion of analyzing other oppressions.

I have chosen the books of *The Twilight Saga* by Stephenie Meyer (*Twilight*, 2005; *New Moon*, 2006; *Eclipse*, 2007; *Breaking Dawn*, 2008) as a subject of inquiry into virginity narratives because of their immense popularity with young women (hereafter, these works will be cited as T, NM, E and BD). Through a critical close reading of these texts, this project explores narratives of first sex in popular culture. This methodology is not without constraint or limitation: *Twilight* and its sequels are primarily a story about love and first sex centered around two characters who are white, heterosexual, cissexual, able-bodied and conventionally attractive. The narratives woven into Meyer's series surrounding the core romantic plot-line further emphasize and valorize whiteness, heteronormativity, hyper-ability, youth and beauty. I suggest that it is not accidental that these narratives are woven together, that the construction of virginity lends itself to emergence as a theme in narratives that emphasize the importance and value of some bodies over others. By examining and pulling apart these pieces within *Twilight* as they relate explicitly to virginity, virginity loss and gendered conceptions about young sexuality, I hope to lay the groundwork for other projects that may re-centre virginity more completely, perhaps by focusing exclusively on previously marginalized narratives of first sex, or by demonstrating the absence of first sex narratives in communities that have not embraced virginity discourse. This chapter presents an introduction and an overview of the methodology for the work that I do engage with through this project: I provide an introduction to the cultural context for virginity today, an introduction to the themes of virginity and abstinence within the *Twilight* series, and I review my research questions, as well as the model I have devised to read virginity narratives within *Twilight*. It is my hope that this model may be used to read future narratives of virginity and first sex.

Cultural Contexts: What is at Stake?

Contemporary cultures are saturated with narratives of correct first sexual experience that transcend the idea of a public/private divide. Virginitly is not currently nor has it historically been a simple matter of choice or identity, although the model of virginitly as controlled through personal choice and sexual agency has recently grown in popularity throughout the latter half of the 20th century (Blank 252; Carpenter 37-43). Virginitly and the popular discourse surrounding it suggest vast public relevance as the concept has implications for broader identities of family, religion and state.

Between 1996 and 2007, abstinence-only sex education in the United States received over 1.3 billion US dollars in federal funding (Valenti 111). This period from the mid-90s represents the cultural climate surrounding sex education developing in the United States leading up to the publication of the final text of the *Twilight* series in 2008. Abstinence education is being enacted upon many youth despite concerns for tangible physiological risks, including increased rates of unwanted pregnancy and of sexually transmitted infections (Manlove 5; Ott 451-2). Abstinence-only sex education does not give comprehensive information about sexual health, but instead focuses only on the supposed physiological and social benefits to remaining sexually abstinent until marriage (DaoJensen 32). Concerned that teaching safer sex permits pre-marital sexual activity, abstinence-only curricula avoid acknowledging that many teenagers will become sexually active; STIs and unwanted pregnancy are cited as reasons to remain sexually abstinent without accurate discussion of contraceptive or condom use. Abstinence-only sex education is also delivered with a gendered discourse attaching sexual purity to the worth of young women (Valenti 32, 41).

After their creation in 1998, the popularity of “purity balls” - dances where young women pledge to their fathers to remain chaste until marriage - has soared in the early 2000s with over 1400 held in 2006 and 4000 in 2007 (Baumgardner; Gibbs). Although these events also exist for young men and their

mothers, they are significantly less popular and the emphasis on male sexual purity is downplayed as they are renamed “integrity balls” (Ellis). The abstinence movement is connected to gendered consumer culture through the expense of these large scale events as well as through the marketing of individual products, such as the “purity rings” worn by youth who take a vow of chastity (Rosenbloom). Virginity vouchers are hard plastic cards reading “virginity voucher: don't buy the lie, save sex for marriage” that are bought and handed out by abstinence educators with a place for youth to sign the back, resembling a credit card (Valenti 31). Pro-abstinence slogans sold on girls t-shirts allow young women to identify as everything from the declarative, “I'm Waiting,” to the fetishized, “I'm Tight Like Spandex” (Baumgardner; Valenti 79).

Social investment in virginity is not limited to youth nor does it end with the beginning of sexual activity. Vaginal rejuvenation – the trimming, tightening and/or liposuction of labia and vaginal muscles – is the fastest growing form of cosmetic surgery in North America (Cormier 19; Valenti 73).

Hymenoplasty, the construction of a hymen, is marketed both to sexually active adult women as a way to physically restore virginity, and to never sexually active women concerned their bodies may not be read as virginal (Cormier 20). These surgeries transform adult women towards the ideals of youth fetishized in virginity genre pornography where purity is visually associated with tightness and smallness (Blank 197).

This thesis examines a portion of abstinence discourse that young women are literally paying for: sexual abstinence in popular teen media. Following the massive popularity of the novels, the film versions of *Twilight* (2008), *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* (2009), and *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse* (2010) all broke US box office records (Johnson; Fritz; Sperling). Time magazine named Stephenie Meyer one of the most influential people of 2008 (Silver 128). The impact of Meyer's success on the marketing of broader young adult fiction is evident through cover art choices as well as through the plots of promoted teen series published during the height of *Twilight's* popularity. The iconic white and red on black covers of the *Twilight* series are mimicked by many newer teen series as well as by the 2009 HarperCollins reissues of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

Popular vampire series published shortly after the *Twilight* saga include Richelle Mead's *Vampire Academy* (2007-2010) and P.C. Cast's *House of Night* novels (2007-2014). Many recent teen series follow a formula popularized by *Twilight*, where a mortal teenage girl encounters a supernatural boy, and his existence as a werewolf, faerie, angel, or other transcendental being complicates their relationship (see: Clare 2007-2014; Fitzpatrick 2009-2012; Livingston 2008-2011; Marr 2007-2011; Noël 2009-2011; Stiefvater 2009-2011).

The Twilight Saga has emerged during a time of cultural tension surrounding the relevance of sexual abstinence to an individual's success in life. In *Twilight* — and in many series following *Twilight*, such as Alyson Noël's *Immortals* novels (2008-2011) — when a heroine identifies herself as virgin and even sets out to become a non-virgin, she encounters supernatural barriers to sex. A large international readership of primarily young women are receiving a particular kind of story about sexuality through these texts and a committed critical, intersectional study of virginity narratives within *Twilight* is currently missing from academic discourse.

An Introduction to Virginity/Abstinence in *Twilight*

The importance of virginity may have never before been created and marketed so enticingly for young women as through Stephanie Meyer's teen series, *The Twilight Saga* (2005-2008). Chronicling the romance between seventeen year-old Bella and her supernatural love interests, a key feature throughout the series is its focus on Bella's virginal status and the ways in which virginity dictates her options in love and life. The sexualization of virginity is such a strong feature within the narrative that the genre was nicknamed “abstinence porn” by professor and fellow young adult author, Christine Seifert (2008), and widely criticized for its portrayal of sexuality by feminist media critics and scholars. Despite physically and psychologically violent depictions of teenage romance and eventual sex, *Twilight* and its sequels have

been immensely successful. The four-book series has sold over 100 million copies worldwide with translations into 37 languages and a collective 235 weeks on *The New York Time's Bestseller's List* (Adams & Akbar; Grossman; Shaw-Williams). Proven to be a major pop-cultural success with a youth audience, Meyer's books provide a rich cultural site for the analysis of popular narratives surrounding virginity and first sexual encounters.

Seifert credits *The Twilight Saga* with the creation of “a surprising new sub-genre of teen romance: It's abstinence porn, sensational, erotic and titillating”. In her review for *The Washington Post*, Elizabeth Hand (2008) similarly calls the *Twilight* series “an increasingly bizarre allegory of sexual abstinence”. The plot of *Twilight* is formulaic young adult romance fiction with a twist. A not extraordinary girl, Bella Swan, moves back to the rural town of her childhood and quickly becomes the love interest of the most attractive guy in high school; however, she soon discovers that Edward Cullen, who appears as a 17 year-old youth, is actually a century old vampire. Torn between his desire for Bella as a romantic partner and his desire to consume her blood, Edward is sure that he will kill Bella if they become too physically intimate.

Reading the series set mostly from Bella's perspective, it is not hard to understand why Seifert describes it as “abstinence porn”. Though believing herself to be plain, Bella describes Edward physically as “too beautiful to be real” (T 261) and looking “like a god” (NM 65). Their physical interactions are tense as Edward knows there is danger in his touching Bella and does so tentatively, the narrative speckled with descriptions such as this one:

He raised his hand, hesitant, conflict raging in his eyes, and then swiftly brushed the length of my cheekbone with his fingertips. His skin was icy as ever, but the trail his fingers left on my skin was alarmingly warm – like I'd been burned, but didn't feel the pain of it yet. (T 220)

At first, the smallest touches between them are eroticized through hesitancy and restriction. Edward needs to ask Bella to “be very still” so he can place his ear against her chest (T 275). When Edward

kisses Bella and she does not remain still, he abruptly pulls away: “I sighed, and my lips parted. He staggered back, breaking my grip effortlessly” (T 363). As their romantic and physical relationship develops across the series, Edward frequently puts a stop to their physical interactions, their sexual intimacy not extending beyond restrained kissed and clothed embraces prior to their marriage in the final book of the series.

Sarah Seltzer (2008), writing for *The Huffington Post*, and Seifert, writing for *Bitch Magazine*, each describe a key way the series subverts traditional gender roles in sexuality as the responsibility to protect virginites is shifted onto men. Seltzer writes that *Twilight* features an “inversion of abstinence-only/purity ball culture,” as the series portrays Edward, instead of Bella, as “the sexual gatekeeper”; however, “even while inverting the positions,” Seltzer continues, “Meyer doesn't change the game”. While Bella is not expected to protect her own virginity and “often loses control of herself” when embracing Edward, “[m]en, or vampires, are still dangerous and threatening while females are still breakable and fragile”. Seifert asserts that Bella only gains sexual forwardness by losing control of her body and becoming “absolutely dependent on Edward's ability to save her life, her virginity, and her humanity”. Where Bella does wish to take control of her own body and repeatedly voices her desire to become a vampire, Edward refuses to respect her choice. The decision is eventually taken out of Bella's immediate control when her death during childbirth forces Edward's agreement to transform her.

Twilight tells a direct story about sexual abstinence until marriage as a correct and desirable path to navigate youth sexuality. Natalie Wilson (2011), whose area of expertise is in literature and women's studies, points out, however, that, “[u]nlike the dominant cultural message that sex is bad, *The Twilight Saga* represents sexual activity as extremely desirable” (106). Strongly desiring sex and knowing that Edward wants to marry her, Bella agrees to marry under the condition that he will at least attempt to have sex with her as a human despite the danger to her life. It is Edward who insists on this ordering of their arrangement: marriage before sex. Wilson reads an “abstinence-only imperative” in this narrative, “equating pre-vampire sex to pre-marital sex, eliding the real danger of the first (sex with a vampire) with

the false danger touted in relation to the second (sex before marriage)” (109). As Bella engages in sex with Edward while still human, the message is extended to say that first sex is dangerous for women even within the context of marriage. As it is only Edward's extreme love for Bella and practice of personal restraint that enables him to not kill her during their first sexual experience together, the narrative of sexual abstinence in *Twilight* is about not only waiting for marriage, but of love and marrying the correct partner as a necessity to avoid violence.

Examining the Representations of Virginity in the *Twilight* Series: Research Questions & Model

This thesis summarizes my reading and analysis of virginity and virginity loss within the *Twilight* series as guided by three main research questions. Firstly, what are the dominant¹ narratives of youth sexuality, virginity and virginity loss, and who do they forget, exclude or marginalize? Secondly, how does the *Twilight* series subvert or reify dominant social discourse surrounding sexuality and virginity? Thirdly and lastly, within the *Twilight* series, how do gendered narratives of virginity interact with structural oppressions such as patriarchal violence, racism, classism, heterosexism, cissexism and ableism? These questions form the basis of my methodology and guide the organization of my thesis as I link each question to one of three keys for analysis: social discourse, subjectivity, and spatiality. Conducting discursive analysis of salient themes in the *Twilight* books connected to virginity, first sex, and reproduction, I explore how virginity and sexuality narratives are constructed and entwined with oppressive narratives. I explore my hypothesis that a deconstruction of the narratives of virginity will reveal the concept as one potentially harmful to the well-being of individuals and as implicitly connected to matrices of systemic oppression.

¹ I use the word dominant here to signify my interest in identifying unmarked ideologies that may be assumed to be natural or universal, rather than those from a specific identified religious or cultural perspective.

Epistemology & Methodology

My project assumes a feminist postmodern² understanding of reality and knowledge construction. Postmodern theory problematizes claims of objective truth, emphasizing the social construction of our world and highlighting how specific interests become privileged through the construction of reality. Queer theory teaches that terms such as women can be used as essentialist, exclusionary categories that marginalize trans individuals. Drawing on the work of Lynne Layton (1998), Lisa Cosgrove (2003) asserts that “there is a crucial difference between saying *femininity is symbolized* as relational and saying that *women* are relational [original emphasis]” (89). Recognizing that the constructions of gender and race are influenced by social processes, and that these processes cannot be empirically measured and separated out from any potentially inherent or natural traits, my project assumes that categories such as gender and race are inextricably socially constituted (See: Butler 1988; Gagnon & Simon 1973; Serano 2007).

My project is conducted in three parts, answering my research questions in sequence, and using this sequence to order my analysis of *Twilight* within three thematic chapters on virginity, femininity and masculinity. Firstly, I identify dominant cultural narratives of virginity and virginity loss through an examination of the broader social discourse surrounding virginity, paying particular attention to who is forgotten, excluded, or marginalized within these narratives. Secondly, I explore how the *Twilight* series subverts and/or reifies dominant social and cultural sexual discourse through themes surrounding individual characters and their subjective desires. Thirdly and lastly, I examine how narratives of virginity and virginity loss interact within the *Twilight* novels with structural oppressions through a spatial analysis of the world Meyer creates. The following section outlines these three parameters – social discourse, subjectivity, and spatiality – in order to establish my interpretive framework to be adopted in

² Postmodern and/or poststructuralist. Although these terms have nuanced meanings, I use the terms synonymously for their purpose within this project.

my analysis of the *Twilight* novels.

Social Discourse

To identify cultural narratives of virginity and virginity loss, my project begins with a literature review on previous virginity scholarship in order to examine dominant social meanings attributed to virginity across history and within contemporary culture. I outline significant prior works on virginity and virginity loss, as well as historical and political contexts leading up to present day sexual discourse. To discuss who these narratives forget, exclude or marginalize, I summarize scholarship that discusses subjects outside of dominant conceptions of virginity and highlight gaps in virginity scholarship where marginalized subjects are not discussed.

Subjectivity

To explore how dominant social and cultural ideas of virginity and virginity loss are subverted and/or reified through the *Twilight* series, I conduct a close reading of the series to locate salient textual quotes and vignettes related to virginity and virginity loss, as well as related to themes of femininity, masculinity and racialization. I use the subjective voices of *Twilight's* characters to discuss how sexual, gendered and racialized narratives are employed within the series. I ground this analysis by outlining common metaphors that real individuals use to view their own conceptions of first sex. I introduce these metaphors of a gift, a stigma, and a step in a process in my Virginity chapter and revisit those most relevant to Femininity and Masculinity in those sections.

Spatiality

The last element of my analysis is spatiality. An introduction of the supernatural into a 21st century American landscape requires a slight re-configuration of physical and geopolitical locations to be able to plausibly conceal supernatural beings. I explore the space that characters within *Twilight* occupy in relation to one another, as well as how bodies move through that space.

My use of spatiality as a tool is inspired by Katherine McKittrick's (2006) discussion of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) in which the effects of a supernatural intervention – protagonist Dana's involuntary time travel a century and a half into the past – are explored by McKittrick as a geographic event. The supernatural becomes spatial as Dana's time travel back and forth causes her home of 20th century Pasadena, California to be imbued with its history of slavery (McKittrick 1-5). Within the *Twilight* series, I assert that the supernatural is problematically used to overwrite racist and colonialist histories of the land, rather than to underscore and illuminate them. My spatial analysis is further influenced by Eli Clare (1999) who also uses a discussion of land in his book *Exile and Pride* to frame and organize his intersectional analysis of gender, sexuality, class and ability politics in the US.

Geography is a useful tool for showing how different oppressive themes intersect. For example, within *Twilight's* narrative there is no discussion of the economy or industry of Forks, Washington, the real-life logging town where *Twilight* is set. Forks is conceptualized by Meyer as a dreary and insignificant place: “It rains on this inconsequential town more than any other place in the United States of America” (T 3). Meyer evokes traditional lore of vampires avoiding the sun, but with a romanticized explanation of pale vampire skin as glittering in the sun. Excessive rain is used in conjunction with the narrative of vampire sun-skin to both explain the plausible concealment of vampires existence and to confine vampire movement on sunny days to the forests outside of town. Examination of the land illuminates a connection between the erasure of real US class and environmental issues and the race politics implicit in the imbuing of the forest as a playground for sparkling white vampires.

My initial analysis of the land in my thematic chapters as it explicitly relates to sexuality, gender and race will also form the basis for my final chapter and a broader intersectional analysis. To examine how narratives of virginity interact with a matrix of intersectional systemic oppression, I incorporate secondary literature analyzing the portrayal of race, heterosexuality and ability within *Twilight*. To add to this scholarship and to tie these themes together I use the land as a unifying idea.

2. Virginity: “Which is tempting you more, my blood or my body?” (NM 52)

Virgins, virginity and virginity loss are subjects that attracted a surge of interdisciplinary scholarly interest at the turn of the 21st century. Collectively, these studies support an understanding of virginity as a socially constructed phenomenon as they assert that virginity is not a physical property of the body and problematize the idea of a testable loss. Charting how meaning has been historically attributed to a virgin or non-virgin state, virginity scholarship has summarized varied and often contradictory metaphors for understanding virginity and virginity loss that are reflective of contemporary discourse. Problematizing the attribution of meaning to virginity, many scholars outline harmful consequences of societal focus on correct virginity loss in the past, yet some also focus primarily on reciting and potentially reifying those histories of virginity. All of the texts I have reviewed conclude with a politicized discussion about potential affect of abstinence-only sex education.

This chapter explores the line between virginity and post-virginity, the social importance and meaning attributed to virginity loss. Here I outline the historical contexts for virginity as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than as a medical fact found universally found within bodies of any gender. I contextualize contemporary presumptions of virginity as attached to the feminine body, dismantling physical tropes of virginity loss for women. To discuss the social importance and meaning attributed to virginity loss, I review the research conducted by Carpenter documenting common metaphors of virginity loss pulled from interviews with individuals reflecting on their own experiences of virginity and first sex. These real subjective experiences of virginity and first sex provide context for my examination of the fictional narratives of virginity within Meyer's *Twilight* series. *Twilight* can be viewed as a broadly successful incorporation of of pro-abstinence morals into the realm of pop culture. In reading virginity within *The Twilight Saga*, this chapter considers the elements of the narrative that relate directly to Bella's transition from virginity to post-virginity, focusing on the vignette of Bella and Edward's wedding night.

Historical Context: Understanding Virginity as a Socially Constructed Phenomenon

The Latin word *virgo*, from which the English word “virgin” is derived, refers to a never-married woman or girl, while a woman and wife is *uxor* (Blank 10). Similarly, the Greek word *gyne* refers to a woman/wife while *parthenos* is a girl/virgin (Blank 10). In many languages, words meaning woman or girl express marital status at the same time as sexual status and age, such as with the Hebrew words *betulah* and *almah*. In contemporary English, a woman does not need to be a wife, but it would be hard to separate “wife” from “woman” or the implication of sexual experience.

The concept of virgin most likely arose as a familial and socio-economic distinction between partnered and un-partnered women. Across history, it is distinctly and consistently associated with females and feminine bodies, an association that has evolved into contemporary assumptions about the biological nature of virginity, as well as the diagnostic capacity for doctors or other medical specialists to locate virginity within women's bodies. Throughout the majority of history, however, virginity has not commonly been medically defined.

In 2007, two books on virginity were published separately in response to the cultural climate in the United States shaped by the context of the pro-abstinence movement. Anke Bernau (2007) and Blank each begin their books on the history of virginity with a chapter deconstructing the socially assumed medical value or diagnostic capacity for virginity. “Humans,” according to historian and writer Blank, “have often evinced a strong desire to believe that sexual activity must, somehow or other, literally alter the body” (80). As an example of this, she references rumours about masturbation causing various ills or other evidence upon the body, such as blindness, skin blemishes or the growth of new body hair. Bernau, whose academic focus is on Medieval Literature and Culture, and Blank each cite the late thirteenth century text, *De Secretis Mulierum* – translating to “On the Secrets of Women” or “Women's Secrets” - for medieval signs of virginity. One key offering of this time period is the idea that virginity affects how

women urinate: a virgin's urine being clearer or even sparkling, producing a “heightened hissing noise”, or a virgin physically urinating from a higher point in the body (Bernau 7). Female virginity could also be tested for by having a woman smell ground-up lilies, or “the fruit of a lettuce”, to check whether or not she urinated immediately afterwards (Bernau 7; Blank 82). Other common historical tests for virginity related to fumigating the body through the vulva – either to check for immediate urination, or to see if the smoke was detectable upon the breath – and observations on the perceived tightness of a given vagina (Blank 83-85). What mid-twentieth century women's magazines referred to as “the pencil test” – placing a pencil below your breast to assess its pertness by whether or not the pencil drops – likely originated from a relic of virginity tests: sagging or shallow breasts, downward pointing nipples, large nipples or areolas were all once believed to be signs of sexual experience (Blank 80). The way a woman behaves or dresses, her capacity to interact with a magical object such as taking a drink of water from a special cup or even perform an act of seeming magic by carrying water in a sieve, may also point to her virginity or non-virginity (Kelly ix).

Although many historical beliefs of how virginity is embodied have not survived into contemporary narratives, the belief that virginity may be found within women's bodies has. Elements of many virginity signs and tests are connected to the idea that a body with a vagina is closed until an act of sexual intercourse opens the body. This idea underlies two beliefs that have successfully persisted into contemporary narratives of virginity loss: the idea of a hymen that breaks or ruptures upon vaginal entry, and the expectation that a majority of women bleed, experience pain and or undergo a transformation of vaginal tightness while participating in sexual intercourse for the first time. Bernau notes that, “the hymen is still commonly thought to be the central sign of 'intact' virginity in Western culture today” despite the plethora of factors effecting whether or not any individual woman has a particular shape, measurement or substance of hymen (2). Only second to the hymen, blood, as evidence of the end of virginity, is also prevalent.

(De)Constructing the Hymen

Hymen originated as a Greek word simply meaning membrane. Where the female sexual and reproductive system was concerned, medical writers of the first centuries of the common era focused their concern with the womb due to its capacity to transform sperm and blood – the substance easily seen as the product of the uterus – into offspring (Blank 44). In the Middle Ages, medical writers sometimes referenced a *pellicula* – a skin – near the opening of the vaginal canal into the vulva, but did not label it as a hymen and only occasionally speak of hymens at all, instead viewing the shape of the womb as indicative of virginity or sexual experience (Bernau 4; Kelly 12).

Blank credits medieval scholar Kathleen Coyne Kelly (2000) with discovering the earliest use of the word hymen to mean something similar to contemporary narratives of the hymen. It was not until the fifteenth century that physician Michael Savonarola wrote this description in his work *Practica maior*: “The cervix is covered by a subtle membrane called the hymen, which is broken at the time of deflowering, so that the blood flows” (qtd. in Blank 45). Although the vaginal hymen that does exist is not especially close to the cervix, Savonarola speaks of the hymen as specifically located within the vagina, and his definition evokes a very similar meaning as is often communicated to youth today: there is a thin membrane within the vagina that tears during sexual intercourse and is responsible for the bleeding that sometimes accompanies first sexual experiences.

The idea that the blood, as well as pain, that some individuals experience during their first participation in vaginal intercourse is the result of tearing an imperforate, or only slightly perforated, membrane within the vaginal canal is not a medical fact, nor is there record of it being stated with any medical authority previous to the 15th century; however, it is a cultural narrative that dates back further, and has persisted throughout history. We know rumours of it existed in the third century, as Soranus of Ephesus wrote about a membrane within the vagina explicitly to refute its existence (Bernau 4). In one of

the earliest surviving complete texts on the subject, *Gynaecology*, Soranus writes, “the belief that a thin membrane grows in the middle of the vagina and that it is this membrane that tears in defloration . . . is an error” (qtd. in Blank 46). Soranus had good reason to doubt the existence of this membrane, as he had never found evidence of one within the bodies of virginal patients, or during dissections of virginal bodies (Blank 46). He correctly reasoned that if the breaking of an imperforate membrane was responsible for pain, then women would experience this pain during their first menstruation, and “during defloration there should no longer be any” (qtd. in Blank 47).

There is, in fact, a vaginal membrane that the majority of women are born with, although it does not resemble historic or contemporary rumours of something that must be torn to have sex, or menstruate, as it rarely creates a barrier within the vaginal canal. Referring to the fetal development of reproductive organs and genitalia that happens while in the womb, Blank explains that, “put in the simplest terms possible, a hymen is what's left over when you dig a hole” (32). A solid vaginal cord extended between the uterus and the interior wall of the exterior body goes through a process called canalization, where the cord hollows out into a tube, becoming the vaginal canal extended between cervix and vulva (Blank 33). Similar to other mucous membranes found in the liminal places between the internal and external body – such as the underside of the eyelid or the inside of the nose or mouth – the hymen is soft and moist; it is also hairless, flexible and often very thin, with no muscle beneath it and few or no nerves within it (Blank 36).

Popular discourse around hymens evokes imagery of something imperforate that must be torn prior to or during first sex. Blank uses two similes to describe the hymen of popular imagination, describing it as “like the head of a drum, a skin that is stretched across the opening of the vagina” (33), or “like the paper-covered hoop through which the circus lion tamer makes his charges leap” (36). I remember a young version of myself imagining the hymen as much deeper inside the body: it was easy to see and feel that there was no membrane stretched near the vulva, and through the informal and nonfactual sex education that was passed from peer to peer, I had heard that the hymen was too high up in

the vaginal canal to be easily torn or pierced by self-examination or with tampons. What I did not understand was what I was looking for.

The hymen, or vaginal corona³, is “a small, flexible flange of what used to be body wall tissue” found just inside the opening to the vagina (Blank 33). Although hymenal tissue can form in many different shapes, the most common two shapes are annular – a circle or ring – and crescentic, or U-shaped (Blank 37).⁴ Imperforate hymens – where the hymenal tissue stretches across the vagina without any opening – are possible but extremely rare and can be opened surgically in order to make menstruation viable (Blank 36). Much more commonly, hymens have a central opening that starts out small and grows a millimetre or two in diameter each year (Blank 37). Just as hymenal tissue varies in shape from one individual to another, it can vary in thickness and flexibility. It is also affected by hormones, particularly estrogen which “both thickens the genital mucous membranes and makes them more elastic” meaning that the same individual may experience their hymenal tissue behaving differently at different ages (Blank 39). Blank notes how this “seems strange, as we think of think of them as being static unless they are 'torn' or 'broken', but hymens change shape all by themselves” (38). Hymens found in adults may be fragile or strong, ruptured or flexible, present or worn away, and although some may tear during penetrative sex, not all do. Bernau points out that where discernible hymens are present, of those that do tear or break, “many rupture due to other activities, such as sports” and therefore “it is not possible to use it as evidence for either lost or maintained virginity,” especially when examining the bodies of adults and emerging adults (2).

Popular crime and justice system themed television shows emerging in the 1990s and early 2000s – such as *Law and Order* (1990), *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000) and the subsequent spin-offs shows of each – prominently feature the bodies of live and dead victims of crime as containing infallible

³ The Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RSFU) coined the term “vaginal corona” in 2009 an effort to dispel myths associated with the term “hymen” (Knöfel; Landes)

⁴ Annular and crescentic are two of five shapes categorized by The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, which Blank asserts are “in line with many medical textbooks” (37). The other three in order of frequency are redundant and fimbriated, followed by septate (Blank 37-8).

empirical evidence. One way this manifests in the fictional stories is the depiction of medical examiners making assertions about whether or not a woman or girl has had sex before, often referencing the state of her hymen. Despite a surge in medical research efforts initiated in the 1980s to create a medical standard for proving whether or not a child has been sexually assaulted, research has demonstrated that although transactions of the hymen may be noted as red flags for possible sexual abuse in children, no perfect standard exists as the hymens of neither children nor adults are universal; the interpretations of hymens by physicians, including specialists, include significant margins of error, and can be extremely biased towards the information accompanying them (Blank 56-7, 93-4).

Blood as Proof

In Sylvia Plath's (1963) semi-autobiographic novel *The Bell Jar*, the main character Ester Greenwood wonders briefly, as the man she has been engaging in sex exits the bedroom for the washroom, if she is still a virgin or if her “virginity had obstructed him in some way” (219). As she realizes that she is bleeding, she is both startled and enthused:

Then the stories of blood-stained bridal sheets and capsules of red ink bestowed on already deflowered brides floated back to me. I wondered how much I would bleed, and lay down, nursing the towel. It occurred to me that the blood was my answer. I couldn't possibly be a virgin any more. I smiled into the dark. I felt part of a great tradition.

(Plath 219)

After leaving his apartment, and eventually realizing the blood flow is not slowing or stopping, Ester heads to the emergency ward. Having had only a few words whispered to him about what happened, upon examining her and finding the origin of the blood, the doctor says to her, “You're one in a million . . . it's one in a million it happens to like this” (223). Although specifying hemorrhaging as a rare

result, Ester's recent sexual activity is also inferred from the presence of vaginal bleeding, "it" being her first participation in vaginal intercourse.

Blood is a historically prevalent sign of virginity. According to Bernau, it is "arguably the one considered most important," as the only sign thought to give a clearer answer about a woman's virginity status was pregnancy (7). "Bleeding as the result of penetration was understood as proof" of having been virginal up until that sex act, although, Bernau clarifies, "not necessarily because of a ruptured hymen" (7). It was more commonly believed throughout the Middle Ages, "that the tighter and therefore more sensitive virginal vagina would be injured on first intercourse, that the delicate blood vessels lining the vagina would be ruptured" (Bernau 7). Bernau explains this means pain was also a sign of virginity, one that went hand in hand with blood (7). Blank similarly discusses bleeding during first intercourse as likely "the oldest and foremost belief about female virginity," (89) stating that for "literally thousands of years, Western culture has presumed that first sexual intercourse creates a wound in a woman's body" (90). Blank notes that despite it being well known in both contemporary culture and historically that not everyone bleeds the first time they insert something into their vaginas, little research has been conducted on it (89). According to Blank, one of the very few articles existing on the subject within medical literature is a brief one by Dr. Sara Paterson-Brown (1998) who cites an informal survey she conducted of 41 of her female colleagues: "14 (34%) bled on first intercourse, 26 (63%) did not, and one could not remember" (Paterson-Brown 451; qtd. in Blank 89). Although it would be incorrect to take this informally gathered small-sample and assume it to be representative of any larger population, Paterson-Brown's finding that more than half the women she asked did not remember bleeding during their first experience of intercourse is notable as it questions the historical narrative that bleeding is standard and not bleeding is the exception. Paterson-Brown states that bleeding during intercourse is an unreliable indicator of virginity for women in Western cultures, due to the prevalence of tampon use and athletics for women (Paterson-Brown 451).

From light spotting to more rare occurrences of dangerous hemorrhaging, blood has been one

potential result of first intercourse for many women throughout history as ancient medical texts outline aftercare for sex, prescribing methods for how to stop the bleeding. Writing for her website *Scarleteen*, which seeks to provide free comprehensive sex education for youth online, Heather Corrina (2010) speculates that bleeding during first sex was likely more common throughout periods of history where girls were expected to have vaginal intercourse at a younger age than is common today. Regardless of frequency, Blank states there is “no reason to believe that bleeding was any more *inevitable* a part of virginity loss for our foremothers than it is for us now [emphasis mine]” (90). Tampons and athletics are frequently cited as contemporary explanations for why a hymen looks the way it does, or why a particular woman does or does not bleed, but these excuses are given in response to the assumption that women's bodies have and should routinely participate in these rituals, without actual evidence of biological universality.

It is true that there have been many times and places where confirmation of a woman's – likely, a bride's – virginity through blood was the socio-cultural expectation. “Bloody bedclothes or personal linens,” says Blank, “have, for centuries, been the standard of proof by which a bride's honour was judged,” regardless of how dangerous an expectation it is to place upon a body, especially in times and places where the penalty for being deemed not virginal at marriage could result in murder (90). Blank calls the expectation of blood a fantasy of women's virginity, but explains that when “stakes that ride on the realization of that fantasy” are so high, “so is the incentive to counterfeit” (90). Although there are many variations on each kind of strategy, the appearance of vaginal bleeding has been routinely created through the insertion of something into the vagina that will burst easily, or through self-mutilation. In a manuscript from the eleventh-century attributed to Trotula of Salerno, leeches are recommended as another way to ensure bleeding. By the placement of one, a bride may create a wound on her labia, the idea being that although the leech is removed and the wound will crust over, the motions of sexual intercourse will cause the recent wound to reopen (Blank 91).

In her book, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, Kelly (2000) uses the

guidelines for faking virginity across medical texts, alongside the quantity and diversity of ways to test for virginity, to argue against the existence of a “stable, readable, knowable female body” (13). The prevalent concern with locating virginity within the female body, and diversity of ways to do so unsuccessfully, undermines its existence. Virginity cannot be universally tested for within the body, because virginity is a social, rather than a physical conception. Kelly also discusses the disdain with which many Christian scholars viewed medical examinations of virginity (13). As virginity became a tool of personal sanctity and salvation it became entwined with religious concepts of purity, goodness and chastity. This shifting cultural definition meant that the importance of virginity was no longer tied to a trait of the physical body alone.

Not all women are born with hymens⁵ or experience any measurable change during first sexual encounters as human sex organs do not have universal distinctions to indicate virginity and post-virginity (Bernau 4). Although many histories imply the existence of a testable virginity through evaluation rituals, passing these tests has never been definitive, and these histories are nuanced with other rituals to ensure that certain bodies pass. Despite the consensus on this issue within virginity scholarship, the belief in the hymen, and in blood as an expected result from first vaginal intercourse, persist into present day. In fact, contemporary biomedicine has provided yet new ways for women to pass tests of both expectations. Patterson-Brown describes what she calls “[t]he simplest technique of hymenorraphy, performed days before a wedding,” as using “catgut sutures to approximate hymen remnants (with or without incorporation of a gelatin capsule containing a blood-like substance which bursts on intercourse)” (Patterson-Brown 451). Non-surgical options are also available online, and for approximately thirty dollars an elastic hymen filled with artificial blood can be ordered for delivery through the mail⁶.

The breaking of the hymen and bleeding during a woman's first sexual experience are important

⁵ Blank (2007) states that “virtually every woman is in fact born with one, the estimated frequency of women being born without discernible hymens given at less than 0.03 percent” (33); however, since not all women are born with vaginas, not all women can be born with hymens.

⁶ Several websites sell insertable hymens over the internet, including hymenshop.com, hymenshop.net, and artificial-hymen.info

themes in the study of supernatural narratives of virginity loss. A vampire whose bite is often read as a metaphor for sex leaves the body acted upon as marked, bleeding, and often forever changed, either through human death, or a cycle of death and rebirth in transformation from human to vampire form. Just as post-sex a woman is rarely considered again to be a virgin, a vampire cannot ever return to human life. These themes are particularly evident in the concluding books of *The Twilight Saga*, where first sex and virginity are explicit topics in the text alongside supernatural themes. The first sexual experience of the main character, Bella, leaves her injured, pregnant and without a clear memory of the encounter. Further, her pregnancy requires that for her life to be saved, she must be transformed into a vampire by her partner. Sex in *Twilight* leaves the woman marked to the point of death and transformation.

Dominant Socio-cultural Meanings Attributed to Virginity (/Loss)

Virginity scholarship has asserted that virginity is not a physically identifiable property of the body, nor is it universally testable. Blank claims that although “there is no purely biological argument for human interest in virginity” (25), it is likely explained through sexual difference in human reproduction, the importance of female virginity originating as a way to render the paternity of children knowable (26). Blank and Bernau each devote much of their early discussion to accounts of “virgin sickness”, a variety of lore outlining symptoms of illness indicative of individuals remaining virginal for too long, further signifying the social importance of virginity – and the sanctioned end of virginity – for the control of reproduction (Bernau 10-25; Blank 65-70). However, Blank notes that, at certain points in history, “the framework supporting our regard for virginity undergoes renovation” (252). Blank highlights two points where the dominant meaning of virginity shifted:

This happened during the early years of the Christian era, when virginity, customarily a socioeconomic and familial concern, was suddenly mobilized as a primary mode of

individual sanctity. And it is happening now, as virginity is drifting away from a religious framework and what remains of its socioeconomic and kinship underpinnings and is becoming instead a way to organize experience and identity. (252)

Other scholars concur that Christianity – in the West – and a number of relatively recent changes within the past century have each drastically impacted the meaning of virginity. Bernau explains that “the centrality of religious institutions and learning in Western culture over the centuries has meant that they shaped the way virginity was understood in the wider culture as well” (31). Contemporary understandings of virginity thought to be secular were shaped by Christian mythology. The recent shift towards virginity as a way to organize experience and identity has been influenced by twentieth century changes in social science, feminism and medicine, in particular the development of hormonal birth control (Carpenter 37-43).

The social construction of virginity varies over time and geography, but certain commonalities remain consistent. In her analysis of virginity within medieval writing, Bernau summarizes that “there is always a range of virginities present in writing at any given moment” and that “while these are not static, neither do they change so radically as to become unrecognizable or seem new” (72). Blank similarly says this about a broader history of virginity, claiming that there has always been a “multiplicity of ways of thinking about virginity” and that “conceptualizing multiple virginities . . . is nothing particularly new” (254). While accounting for diverse variance of any given time or place, specific themes of meaning attributed to virginity can be pulled out across history as dominant. According to the histories collected by Blank and Bernau, virginity most often represents a framework that is: socio-economic, as a commodity attached to female bodies for reproductive control and as an illness when prolonged virginity threatens reproduction; a form of religious devotion; and more recently, an identity conception or experiential rite of passage.

Narratives of virginity and first sex vary as they are about personal experience and sense of identity. Laura Carpenter researched these subjective experiences of virginity loss, noting that prior to

her study “surprisingly little was known about young Americans' definitions, interpretations, and experiences of virginity loss” (206). For her project Carpenter interviewed 61 individuals between 18 and 35, identifying three dominant metaphors used by participants correlating to their decision-making and feelings around virginity loss: virginity as a gift, a stigma, and as a step in a process (8; 11). Carpenter identified a distinct fourth metaphor, virginity as an act of worship, that also emerged, but very infrequently compared to the other three (11). Carpenter combined these metaphors to develop a four-pronged model to categorize narratives of virginity and virginity loss. As these metaphors are taken from subjectively identified narratives, they are an asset for my reading of fictional virginity, particularly as they reflect and overlap with historical themes of virginity as a socio-economic commodity and illness, as religious, and as experiential. Notably, Carpenter's research connects the narratives through which individuals view virginity with patterns in sexual choices among each group, suggesting links between sexual discourse and behaviour (13).

In the section that follows, I examine the three dominant metaphors for how individuals view their own experience of virginity loss based on Carpenter's research to provide evidence of the way virginity narratives vary between individuals. The subjective, lived experiences of virginity as a Gift, a Stigma, and as a Step in a Process challenge the universality of virginity as a socially constructed identity. In fact, it is common for the same individual to view their own virginity loss differently at different points in their life. Although the type of interview-based research Carpenter performed cannot be extended to fictional characters, this research is important for understanding how the way in which an individual views virginity influences when, how, and with whom they engage in sexual experiences. Carpenter's research also describe the ways in which virginity narratives presume standards of whiteness and heterosexuality, themes that are important to my understanding of virginity narratives as colonial and to my reading of the *Twilight* series. It is with the basis of these metaphors as repenting real, lived experiences of virginity loss that I interpret the more fantastical understandings of virginity as depicted in Meyer's series.

A Gift

Virginity as a precious gift that you give to a partner in marriage is the model valorized by the pro-abstinence movement. Highlighting the commodification of virginity within the sexual purity movement, Valenti describes physical tokens of abstinence education that are handed out to girls at state-funded public schools across the United States, as well as at Christian youth events. On one, a small card with a gold coloured rose pin attached, the accompanying text reads: “You are like a beautiful rose. Each time you engage in pre-marital sex, a precious petal is stripped away. Don't leave your future husband holding a bare stem. Abstain” (Valenti 32). When first sexual experiences are portrayed as valuable, they are often also portrayed as only valuable within specific contexts. Across the majority of history, virginity is of particular worth when attached to a female body, and the value is only seen as spent well if given or sold to a man through marriage. As in the case of the rose pin, while abstinence only sex education often describes virginity as a precious gift that a woman gives to a man within marriage, sex for women outside of marriage is likened to acts that strip something precious away and leave her lacking as a woman.

The gift metaphor is connected to the commodification of women's virginity for the purpose of knowing and controlling paternity in an unsurprisingly gendered way. Carpenter states that inclinations both towards the ideal of virginity until marriage and towards the gift metaphor are “fostered by traditional gender beliefs and serve as way for young women to enact feminine identities” (189). In Carpenter's research women were more likely than men to understand virginity as a gift (189). The gift metaphor was especially prevalent among straight women with very few of Carpenter's lesbian or gay interviewees reporting ever having understood virginity as a gift, likely “because a model of virginity loss that revolves around traditional understandings of femininity and masculinity has relatively little appeal

for people who desire same-sex partners” (Carpenter 68). The men in Carpenter's research who reported viewing virginity as a gift were “disproportionately young” compared to other respondents (99).

In total, half of the individuals Carpenter interviewed understood virginity as a gift at some point throughout their lives, although this does not mean that the majority of them believed it was only valuable within the context of marriage (11). Instead, the majority of those who understood virginity as a gift interviewed by Carpenter chose to have sex for the first time within the context of a relationship, but outside of marriage:

This perspective – treating virginity as precious but accepting its premarital loss – has steadily grown in popularity since the 1960s, as American society has grown more secular, marriages have become less stable, and more people accept the feminist claim that women should enjoy the same sexual freedoms as men. (100)

Likely due to their orchestration of first sex as a special and intentional event with a partner, four-fifths of those who viewed virginity as a gift practiced some form of birth control during their first sexual act, which Carpenter notes is more than those in groupings by the other metaphors in her study (67).

Universal among those who understood virginity to be a gift was engagement in “increasingly intimate sexual acts”, whether across consecutive partners or within one relationship (Carpenter 64).

Discussing gift-giving and the importance of reciprocity, Carpenter explains that individuals who “favour the gift metaphor . . . run the risk that their partners will determine what happens when they lose their virginity” (88). When individuals perceive first sex as giving a partner an irretrievable part of their own self, they may make more of an effort to maintain an unsatisfactory relationship in which they've engaged in a meaning invested first sexual experience (Carpenter 86). Additionally, they may be especially hurt by a negative experience with their sexual partner after first sex, for example, if their partner questions the authenticity of their virginity. This happened to one of Carpenter's interviewees when she did not experience vaginal bleeding (87).

Carpenter's research also suggested that individuals frame the definitions and understanding of

virginity they view others with on whether or not their own first sexual experience lined up with their ideal. For example, when asked about the idea of secondary virginity, “people whose own experiences had fallen short of their expectations . . . expressed sympathy for non-virgins who hoped to start over and choose a better second time” while those whose experiences lived up to their expectations “stressed virginity's uniqueness over volition and dismissed the possibility of a secondary virginity” (Carpenter 95). Deciding to disregard one sexual experience as the first due to displeasure – such as stopping sexual intercourse due to physical pain – in favour of a later sexual experience being named as the real first, was common among and actually unique to those who viewed their virginity as a gift (Carpenter 65).

A Stigma

On deciding to have sex with a man she's just met in *The Bell Jar*, Ester explains her desire to have sex with him upon realizing that he was likely seeing other women:

I also needed somebody quite experienced to make up for my lack of it, and Irwin's ladies reassured me on this head. Then, to be on the safe size, I wanted somebody I did not know and wouldn't go on knowing – a kind of impersonal, priestlike official, as in the tales of tribal rites . . . Ever since I'd learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck. It had been of such enormous importance to me for so long that my habit was to defend it at all costs. I had been defending it for five years and I was sick of it. (218)

Carpenter states that, “Americans have historically viewed men's virginity as a stigma and women's a gift – perceptions that undergird the sexual double standard” (103). Ester's decision to end her virginity marks her rejection of this gendered standard, fuelled by the discovery that her sometimes boyfriend, Buddy, has left his virginity behind. In Carpenter's study, younger women were more likely to interpret

virginity as a stigma in order to challenge feminine norms (138).

Carpenter's research suggests that the fear of being discovered a virgin – by potential sex partners or others — may affect the sexual behaviour of those who understand virginity as a stigma. Although almost all of those who engaged in sex for the first time with a partner aware of their virginity used contraception, others who chose not to disclose virginity avoided insisting on the use of or initiating dialogue about contraception out of concern it might somehow expose their inexperience (Carpenter 121, 128). Carpenter highlights this “distinctive bent towards concealment” as “the chief reason that the stigmatized were the group least likely to use birth control or practice safer sex” (137). Across Carpenter's respondents who viewed virginity as a stigma, none hoped to share virginity loss with another virgin and the majority expressed their preference for a sexually experienced partner (114).

As “people frequently interpret one stigma as indicating the existence of another”, some individuals expressed concern that remaining virginal would stigmatize them in other ways as well, such as being assumed to be religious (Carpenter 111). Dominant heterosexual conceptions of male virginity in the United States associate virginity with homosexuality, and some of Carpenter's male respondents were eager to shed the double-stigma of virginity and suspected queerness: “through virginity loss, they had sought, more or less consciously, to lose two stigmas at once” (109). The gay men interviewed by Carpenter almost all interpreted their virginity as a stigma, and for some having straight sex first was at once a way to both shed one stigma and to test or gain insight into their sexual identity.

The historical and contemporary framing of male virginity as a stigma to shed as soon as possible serves to marginalize male victims of sexual assault. One of Carpenter's interviewees discusses the woman who raped him and how “a lot of people say that can't happen” (qtd. in Carpenter 134). Unlike many other victims of rape, he no longer viewed himself to be a virgin after the assault. Carpenter notes that although he later came to “exclude coerced sex from his definition of virginity loss” when speaking of others and in generalities, “he did not apply this new definition retrospectively to himself, perhaps because doing so would have necessitated revising the way he had understood his sexual history for

several years” (136). Overall, Carpenter found that those who viewed virginity as a stigma had minimal expectations for their first sexual experiences compared to those who viewed virginity as a gift (137).

Social norms of femininity and masculinity intersect with the stigmatization of virginity “in ways that tend to empower female virgins while disempowering their male counterparts” (Carpenter 138). Carpenter found that younger women were more likely to interpret virginity as a stigma, and that doing so “allowed them to challenge the sexual double standard and defy traditional feminine norms” (138). Men who view virginity as a stigma are more likely to feel disempowered through the process of first sex, especially if they are ridiculed for their sexual inexperience around the time of first sex, or by a sex partner (Carpenter 124). The vast majority of all individuals in Carpenter's study who conceptualized virginity as a stigma previous to their first sexual experience later re-conceptualized first sex as “a step in the process of growing up” (140).

A Step in a Process

When Plath's Ester speaks about her chosen circumstances for first sex in *The Bell Jar*, she compares it to an “impersonal, priestlike official, as in the tales of tribal rites” (218). Like many of Carpenter's interviewees, Ester understands her virginity through multiple metaphors: she was raised to believe that her virginity was a gift to save, comes to see that expectation as a weight hanging around her neck that she may liberate herself from and finally speaks about first sex itself as a rite of passage. Published in 1963, *The Bell Jar* was written after Margaret Mead challenged Western conceptions of pre-martial virginity as universally important through several texts on youth in the South Pacific beginning with *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928). Carpenter connects Mead's influence with Bronislaw Malinowski's *The Sexual Lives of Savages* (1929), citing both as “introducing educated Americans to the concept of puberty rites – ritualized celebrations of an individual's passage from children to adolescence or

adulthood” (141). When first sex is disconnected from marriage in a non-shameful way, it makes sense to view it as its own passage, one of several rites on the path to adulthood.

One-third of Carpenter's interview subjects likened virginity loss to a rite of passage or more specifically “to a step in two interrelated processes: becoming an adult, and acquiring knowledge about sexuality” (143). Many popular cultural narratives of virginity strongly link sexual experience with becoming an adult. Marriage has also traditionally been understood as a rite of passage into adulthood, and with the distancing of virginity loss from marriage in contemporary society, virginity loss has emerged as its own rite of passage. Many of Carpenter's interviewees linked the transition from virginity to sexual activity with the transition from high school to college or other life beyond high school (167).

Understanding virginity loss as a rite of passage – or as a step in a process– is a differently gendered alternative to the sexual double standard at play between previous metaphors of gift and stigma. Only slightly more women than men in Carpenter's study understood virginity as a step in a process, suggesting that this metaphor has a gender-neutral appeal (144). It is not, however, ungendered, as “people tend to think in terms of becoming not just generic adults, but specifically adult *women* and *men* [original emphasis]” (Carpenter 144). While an individual of any gender may draw on the process metaphor, it is typically drawn on in the construction of specific gendered identities and sexualities (144).

Like those who favoured the gift metaphor, those who viewed virginity loss as a step in a process universally participated in increasingly intimate sexual acts, although for the purpose of expanding personal sexual education rather than testing and gaining trust within a romantic relationship (Carpenter 147). Those who favoured the process metaphor also favoured romantic relationships for sex, but not out of idealization of them, more likely seeing them “as the context best suited for satisfying in stages their curiosity about sex” (Carpenter 148). The majority of those who viewed virginity as a rite or a step were open about their virginity with their first sexual partner and approximately half engaged in first sex with a fellow virgin (Carpenter 144). Two-thirds of those who viewed their virginity as a step in a process used contraception during first sex (Carpenter 158)

Viewing first sex as one step in an ongoing exploration of sex acts meant that those “who favoured the process metaphor were far better prepared for 'imperfect' or physically unremarkable encounters” (Carpenter 159). Many found first sex to be immensely satisfying as a rite of passage (Carpenter 159). One of Carpenter's respondents spoke of virginity loss as a zero marker between his life previous to partnered sexual activity and his sexual life afterwards (172). Those who favoured the process metaphor were “acutely aware of the possibility of constructing their identities through virginity loss – trading one social status for being precisely what their interpretation of that event entails” (Carpenter 175). This was especially poignant for individuals whose first sex was with a same-sex partner; Carpenter notes that “heterosexual women and men likewise demonstrated their sexual identities through virginity loss, although they were typically less conscious of doing so” (176). Notably, of the women Carpenter interviewed who framed their own experiences of first sex as a rite of passage or as one step in a process, none felt sexually disempowered, even in cases where their partner had more experience with sex (171).

Whose Virginity Counts?

In January of 2004, Rosie Reid, an eighteen year-old student from the University of Bristol, made headlines when she created an online auction for the sale of her virginity. After the auction website *Ebay* removed her listing, Reid continued the auction on her own website and reported to media that the transaction was consummated with the highest bidder in March of 2004. Although Reid was not the first individual to list her own virginity for public sale online, she appears to have been the first to succeed. When she listed her virginity for auction, she did not hide her identity as a lesbian or her previous sexual experience with women. Reid's partner went with her to the hotel where she met her client, staying in a nearby room (“Student 'sells virginity' via web”). However sexually experienced she may have been,

Reid auctioned her virginity on the basis that she had never before had sex with a man. On the subject of this auction, Blank says that “an authoritative silence” within media coverage and from the bidders themselves “told the world that Reid's [previous] sexual experience was not considered valid” (12). For the purposes of selling virginity, “all that mattered to either the journalists or the many men who placed bids in the hopes of gaining one-time sexual access to Reid was that she had never been penetrated by a penis” (Blank 12). In Reid's story, her virginity is defined as heterosexual.

As virginity is historically associated with women's bodies, it is also primarily heterosexual, and its definition may be used to police the boundaries of sexual experience. Scholar and poet Adrienne Rich (1980) named “compulsory heterosexuality” the pattern by which heterosexuality is assumed to be the standard or default for all, while anything else is vilified, discouraged or rendered invisible (Carpenter 44-5). One effect of compulsory heterosexuality is the way in which virginity is predominantly defined as vaginal intercourse with the insertion of a penis. Blank suggests that coupled with its unique capacity for reproduction, penile-vaginal intercourse is historically heralded as the definitive sex act precisely because it is also “uniquely heterosexual” (10). Vaginal penetration by a penis is not exclusive to heterosexual sex or relationships – it has been constructed as heterosexual because of the way different genitals have been gendered within the context of cissexism – but the privileging of heterosexuality and penile-vaginal intercourse are undoubtably interlocked. Carpenter adds that the tendency to define virginity by heterosexual standards is self-perpetuating and also serves to reify compulsory heterosexuality (44). Although many of her lesbian, bisexual and gay interview subjects questioned the definition of sex in order to discuss virginity as first sex, the majority of heterosexual respondents did not (Carpenter 44-5).

Social constructions around virginity and virginity loss must also be contextualized in terms of race. Blank states, “in the West, virginity not only has a sexual orientation and a gender, it has a colour” (11). The colonization of many countries by white Europeans bearing an oppressive Christian symbology of light and dark as respectively representing goodness and sin led to the racialization of Indigenous peoples as sexually other, primitive and deviant (Blank 11). Believing racialized peoples to be inherently

sinful and lacking sexual morality, Europeans framed virginity as “an attribute of being civilized, which was to say Christian, European, and white” (Blank 11). Valenti traces this belief into contemporary media and pop culture while discussing the phenomenon that Ariel Levy (2005) termed “raunch culture”: an over-sexed culture that objectifies women but also encourages women to objectify themselves. Discussing the cultural backlash towards young women, their sexualities and perceived promiscuity, Valenti discusses how concern is disproportionately expressed for the sexual purity of young white women:

Why? Because the sexuality of young women of colour – especially African Americans and Latinas – is never framed as 'good girls gone bad'; rather, they're depicted as having some degree of pathologized virginity from the get-go, no matter what their virginity status. You'll find articles about STI rates, pregnancy and poverty – which *are* issues that affect women of colour disproportionately and deserve attention. But when articles about the sexual infection rates of African American women are one column over from an article about young white women's spring break, a disturbing cultural narrative is reinforced – that 'innocent' white girls are being lured into an oversexualized culture, while young black women are already part of it [original emphasis]. (47)

Alongside substance use/abuse, medical literature uses questions about first sex as an indicator of a person's tendencies towards risky behaviour. In her research, Carpenter found that “some metaphors for virginity are more conducive to emotional and physical well-being . . . than others” (45). Studies, presented from a position of medical authority, create an ordering of some individuals behaviour as safer than others based on the types of first sex they engage in without taking privilege into account. Valenti employs the bell hooks essay “Naked Without Shame” (1998) to note that “since the time of U.S. slavery, men have benefited from positioning black women as naturally promiscuous because it absolves them of guilt when they sexually assault and rape women of colour” (45).

While Carpenter demonstrated how virginity loss may be used in the construction of gender and

sexual identities, she drew on other researchers to examine racial identity as inseparable from these constructions. Applying the idea that Deborah Tolman (1996) calls the “myth of the urban girl”, Carpenter discusses how the conceptualization of virginity as a gift allows racialized women to construct a “morally upstanding” identity through their understanding of first sex (Carpenter 100). While young white women especially may find sex empowering as the shedding of traditional femininity and gendered sexual restrictions, racialized women may instead already find themselves to be stigmatized as sexually deviant. Carpenter also observes that although the historical tendency for men to frame virginity as a stigma was demonstrated by many men in her research, it was most pronounced among her African American male respondents (109). Carpenter summarizes that according to Benjamin Bowser (1994), a “‘hypersexual’ posture appeals to young African American men as a means of achieving manhood in a society where routes to economic success are often blocked by institutionalized racism” (110).

Ultimately, Carpenter remains optimistic that the changes brought about by social justice and rights movements in the latter half of the 20th century “have opened new avenues, new ways of being” for people “to choose specific approaches to virginity loss based on the versions of social identity that those approaches will help them achieve” (177). Bernau cautions against dismissing virginity as no longer relevant “in a secular, sexually liberated West” claiming that “there is considerable evidence to show that it is still central to how women, in particular, view themselves and are viewed by others” (25). In particular, she raises the importance of considering “why those whose only experience of sex is violent or abusive often seek reassurance that they are still virgins” (Bernau 25). It is certainly also important to remember that not all people in the West or elsewhere are living in a “secular, sexually liberated society” and that the kind of sexual liberation fought for in the West is one that prioritizes the needs of women who are privileged along axes other than gender. Recent feminisms focused on sex-positivity frequently assume the gains made for white, rich, female-presenting, heterosexual, cissexual women can be assumed for all women, as well as overwrite and ignore the experiences of victims of sexual violence.

The themes of virginity as a gift, as a rite of passage, and as a stigma are important because they

represent known subjective experiences of first sex. They highlight that not only is virginity not inherently a medical or physical state of the body, virginity is interpreted differently by individuals in different contexts, especially where systemic privilege/marginalization occurs. Just as there is no universal way to determine an individual's virginity or non-virginity by examining their body, the instance in which a person may switch from a place of virginity into a non-virginity is dependent upon the context by which they understand its loss. An individual's sexual experience may begin before the point they personally consider the end of their virginity and often continues throughout their life. Sexual experience is a continuum comprising complex and fluid experiences that are inaptly summarized by a binary of virginity versus sexual activity; however, many cultural narratives today reify the idea of a clear moment of virginity loss. I will turn my attention to one such narrative, conducting an interpretive reading of themes surrounding first sex and the transition from virgin to non-virgin in the *Twilight* series.

Reading First Sex in *Twilight*

I would like now to compare these metaphors of virginity and virginity loss with the depiction of first sex in *The Twilight Saga*. My aim in doing so is to examine the ways dominant metaphors surrounding virginity are challenged, the ways they are reinforced, and whether first sex in *Twilight* includes or ignores the existence and experience of queer, trans, and racialized people. The world of the *Twilight* saga is an apt location for this analysis not only because of its popularity, but also because the series depicts the end of virginity as bringing about drastic change, particularly within the body of the main female character, Bella. The following interpretive reading of the story is devised to illuminate the questions about virginity and virginity loss that drive the narrative. As my summary here is intended to demonstrate, the *Twilight* saga reveals that there is much to be contested around the experience of first sex. Indeed, the *Twilight* narrative demonstrates a particular framing around virginity that rewards

abstinence until marriage with eternal youth, beauty, and leisure.

Concerned that her body will continue to age while her vampire boyfriend Edward remains eternally seventeen, Bella persistently expresses two desires to Edward: her desire for sex and her desire to be made a vampire. Seeing his own existence as a vampire to be morally fraught, Edward refuses to fulfil Bella's wish to become a vampire until an arrangement he proposes to her in the second book of the series, *New Moon*: he will turn her into a vampire only if she marries him (539-542). Edward also agrees to attempt to have sex with Bella, but only within the context of marriage. As the series links sexual intimacy for vampires with their desire to feed on humans, Edward refuses to escalate their physical intimacy beyond restrained kissing as he is concerned that he might lose control and kill her. Ultimately, Bella and Edward's first sex act takes place while Bella is still human, shortly after their marriage in the final book of the series, *Breaking Dawn* (2008).

For Bella, her first sexual encounter is conflated not only with marriage, but also with the shedding of her mortality as a human. During Edward and Bella's wedding reception, Edward's adopted vampire brother Emmett asks to dance with Bella stating, "This could be my last chance to make her blush" (BD 69). This statement seemingly has a double-meaning, both suggesting Bella's innocence and nodding at the arrangement for Bella to be shortly transformed: as a vampire, Bella will be physically incapable of blushing. Although no date has been set for her change, Bella clearly expects Edward to fulfil his promise to turn her at some point shortly following their wedding. As Bella and Edward exit their reception to head for the airport, she promises to her parents that she will call, thinking to herself: "this was all I could promise. Just a phone call. My father and mother could not be allowed to see me again; I would be too different, and much, much too dangerous" (BD 73). Unexpectedly conceiving a half-vampire child on their wedding night, Bella's pregnancy from first sex results in her near death and subsequent transformation into a vampire as a way to preserve her life. Becoming pregnant with a supernatural fetus, first sex for Bella and Edward also becomes conflated with the parenthood they enter into less than three weeks later.

The framing of first sex in *Twilight* creates a depiction of sex as something that has its own course of action and momentum without pause, dialogue or continually obtained consent. Standing naked together, before touching, Edward says to Bella, “I promised we would *try* . . . if I do something wrong, if I hurt you, you must tell me at once” (BD 85). A few sentences later, the story skips forward to the next morning. Although this is an understandable exclusion as *The Twilight Saga* was advertised to and read by a young audience, what happens in the morning does not follow well. Instead of implying a sexual experience filled with communication and choice about different ways of being intimate, Bella awakes to find herself in conflict with Edward. Edward’s feelings of self-loathing are evident as he demands that Bella tell him how hurt she is. As she insists on her happiness and pleasure in the previous night, asking why he is upset, he encourages her to look at herself. Bella sees that her body is covered in bruises, the bed is broken, and feathers are strewn everywhere from ripped open pillows. Despite the clear presence of violence in their first sexual experience, Bella cannot remember pain: “I couldn't recall a moment when his hold had been too tight, his hands too hard against me. I only remembered wanting him to hold me tighter, and being pleased when he did” (BD 89). It is implied that despite Edward's request for communication prior to sex, sex was a force of its own that took over both of them. Not only is their first sexual experience depicted as violent, but also as followed by silence and distrust as they are in conflict for days.

Although the details of their first sex acts are not discussed, a few things are clear. Bella describes sex stating, “It had been simpler than I'd expected; we'd fit together like corresponding pieces, made to match up” (BD 87). As Bella becomes pregnant from their first night of sexual interaction while she is human, it is clear that this statement refers to penile-vaginal intercourse. Bella also recounts feeling physically different in the morning. Before noticing her bruises, she assesses her physical state by stretching, describing it this way: “There was stiffness, and a lot of soreness, too, it was true, but mostly there was the odd sensation that my bones all had become unhinged at the joints, and that I had changed half-way into the consistency of a jellyfish” (BD 88). This description may be meant to include vaginal

soreness, although it is never made explicit if Bella experienced any vaginal change. We do know that Bella could not have bled during first sex with a vampire: the scent of human blood is consistently depicted throughout the series as a trigger for vampires to lose control. As sexual arousal is also conflated with Edward's desire to feed from Bella, the presence of blood during sex would have surely resulted in her murder.

It is significant that the birth of Bella and Edward's child is accomplished without any vaginal intervention. In her examinations of virginity and medicine, Blank discusses the historical tension between the female body and gynaecology, particularly surrounding virgins. Tools similar to the modern speculum date back to at least Roman civilization, although concern about their use peaked in much more recent history (Blank 58). In nineteenth century Victorian society, "doctors and patients alike lived in fear of even the most stringently medical contact with the vulva, let alone penetration" (Blank 221). Meyer wrote Edward's birth as dated to 1901, right at the conclusion of the Victorian era. It is notable that within Bella's birth scene there is never an examination of her cervix for dilation, no midwife or medical examiner passes anything through or even views Bella's vulva. Bella's own child does not even pass through her vagina to be born, but instead tears through Bella's abdomen with her teeth. As Bella will never have reason to receive a gynaecological exam as a vampire, the story is written in such a way that Edward is the only individual to ever enter or even view Bella's vagina. Sex with a virgin is coveted as an act of conquest and exploration and Bella's conquered body belongs to Edward and Edward alone.

Mapping Virginity (Loss) in *Twilight*

Bella and Edward's wedding ends in Bella changing into her going-away outfit and Edward driving the two of them to the airport without revealing their destination. After flying into Rio de Janeiro, they take a private boat Edward drives eastward bound off the coast of Brazil. Speeding into the

darkness, Bella sees a small island emerge ahead of them. Docking the boat, Edward explains “This is Isle Esme”, a gift given to his adopted vampire mother Esme by his vampire father (BD 78). It is on this privately owned island where Bella and Edward violently consummate their marriage in a house that reminds Bella of Edward's home on the edge of her childhood hometown in Washington.

Discussing the tendency to describe territories and landscapes as female gendered and as akin to female bodies, Bernau describes one way that “virgin land” may be compared to a virgin woman:

The fecund virgin land – like the nubile human virgin – needs to be possessed; without 'owner', she is free for the taking. Indeed it is for her own good that she should be taken for, as we know, virgin soil needs to be 'tilled' to be fertile; the page needs to be inscribed in order to convey meaning. Colonization can thus be reimagined as an almost charitable act, performed for the good of the colony-to-be. (135)

Bernau continues to say that “these images of conquest and despoliation” wherein the land is equated to a “desirable-but-helpless (or hapless) woman” become inverted in other common discourses where the rape of women is compared to the conquering or ransacking of buildings (135-6). Discourses of virginity within female bodies and the concept of unclaimed land are not unconnected, as both have similar histories as “contested social territor[ies]” (Bernau 137).

The narrative of *Breaking Dawn* does not make any attempt to explain how Edward's family acquired “Isle Esme”, although it is implied that the island is uninhabited. There is a brief reference Edward makes to staff who clean the house and stocked the fridge prior to their arrival (BD 97). For my discussion of space and spatiality within the *Twilight* books that will be revisited at the end of each chapter, it is powerful to begin with this point: it was not enough for Edward for Bella and himself to remain virgins until marriage, but he chose the place of their first sex to be on a private island claimed by his family, a place that Bella could not access or leave without his help.

Conclusions to Draw

Throughout this chapter I have shown the lack of a clear distinction between virgin and non-virgin, despite a history of belief in virginity as being physically testable within the bodies of women. The differing common subjective interpretations of virginity – as a gift, a stigma, and as a step in a process – combine with the intangibility of virginity to suggest that virginity is socially constructed and that interpretations of virginity and first sex are deeply connected to personal narratives. The foregoing reading of the narratives of virginity loss in *The Twilight Saga* demonstrates Bella's vulnerability to Edward, as symbolized through the remote location of their first sexual experience and the ownership the Cullen family has over the land. In the next chapter I focus my analysis on femininity as it relates to first sex and as it is presented in the *Twilight* series.

3. Femininity: “Don't be afraid, I murmured. 'We belong together.'” (BD 85)

In her 2010 hit song, *Teenage Dream*, Katy Perry sings, “let's go all the way tonight / no regrets, just love”. Love as the ultimate qualifier that makes sex unregrettable for women has not changed since The Shirelles sang their 1960 hit, *Will You Love Me Tomorrow*, fifty years prior. Asking, “is this a lasting treasure / or just a moment's pleasure?”, The Shirelles’ song positions sex as appropriate within the context of a continuing loving relationship only. Perry's lyric says that love is still important for sex, but does not suggest that it needs to last. The small narrative change between these two popular songs is representative of a broader shift in dominant social narratives about first sex throughout the latter half of the 20th century: although first sex is no longer always touted as being appropriate only within the confines of permanent relationships such as marriage, first sex within loving relationships is widely recommended for young women. Many tropes of virginity loss -- such as the saying “you always remember your first” -- imbue first sex with romantic meaning and a sense of permanence to the experience.

In her summary of the history of virginity loss throughout the twentieth century, Carpenter discusses a prevalent tension between sexual ideology and behaviour. Prior to the publication of The Kinsey Reports – *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953) – it was widely believed in North America that the majority of first sex took place within the context of marriage. Carpenter explains how “many readers were shocked to learn, from an ostensibly scientific authority, that over half of the women interviewed for the study – and many more of the men – had lost their virginity before they married” (37). The Kinsey publications were a key element in precipitating the sexual revolution of the 1960s as they contradicted dominant social discourse about sexual conduct with reports of commonly lived sexual behaviour. Carpenter links the commercial success of the texts to a growing market for the “commodification of sexuality during an era of sexual conservatism” (37). Curiously, this paradox has been somewhat inverted less than fifty years later through the re-emergence of the purity movement, which commodifies sexual abstinence in an era of

greater sexual liberalism and objectification.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the commodification of sexuality and of the female body became dominant North American social discourse. The journalism adage “sex sells” is reflected in an ongoing advertising and media barrage of objectified female bodies shown in submissive and dehumanized positions famously critiqued by Naomi Wolf's (1991) *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, and in film documentary projects such as Jean Kilbourne's *Killing Us Softly* series (*Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women*, 1979; *Still Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women*, 1987; *Killing Us Softly 3: Advertising's Image of Women*, 1999; *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising's Image of Women*, 2010) and Jennifer Siebel Newsom's *Miss Representation* (2011). Carpenter contends that moral conservatives of the 1970s and 80s sought to drive backwards what they viewed as an increasingly sexually permissive culture due to the gains of gay-rights and early second-wave feminist activism; however, the sexual counterrevolution was also influenced from within feminism to push back against the objectification of female bodies and as radical feminism emerged in opposition to sex work and pornography (42).

Throughout the early 1980s, debates within feminism became polarized into a false dichotomy between being either against sexual exploitation and danger of violence, or else for sexual pleasure and freedom (Carpenter 42). According to Carpenter, this “context encourage[d] women to frame virginity loss as purely liberating or entirely perilous” (42). A polarization between liberation and peril exists for young women today as contemporary feminisms that emphasize sex-positivity and sexual subjectification clash with messages about abstinence and purity. Caught between conflicting messages, our culture encourages young women to create a story about their first sexual experiences – whether one of restraint or romance or of empowerment – rather than encouraging exploration, experience and discovery. As Carpenter's research concludes, the framing of that story can have have tangible consequences.

Despite a heavily sexualized culture and a broad belief in women as sexually liberated – so liberated that the purity movement has arisen in response— feminine sexuality is heavily socially policed

and this is reflected in social narratives about first sex. Although there are points of overlap across genders, Carpenter asserts that “young heterosexual women are more often disappointed by and/or feel a lack of control at virginity loss than young men” (43). This is in part due to the pressure placed on young women to have a positive or meaningful first sexual experience. In this chapter I discuss the broader social contexts shaping cultural narratives of feminine virginity. Subsequently, I examine the *Twilight* books and discuss a detailed reading of abstinence narratives within the texts as they relate to female characters and bodies.

Social Contexts Surrounding Feminine Virginity and First Sex

In the academy award-winning movie *Juno* (2007), the title character unintentionally becomes pregnant from first sex. After repeatedly hearing the words “sexually active”, Juno questions the value of the term, asking, “What does it even mean? Am I gonna like deactivate some day or is it a permanent state of being?” In this section I explore contemporary social contexts shaping dominant narratives around young feminine sexuality, virginity and virginity loss that suggest meaningful change occurs in women upon participation in first sex, whether positive or negative. While the purity movement warns against the dangers of first sex before marriage, encouraging women to save their virginity as a gift to present to their husband in marriage, what Blank calls “the mythology of the erotic virgin” similarly places special value on first sex as different than sex between experienced partners (216). Meanwhile, sex-positive postfeminist discourse valorizes sexual experience, marking first sex as a meaningful step in the process of becoming an adult woman.

The Purity Movement and the Commodification of Feminine Virginity

The purity movement of the 1990s and 2000s is a cultural trend based in Christian theology that focuses on abstinence-only sexual education and practice until marriage. It gained traction in the United States in a period of tension following the sexual revolution throughout the 1980s and 1990s when, as Amanda Barbee (2014) explains, “a decline in the economy, as well as the onset of the AIDS epidemic, caused a cultural shift back towards sexual conservatism”. The passing of the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) in the United States in 1981 began a pattern of U.S. legislation towards abstinence only sex-education, as the AFLA required that sexual abstinence until marriage be presented as an option within federally funded programs (Carpenter 42). Barbee credits the beginning of the purity movement with a curriculum developed by a faction of Southern Baptist ministers called “True Love Waits” in 1992. As it gained popularity the movement exploded outwards into multiple abstinence focused curriculums stemming from different ministries. Although abstinence-only education is recommended for all unmarried youth, the messages are gendered in ways that harmfully target girls and women.

In her discussion of abstinence-only curricula, Valenti notes that women are often assumed to be inherently less sexual than men (107). Cautionary literature of the Victorian Period encouraged young women to pray to be freed from sexual interest as, Carpenter explains, it was believed that women would “be best protected not by merely restraining their sexual passions but by actually lacking them altogether” (23). The passionlessness of women became a dominant assumption of this period, with particular public concern for the virginities of working-class and poor white women (Carpenter 23). The belief that women are inherently less sexual than men persists into present-day social discourse both inside and outside of abstinence-only education.

When women are interested in sex, Valenti observes that it is attributed by proponents of abstinence to our increasingly sexualized culture interfering with natural feminine desire (108). Proponents of what Valenti terms “the virginity movement” seek a renewal of traditional gender roles in dating and courtship (23). This is evident as authors such as conservative writer Wendy Shalit (*A Return*

to *Modesty*, 1999; *Girls Gone Mild*, 2007) frequently present advice from 1940s dating guides for contemporary use (Valenti 50). Positioning women as gatekeepers of sex and therefore morality, young women are encouraged by abstinence education to dress modestly in order to protect their own virginites as well as those of the men around them by not being a source of temptation; yet, it is women's virginites that are at the greatest peril should they fail (Valenti 108). At the Eighth Annual Abstinence Clearinghouse Conference, Darren Washington gave this analogy as an example of how to teach abstinence:

Your body is a wrapped lollipop. When you have sex with a man, he unwraps your lollipop and sucks on it. It may feel great at the time, but, unfortunately, when he's done with you, all you have left for your next partner is a poorly wrapped, saliva-fouled sucker. (qtd. in Valenti 41)

It is feminine bodies that are described by abstinence educators as tarnished, used up or ruined by sex. When describing virginity as a special gift to present to a partner post-marriage, it is within feminine bodies where virginity is most often assumed to reside.

Although women are often framed as the gatekeepers of sex, the evocation of traditional gender roles in abstinence education also positions girls, women and their virginites as objects under paternal control. At purity balls, gala events attended by pairings of fathers and daughters, the pairs may exchange gold rings, sign documents, and state vows to each protect the daughter's chastity until marriage (Baumgardner). The wedding symbolism inherent in these rituals is clear: young women offer their virginity to be owned by their father until he presents her to a man in marriage. These rituals romanticize longevous historic concepts of women as property and virginity as a physical commodity.

There are potentially some positive affects of understanding virginity as a gift. In Carpenter's study, those individuals she interviewed who viewed first sex as a gift given to another reported using birth control or contraception with greater frequency than any other group in her study (66). Carpenter believes this "to be a by-product of the intimacy enjoyed by people in committed romantic relationships,

which helps them discuss and prepare preventative measures in advance” (67). Unfortunately, those educated by abstinence-only curricula are less likely to reap this benefit correlating to the gift metaphor as abstinence-only programs are not permitted to discuss contraception outside of discussing failure rates (Valenti 218). Instead of providing accurate information, abstinence-only programs spread intentional misinformation about birth control and condoms to scare youth away from sex and to shame those who are already sexually active (Valenti 103-105). Presenting virginity as a gift as the only narrative of first sex within a sexual education curriculum also marginalizes lesbian and gay youth who are less likely to connect with a model built upon traditional heterosexist gender roles (Carpenter 68). The heterosexism and cissexism implicit in abstinence-only narratives suggests this is not accidental.

This context is relevant to my discussion of *Twilight* as the books represent not only a narrative of sex before marriage as morally improper, but also contain accompanying messages embodied in abstinence-only education. In *Twilight*, first sex is notably dangerous for young women, even within the context of marriage, yet there is no discussion of real-world concerns such as contraception or sexually transmitted infections, excused by the supernatural romance as vampires are presumed to be sterile. The narratives of courtship and family within the books contain themes including the importance of abstinence until marriage, first sex as precious, and evoke traditional patriarchal gender roles.

Postfeminism, Sex-Positivity and Choice Feminisms

Within the *Twilight* books are indicators of what Sarah Projansky (2001) terms “The Postfeminist Context” (66). Rejecting the dictionary definition of “post” to suggest “after” feminism, Projansky conceptualizes postfeminism as “*a cultural response to feminism, one that seeks to rework – to steal rather than to supersede – feminism [original emphasis]*” (88). Postfeminism at once encompasses both a backlash against feminism and is a complex social movement that perpetuates and reproduces feminism.

Exploring interrelated themes emerging since the early 1980s, two discourses Projansky identifies as postfeminist are of particular relevance to my discussion of feminine virginity in *Twilight*: “(hetero)sex-positive postfeminism” (67) and choice or “choiceosie” (78) postfeminism.

Countering radical feminist positions such as those advocated by Andrea Dworkin (*Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, 1981; *Intercourse*, 1987), sex-positive feminism has steadily gained popularity into the 21st century where it provides a counter-point both to feminism – by defining other feminisms as anti-sex – and to the virginity movement. Valenti notes that there is “no room in the virginity movement's analysis for the idea that young women may want to be sexy, to have sex”, echoing similar sentiments made throughout the 80s and 90s in response to feminist positions against pornography and sex work (50). In the sex-positive anthology co-edited by Valenti with Jaclyn Friedman, *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power & a World Without Rape* (2008), an essay by Thomas Macaulay Millar argues that we need to move away from a commodity model of sexuality – which “assumes that when a woman has sex, she loses something of value” – and towards a performance model (38). Valenti agrees, stating that:

[W]hen women's pleasure is being pathologized, it's imperative that we teach young women that there is nothing wrong with having sex because it feels good, that their desires and pleasure are important, and that their sexuality should be – as Millar says – the presence of a “yes”, not the absence of a “no”. (2009, 196)

The performance model advocated by Miller and Valenti is consistent with the concept of “enthusiastic consent” frequently advocated by sex-positive bloggers and endorsed across college and university campus' through the sexual rights awareness campaign “Consent is Sexy”.

Rosalind Gill (2007) conceptualizes postfeminism in a similar way to Projansky, calling it a “sensibility” rather than an epistemological, historical or analytic position, and identifying features that highlight a critical object – such a text – to be postfeminist. Several of the features Gill explores as those that “comprise or constitute a postfeminist discourse” suggest the enjoyment and employment of sexiness such as though “the notion that femininity is a bodily property” (5). Whereas femininity is traditionally

represented as encompassing emotional qualities associated with motherhood and nurture, media representations of women today present feminine identity as found within the “possession of a 'sexy body'” (Gill 6). Other features of postfeminism include “the shift from objectification to subjectification”, an “emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and discipline” and “an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference” (Gill 5-6). Out of the features Gill identifies, those most noticeably employed in the *Twilight* books are “the dominance of a makeover paradigm” and “a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference” (5). Characters in *Twilight* undergo supernatural makeovers as they are transformed into vampires and shape-shifters, their supernatural forms strongly shaped by traditional gender roles.

Angela McRobbie (2008) argues that postfeminism “draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed” (12). The idea that equality has already been achieved is key to the discourse Projansky describes as “equality and choice feminism” in which “women now have greater access to choice and hence can avoid having to fight further for equality” (67). It is this concept that allows for the romanticization of traditional femininity in *Twilight*. Discussing *Bridget Jones's Diary*, McRobbie claims the film celebrates old-fashioned femininity as “something that has been lost” and can be thankfully “retrieved” (12). *Twilight's* Bella is like Bridget, “reassuringly feminine” as indicated through her focus on securing love and partnership instead of a concern with college or career prospects (McRobbie 12). Repeated references to Bella's favourite books – Emily Brontë's (1847) *Wuthering Heights* and multiple Jane Austen novels – underscore the importance suggested by *Twilight* of old-fashioned femininity and securing the right husband.

When I first read the *Twilight* series at the encouragement of young women I worked with, I heard them repeat similar phrases to defend the books from feminist critique. Although the critiques were varied, the defence was always some approximation of, “at least Bella's choices were her own”. In conducting a close reading of the series for this project, I found that the final book in the series, *Breaking*

Dawn, specifically hints at this interpretation of Bella having notable agency. Throughout the books femininity is associated with selflessness and self-sacrifice, often placing Bella in danger, but Bella's agency and capacity to make self-sacrificing decisions begins to be respected by males after she is married. Although Bella's words “[n]ot a choice – a necessity” (BD 132) to describe her decision to keep a half-vampire fetus that is killing her reveal an anti-abortion rhetoric that Anna Silver (2010) calls “heavy handed and unconcealed” (131), the medical professional patriarch of Edward's vampire family, Carlisle Cullen, refers to Bella's choice saying he “can't ignore her will” (BD 234). Referencing a treaty made between the previous generation of Indigenous wolf shape-shifters with the Cullen vampire family when they first arrived in Forks – in which the Cullen's agreed to never turn another vampire while they resided near the reserve – Sam, the leader of the modern-day wolf-pack questions whether or not the treaty will truly be broken when Bella is turned: “We all know what she wanted . . . Is she really a victim?” (BD 160). The clarity of Bella's wishes in regards to her life, and death, is an appealing rhetoric in the context of postfeminism.

Unfortunately, when choice is emphasized by feminism, women marginalized on multiple axes of oppression tend to be forgotten. Projansky argues that postfeminism is “limited by its overwhelming focus on white, heterosexual, middle-class women” (68). This is especially apparent in equality and choice based feminisms as the accomplishments and success of racially and economically privileged women are assumed to be available to all women rather than contextualized by race, sexual orientation or class (73). This pattern is evident in *Twilight*, as the choices afforded to Bella as a young white woman, even in choosing her romantic and sexual partner, are not freedoms given to the racialized women in the same text.

Similarly, feminism based in sex-positivity and sexual liberation frequently over-emphasizes the importance of sexiness and sex, forgetting or ignoring that sexual desire is not universal. While some individuals do not experience sexual attraction, others choose to not participate in sex as a part of a strategy for coping with and healing from sexual trauma. In the social construction of first sex as

important and transformative for women – whether positive or negative – victims of sexual assault are fundamentally forgotten. Those assaulted who have never consented to sex are also forced to re-negotiate the meaning of virginity, if not personally then at least when contending with the definitions of others. Despite the abstinence-only emphasis of *Twilight* advising against sex before marriage, the supernatural narrative Meyer has created does not shy away from suggesting boundless sexual pleasure and desire as natural within the context of marriage. After her re-birth as a vampire, Bella discovers that her sexual cravings are enhanced along with all of her other senses, to which Edward reassures her: “There's a tremendous amount of time left over when you don't have to sleep” (BD 485).

Twilight has emerged during a time period in which postfeminist discourses react to feminisms of the past, re-conceptualizing the needs of young women today to focus on the needs of individuals and subjective desire over coalition building. The dominant narratives of young feminine sexuality, virginity and virginity loss in *Twilight* are shaped by this context, telling the story of a young woman who chooses romance and exogamous integration into the mysterious world of her new supernatural family over the mundane path expected of her towards college and career options. The following section discusses in detail my interpretive reading of feminine virginity and virginity loss in *Twilight*, highlighting the ways in which the narrative reifies and subverts dominant narratives surrounding young feminine sexuality.

Reading Feminine Virginity and First Sex in *Twilight*

Core messages to girls and young women today surrounding virginity and virginity loss frame first sex as something deeply meaningful and transformative for women, suggesting that because of the value of first sex as an initiatory experience, the circumstances surrounding virginity loss can impact the rest of your life. Women are encouraged to first experience sex within the context of a loving relationship, even if they do not subscribe to the messages espoused by proponents of purity who claim

that marriage is necessary for healthy sexual beginnings. *Twilight* uses the anachronism of Edward as a century-old vampire to naturalize a reversion to traditional values surrounding first sex as only appropriate within the context of marriage. The recent popular conceptualization of feminism as about the personal choices of individual women towards pleasure similarly empowers Meyer's texts to depict ideal femininity as reaching backwards through time, so long as the female characters are content. In this section, I examine how *Twilight* contextualizes first sex as a powerful moment of change for young women, the importance of choosing the right time and partner for first sex, and how virginity and its loss are symbolized in other aspects of the plot of *Twilight*. I also ask, whose virginity counts?, examining Bella as an idealized virgin by virtue of her whiteness, youth and modesty in contrast to the narratives given to other young female characters in the books.

First Sex as a Transformative Experience

First sex in *Twilight* is underscored as an important and transformative experience in a number of ways through the central sexual relationship between Edward and Bella. As the couple engages in first sex only within the context of marriage, and immediately conceives a child on their wedding night, first sex marks their transition not only into sexual activity, but also into parenthood and the formation of a family; however, while first sex represents major life changes for both Edward and Bella as newly wed parents, the impact on each of them is distinctly gendered. Positioning himself as a virgin and contextualizing his sexual inexperience as a unique point of purity considering his violent history as a vampire, Edward says to Bella, “this is the one area in which I’m just as spotless as you are. Can’t I leave one rule unbroken?” (E 446). While Edward's desire to marry Bella before engaging in sex with her is in order to maintain a speck of moral purity, the impact of first sex on Bella is tangible and bodily, manifesting first in the bruises across her body the morning following their consummation, and

culminating as her body is literally ripped open through supernatural childbirth.

Subverting the fetishization of virginity as a uniquely desirable property of youth that once gone is lost forever, Bella's transformation into a vampire brings her unrelenting pleasure in her new body as more beautiful and powerful than her prior human form. Throughout the majority of the series, Bella does not think of herself as beautiful, and is instead routinely jealous and uncomfortable around the beauty of others, particularly Edward's sisters. Upon seeing herself in the mirror for the first time following her transformation, Bella describes her first feeling as “unthinking pleasure” seeing the “indisputably beautiful” reflection of her new form (BD 403). Although Bella is the one who insists on experiencing sex in her human body first, first sex is not by any means suggested to be the best sex in *Twilight*. Instead, Bella describes her first sexual experience with Edward post-transformation as requiring “[n]o caution, no restraint,” stating: “We could finally love *together* – both active participants now. Finally equals [original emphasis]” (BD 482). Asking Edward if he misses anything about the allure of her previous body, of the conflict surrounding his desire to consume her as prey, he gives a firm answer of “no” (BD 484). Rather than risking losing something of value by having sex outside of marriage, the circumstances in which Bella has first sex cause her to gain equal and eternal partnership. *Twilight's* Bella is rewarded with boundless pleasure in exchange for saving sex until marriage, choosing the right partner, not using contraception, and sacrificing her own life for the sake of a child conceived accidentally.

The narrative of first sex in *Twilight* as experienced by Bella represents a merging of the ideals of the virginity movement with sex-positive and choice feminisms. Making careful choices around first sex is important because virginity loss is a transformative initiatory experience, depicted in Bella's story through her literal rebirth. It is through making the choice to marry and have sex within the context of marriage that ultimately brings Bella into a position where she can participate fully and equally in sex with her partner. As marriage and waiting for sex until marriage are rules enforced by Edward, *Twilight* also underscores the importance of attracting the right man, as other women in the novels, who date or

become engaged to men who do not value pre-marital sexual abstinence, encounter violence.

Contextualizing First Sex: The Importance of Attracting the Right Partner

Bella's story is not the only one within *Twilight* in which sex facilitates death: the background story of Rosalie, Edward's adopted sister, violently highlights the importance of attracting the right kind of man to marry. Silver points out Rosalie's vampiric origin as a warning parable within *Twilight* about sex as inherently dangerous (128). Rosalie recounts to Bella how she exacted revenge as a new vampire on her former fiancé and his friends, a group of human men who raped her shortly before her wedding and left her for dead, an act of violence which Silver reads within *Twilight* as linking danger with pre-marital sex (128). Blonde and pale-skinned, Silver and Wilson each describe Rosalie as punished for being “too pretty” (Wilson 125). Beauty is Rosalie's main attribute, described as the reason for her engagement to a man who assaults her. Whereas Bella's humility and non-recognition in regards to her own attractiveness is rewarded, Rosalie's proud beauty is depicted as the reason for her assault. Rosalie's rebirth as a vampire, after she is found by Carlisle, remakes her body to be unscarred from the assault, except through the barrenness she contends with as a vampire despite her desire for a child. Described as part of the performance while living among humans, Rosalie and her vampire partner Emmett get married every few years as the Cullen family lives in different cities; through this detail, Meyer draws attention to the importance of not only having sex within the context of marriage, but of attracting and marrying the correct partner to begin with. While it is unfair to characterize the violence suffered by Rosalie's character as first sex, her background serves as a foil for Bella's virginity as Bella is similarly almost attacked by a group of men in an alley, but rescued by Edward before they can touch her.

It is not just waiting for sex until marriage, but also attracting the right kind of marriage partner, that shapes the course of young women's lives in *Twilight*. Having sex within a loving relationship is not

only important, it is crucial to avoid violence. Across the four books, Bella's life is saved repeatedly by both Edward as well as her best friend and sometimes love interest, Jacob Black. Bella's reliance on the men in her life will be explored further in following sections, including in the Masculinity chapter, but it is her ability to attract the right type of men that affords her safety in the *Twilight* world.

Symbolic Virginites: Body and Mind

Seltzer claims that Bella's "physical safety becomes a symbolic substitute for her virginity", one notably guarded by men. Edward expresses interest in Bella by frequently saving her from physical harm, a habit shared by Jacob following his initiation into his supernatural lineage in *New Moon*, after which he gains the capacity to shape-shift into a large wolf. Seltzer describes Bella's "overwhelming clumsiness" as "approximat[ing] adolescent bodily discomfort" in contrast to the hyper-ability displayed by both Edward and Jacob. Having undergone supernatural rebirths away from human adolescence, Bella's suitors are stronger and more graceful than Bella, frequently picking her up and carrying her. Seltzer criticizes the series for "suggesting that ungainly, weak female bodies are the most attractive to men, that teenage gawkiness could be made into an appealing vulnerability". Bella's physical vulnerability and reliance on protection from supernatural men also emphasizes the fragility and corporeality of female virginity, while male virginity is depicted as a moral strength rather than a physical vulnerability.

Due to the unique supernatural interventions *Twilight* makes into first sex, Bella experiences penetration for the first time on a number of different occasions, through sexual intercourse, as well as symbolically through the penetration of vampiric fangs and venom. The first time Bella is bitten, when she is attacked by a vampire antagonist near the conclusion of the first book, his fangs inject vampiric venom into Bella's bloodstream. Edward saves Bella's life – and virginity – effectively reversing the penetrative effect of the bite, sucking the venom out of her body. As Bella later becomes sure that she

wants to be turned into a vampire, she decides it needs to be done by Edward. Her reasoning makes the sexual and colonialist implications of vampiric reproduction explicit: "I wanted *his* venom to poison my system. It would make me belong to him in a tangible, quantifiable way [original emphasis]" (E 324). When Edward does turn Bella, he does so by penetrating her body at multiple points to inject as much venom into her as possible. While he medicalizes the procedure by shooting vampire venom directly into her heart with a needle and syringe, Edward also makes many small bites along her exposed skin (BD 354-5).

The supernatural impenetrability of Bella's mind also stands in for her virginity, although this protection is innate to her. As a vampire, Edward possesses a unique gift in which he can read the minds of everyone around him, until he meets Bella, who he receives nothing from. Explaining how Edward's inability to read Bella's thoughts "both frustrates and attracts him" to her, Tracy Bealer (2011) describes Edward's mind-reading capacity as a "complement to and intensification of the hypermasculine penetration signified by his fangs" (143). Describing what makes virginity sexually desirable, Blank writes that, "[w]hat is sexy about virgins is, in a very real way, their unknownness. Any virgin's body can be *believed* to possess specific appealing qualities. There is, after all, no evidence to the contrary [original emphasis]" (193). Although Blank is describing the appeal of bodily virginity, the intervention of the supernatural in *Twilight* means that Bella's mind is the only closed book to Edward, his only opportunity to experience the fantasy of the unknown.

After her transformation into a vampire, Bella explores what is determined to be her own unique supernatural gift: the shield that prevents her from being mentally penetrated in any capacity. As she learns to control and extend this shield to protect those around her as from the attacks of vampires who possess the power to torture through mental penetration, she also practices moving this shield completely away from her mind. At the very conclusion of the saga, Bella successfully allows Edward to read, to penetrate, her mind for the first time. Although it is brief before the shield falls back over her, she informs Edward that they, "have plenty of time to work on it," suggesting an eternity of new experiences

still to come (BD 754).

Twilight underscores the importance and desirability of first sex through a repetition of first experiences that are sexualized and penetrative. Bella experiences sex with Edward first as a human on their wedding night, and later for the first time again after she is transformed into a vampire. Bella is uniquely able to experience first sex more than once, because the supernatural plot gives her a second body to experience sex though, as well as penetration by fangs and mind. Having established that first sex is important within *Twilight's* narrative through Bella's story, I now turn my attention to questions of whose virginity is counted as valuable by the texts and why.

Whose Virginity Counts?

As a young, conventionally attractive, white woman, Bella is the embodiment of what Valenti calls “the perfect virgin”, referring to the typical characteristics of the young women “presented as examples by the virginity movement”: the kind of virginity that society cares about protecting (44). Within this idealized characterization of virginity, race plays a key role in that virgins are most commonly portrayed as white. Valenti explains that racialized young women are “largely absent from discourse concerning chastity” as they “are so hypersexualized by American culture” (45). Racialized women are similarly exploited in *Twilight*, as young Indigenous women serve as foils for Bella's virginity; cautionary tales depicting the consequences of first sex outside of marriage or true love. Emily and Leah are the only two adult women of colour in the books with speaking roles, and the only non-virgin young women outside of the Cullen family. At different points in time, Emily and Leah each dated and had sex with the same man, Sam, the leader of supernatural wolf pack

The warnings presented through Emily's story highlight sexual relationships outside of marriage as being potentially violent, even with the context of true love. As a character with lines, Emily appears

only once in the *Twilight* saga when she briefly meets Bella in chapter fourteen of *New Moon*, titled “Family”. The reader is prefaced to Emily as just prior to their meeting, Bella is warned not to stare, coupled only with the explanation, “hanging out around werewolves has its risks” (NM 330). Introduced as Sam's fiancée, Emily's beauty is described as permanently disfigured. Bella observes “thick, red lines, vivid in color” marking Emily's face, including one “twist[ing] the right side of her mouth into a permanent grimace” (NM 331). A few pages later, noticing scars extending all the way down Emily's arms, Bella repeats to herself: “Hanging out with wolves truly did have its risks” (NM 333). However, the scene where we meet Emily is romantic. She is positioned as domestic, cooking multiple dishes in her kitchen, waiting for the men who comprise the wolf pack to arrive so she can feed them. She offers Bella hospitality in the way of muffins. When Sam enters, they immediately embrace. Bella notes how he kisses the scarred side of her face before kissing her lips. Although Emily's scars are evidence of violence, an unexplained loss of control, she is positioned as loved. While Emily is physically marked by her relationship with Sam – premarital and implicitly sexual – she is happily partnered.

Leah is a cautionary tale of the importance of choosing the right first sexual partner, as she suffers consequences after having sex with a man whom she is not supernaturally destined to be with. Having been Sam's girlfriend first, Leah was left by Sam when he fell in love with Emily. The only female character to transform into a wolf, Leah notices the loss of her menstrual cycle shortly after the change begins. Jacob's description of this moment confirms for the reader that Leah is a non-virgin – “couldn't be *pregnant* . . . hadn't been with anyone since Sam [original emphasis]” (BD 317) – but also calls into question her womanhood without fertility:

The horror – what *was* she now? Had her body changed because she'd become a werewolf? Or had she become a werewolf because her body was *wrong*? The only female werewolf in the history of forever. Was that because she wasn't as female as she should be? [original emphasis] (BD 318)

The loss of her menstrual cycle signifies to Leah that she may never find love or romantic partnership, as

the supernatural process through which the shape-shifter wolves “imprint” on mates is hypothesized to be for the purpose of passing on wolf genetics to future children (BD 318). Rather than an empowering transformation, Leah's position in the wolf pack is torturous. While in wolf form, the pack has a telepathic link, and so Leah's mind becomes open to the penetration of a whole group of men, including Sam. As the leader of the pack, Sam has the capacity to give direct orders, making Leah subservient to her former lover. As wolves do not wear clothing, Leah is also put in the position of having to be transform in and out of her wolf state while naked outdoors, often surrounded by the otherwise all-male pack.

The two young women who choose to engage in first sex outside of marriage in *Twilight* are both Indigenous and both have physical violence enacted upon their bodies: Emily and Leah are presented as being permanently changed in ways they did not choose. Wilson argues that “the saga depicts women of color as *naturally* a part of a sexually violent culture [original emphasis]” without “examining the legacy of colonization and how this leads to inflated levels of violence in communities of color” (130). *Twilight* tells a clear story about virginity as having meaningful and transformative impact on the lives of young women, but it suggests that only the virginites of white women are worthy of protection. To delve further into a discussion of how narratives of virginity interact with intersectional matrixes of oppression within the *Twilight* series, I move my discussion to an examination of spatiality.

Mapping Feminine Virginity in *Twilight*

The landscape of *Twilight* has important effects on the narratives within the series. I examine first the way Bella's identity is linked to her sense of belonging to her physical location. Beyond the geographic environment, I examine Bella's body as a relevant site of space within the text: first in regards to how she is positioned within the home. I then examine how changes to the way that time and space

operate on vampires and werewolves as it relates to femininity and the roles of motherhood and reproduction.

The physical geography and sense of place in *Twilight* sets the tone for Bella's femininity. The romance and sex of *Twilight* is made possible by Bella returning to her childhood home. Descriptions of Charlie's house present her childhood home – which she hated and feared returning to – as unchanging: the colours of the walls, the cabinets her mother painted to try to brighten the room before they left altogether, furniture and curtains all left over from when her parents were together. Feeling that her identity also has a physical geography, Bella introduces herself as never being a true “California girl” with her pale skin, slight figure and dark hair. Her figure and beauty are established early as fitting in better in the northwest Forks, and ultimately transitioning easier into the vampire image: pale, thin, young. Silver discusses how Meyer presents Bella as “inappropriately mothered” (124). This is set up in the way her mother left her father and ultimately failed to settle down. Spatially, Bella returning home and routinely cooking for her father corrects the anti-femininity of her mother. Bella's spatial return to the house and town her mother left her father in sparks her journey towards marrying into a family built around heteronormative coupling.

A world inhabited by vampires, who do not age, has a distinctly changed pressure and sense of time. Bella escapes the mortal constructs of her embodiment in corporeal form that deteriorates with time. *Twilight* makes it clear that youth is beauty and aging is to be feared, using the supernatural to subvert the natural cycles of parenting along with those of life and death. Whereas humans may reproduce themselves through the raising of children who often outlive their parents, canonical vampires are infertile in the human sense – reproducing their vampiric nature through the infection of humans with their venom or blood, rather than the gestating of a fetus within a womb – they are shown as youth or adults in a state of arrested development, beings focused on pleasure and their own endurance over eternity, except for Bella and Edward.

In *Twilight*, Bella and Edward's child is a rare gift resulting from their unique experience of first

sex. The narrative makes it quite clear that she is the only child of a vampire that is both known and wanted. Many female vampires have desperately wished for children, to the extent that turning children into vampires had to be outlawed by The Volturi who govern the rules of vampires, exterminating anyone who violates their wishes and threatens the exposure of all vampires by turning a child. The desperation for children is evident through Rosalie's backstory as a woman who wanted nothing more than to get married and bear children before she was assaulted to the extent that she would have died had she not be made into a vampire. It is Rosalie that Bella turns to for support while the male characters discuss killing the half-vampire fetus her human body is carrying.

Despite the emphasis on motherhood as the ultimate gift to be bestowed upon vampires, the work of parenthood in raising a young child through the first years of their life is nearly written out of *Twilight* altogether. Bella and Edward's child grows at a much faster rate than any human child and stops aging when she appears to be around the age of twenty. Subverting the natural order of parents raising children, Bella, Edward, and their quickly adult daughter Renesmee become an eternal family of peers appearing to be the same age for eternity together. This narrative of the importance of Bella's new family and life as a vampire is contrasted with her life as a human and the broken home she grew up in. In part because it was her mother that failed Bella's human family, *Twilight* presents a narrative where motherhood is both a desire and an obligation for women.

The wombs of women, and the idea of female bodies as vessels for reproduction, is crucial to the space available for women in the *Twilight* saga. While it is suggested that women should be relegated to the sphere of the home through the narrative of Bella living first with her father and then with Edward, the more important role of women becomes one where they represent the capacity for reproduction. Bella's body becomes the subject of a historical treaty describing the land division between the Quileute Tribe (wolves) and the Cullens (vampires), both in reference to the half-vampire fetus she carries before she gives birth to her daughter, and to her own right to choose to become a vampire. Prior to her pregnancy, Bella is shuttled back and forth between Quileute and vampire territory, between Jacob and Edward.

Almost always in physical danger from an external threat, Bella must be both protected and supervised by men.

The reproductive narrative of the werewolf characters in *Twilight* presents a racist contrast to the choices given to Bella as well as the other vampires. The description of animalistic imprinting of the male wolf shape-shifters onto specific women is described as for the survival of their bloodlines and genetics. While Bella's relationship with Edward is never spoken of as explicitly about genetic control, the same agency is not given to Indigenous women such as Emily and Leah, whose futures and whether or not they will bear children is determined by supernatural influences directed to preserve and propagate the supernatural.

Where *Twilight* subverts one idea of female sexuality through Bella's open sexual desire, it does so by reifying other traditional female gender roles such as the idea of a protective paternal suitor. The narratives of femininity in *Twilight*, particular those relating to first sex, set up a standard that does not allow space for women who are not heterosexual and cissexual as these narratives are notably absent. Women who cannot menstruate or who choose not to have children are viewed as missing a fundamental aspect of their femininity. Sexual agency for women in *Twilight* is limited along axes of race and ability. As *Twilight* emphasizes the importance of having first sex in within specific circumstances, it is no coincidence that the narratives found within it are not representative of the experience of many of the women left out by the dominant virginity discourse.

Conclusions to Draw

Heteronormativity and the requirement of women to be homemakers who bear children are clearly depicted through Bella and her sense of place within the story. The disruption of mortal aging processes for vampires allows *Twilight* to present a fantasy world where the main characters will be

forever young, beautiful and able-bodied. This leads to my discussion of the other end of the spectrum of traditional gender roles in relation to virginity depicted in *Twilight*: masculinity.

4. Masculinity: “Do you have *any* idea how close I came to crossing the line today?” (E 186)

At the beginning of a fourth-season episode of the hit television series *Supernatural* titled “Monster Movie” (2009), a conversation between the two central characters implies that male virginity can be found within the body. Speaking of a plot point within the occult themed show in which his character has been literally resurrected from hell, Dean says to his brother:

I came back from the furnace without any of my old scars, right? No bullet wounds, knife cuts, none of the off-angle fingers from all of the breaks – I mean, my hide is as smooth as a baby's bottom. Which leads me to conclude, sadly, that my virginity is intact.

This dialogue is a joke, punctuated a moment later with the follow up line, “I've been re-hymenated”. Set in a series that celebrates hegemonic masculinity through its prioritization of relationships between men and frequent treatment of women as sexual objects, the purpose of this exchange within the scene is to establish the importance that Dean must have sex again, that his accidentally repossessed virginity must be lost as soon as possible. While virginity is almost never discussed as existing in such a bodily way among men, the importance of sexual experience for men is prominent social discourse.

The cultural stigma attached to male virginity in the early 21st century is exemplified in popular media such as in the 2005 film, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. The film's main character, Andy, is coded as immature through his interests in video games and collecting action figures, incomplete as an adult without sexual experience and partnership. After he is revealed to his male co-workers to be a virgin, the movie centers around Andy receiving contradictory advice about masculinity and sexuality as his peers enforce Andy attempting to shed his virginity. In the conclusion of the plot, Andy finds romantic and sexual partnership at the same time as selling his collection of action figures for half a million dollars, symbolizing his entry into adult maturity as connected to sexual initiation, as well as connecting wealth to sexually desirable masculinity. First sex as a necessary marker of adulthood is similarly depicted in turn of the century coming of age stories about young men. In, *American Pie* (1999), a group of male friends make a pact to each have sex before their high school graduation. These and other narratives in popular

culture emphasize male virginity extending past early adulthood as stigmatized while simultaneously making light of the experience of first sex for men: the importance of having had sexual experience is held high above the subjective experience of first sex itself. This, however, is not to say that there are no boundaries suggested to correct first sexual experiences: alongside many contemporary comedies, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and the *American Pie* franchise frequently remind viewers that masculinity is heterosexual through jokes where the suggestion of queerness or even just the word “gay” is the punchline.

Popular narratives about sexual difference as binary and innate claim that in contrast to women, men need to “sow their wild oats”, that there is a biological urge explainable through evolutionary psychology for cissexual men to have sex with as many women as possible in order to pass on their genetic material. Although children are often not the desired result of sexual activity, virile masculinity is framed in such a way naturalizing heterosexual sex and male sexual conquest of women. Sexual intimacy between men is threatening to this conception of masculinity and jokes highlighting how nervous queerness makes straight masculinity were prevalent in popular media throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The Emmy Award winning sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004) asserted the limits of masculinity through a laugh track that played when male friends touched or hugged each other for even a moment too long; while one friend was depicted obsessing over being mistaken for gay in an early season, another was teased for his ex-wife's lesbian sexuality. These and other micro-aggressions aired in the same years Carpenter characterizes as “marked by unprecedented lesbigay visibility and political gains for lesbian, gay and queer activists,” pointing to the tensions raised for heterosexual masculinity by queer advocacy (42).

Popular definitions of first sex and virginity loss matter because they reflect cultural norms about whose bodies and experiences matter. Carpenter hypothesizes that the expanded visibility of queer representation in popular culture, alongside the growing trend for teens to come out prior to first sexual activity, has the potential to transform the way future youth conceptualize virginity and first sex (43). In her interview research, Carpenter observed a generational shift among her respondents where those born

in and beyond the mid 1970s were significantly more likely to consider gay and lesbian experiences when defining first sex than those born in the previous decade (46). While Carpenter is optimistic, she also notes that, “in contrast to their lesbigay counterparts, the majority of heterosexuals posited different standards for virginity loss with same- and other-sex partners” (46). The gains of the gay rights movement of the later half of the 20th century – spurred by publications such as *The Kinsey Reports* and monumental social protests such as the Stonewall riots of 1969 – may have forced a degree of popular acceptance, but only enough to create separate standards, not enough to revolutionize heterosexual definitions of first sex. To acknowledge the value of sexual desire and pleasure as equally relevant outside of human reproductive capacity – to equally value sex disconnected from procreation – would undercut tightly gendered cultural narratives about why virginity and first sex matter and why they matter differently to young men and women. To broadly acknowledge other forms of sexual intimacy that do not rely upon gender duality and heterosexuality – such as oral sex or anal intercourse – as equally significant to vaginal intercourse is to weaken the fantasy of the masculine as penetrator and reproductive seed sower.

To be a virgin is to be feminine, while masculinity is performed through actions such as conquest and expansion. When Dean jokes in *Supernatural* about being “re-hymenated”, he is at once both feminizing himself and framing his soon to be reclaimed masculinity as distinguished from feminized bodily virginity. In this chapter I explore dominant narratives of masculine virginity and virginity loss by reviewing contexts that have shaped the historical non-importance of virginity and the contemporary importance of non-virginity for men. I focus on the shaping of male sexual abstinence in opposition to bodily female virginity and the association of upstanding moral, civilized or spiritual masculinity with matters of the mind. Before turning my discussion to an analysis of masculinity and sexual abstinence in *Twilight*, I also review the historical context of the vampire as queer in gothic fiction and compare it to recent uses of the supernatural to interrogate virginity in recent popular vampire media. These contexts are important to my analysis of virginity in the *Twilight* books as while Meyer notably flips the script on

contemporary male virgin stigma, she does so without challenging narratives of virile masculinity, heteronormativity or colonial ownership over the land. I argue that without a complete reframing of masculine sexuality to be disconnected from heterosexism and white supremacist colonialism, the *Twilight* series reifies the oppressive nature of dominant conceptions of virginity loss.

Social Contexts Surrounding Masculine Virginity and the Relevance of the Vampire

My analysis of masculinity and virginity within the *Twilight* books centers around themes of sexual abstinence and restraint as virginity has not been commonly applied to male bodies, nor is male virginity believed to exist within the body today. To discuss the historical non-importance of virginity for men I outline a brief history of the terms favoured over virginity to describe male sexual restraint, discussing how masculine purity and morality have been commonly constructed as a matter of mind over body through European Christian religious frameworks brought to North America via colonialism. I further discuss the lack of popular momentum to de-stigmatize virginity for men today, viewing this contemporary disinterest as evidence of the significant value placed on virile masculinity today and a popular desire to not disrupt heterosexist patriarchy. To highlight the contemporary importance of non-virginity to masculinity, I summarize portrayals of first sex and desirable masculine sexuality in the vampire-themed television shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *True Blood* (2008-2014). Melissa Ames (2010) describes vampire stories as reflecting the politics of their time, claiming that, “the vampire narrative is a productive space to tease out problems of gender and sexuality” (45). The recent interest of vampire-themed media in exploring first sex through supernatural elements points to the contemporary importance of virginity as a theme for interrogation at the turn of the 21st century.

The use of the supernatural to reflect or interrogate the boundaries of cultural sexual norms is nothing new. Dominant narratives of heterosexuality were interrupted by the supernatural through the

creation of the canonical vampire in late 18th and 19th century literature. Joseph Michael Sommers and Amy L. Hume (2011) explain that, “the penetration of the victim's skin inflicted by traditional vampires has long been associated with the penetration of sexual intercourse; sating the vampiric yearning for blood reads as parallel to gratifying sexual lust” (153). Narratives of the vampire in gothic horror have commonly been read to represent queer or divergent sexuality in a time and place where homosexuality was criminalized. These texts include Sheridan Le Fanu's lesbian vampire novella, *Carmilla* (1872) and the famous vampire novel influenced by it, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The historical subtext of the vampire as queer is important to my discussion of the *Twilight* books: Although Meyer's 21st century vampire story line may be read as subverting dominant narratives of male virginity as stigmatized and undesirable, Meyer also re-writes the vampire to romanticize and assert heteronormativity in a time and place where queer rights are being fought for and won. In this re-writing of the vampire, the interjection *Twilight* makes into vampire literature and contemporary teen narratives of sexuality is part of a backlash against queer rights and progress.

Virginity Unbodied: Continence, Celibacy and Chastity

The discourse of virginity is distinctly female, while terms such as continence and celibacy have been traditionally favoured to describe male abstinence from sex (Blank 10). Rather than describing a born state, these terms refer to sexual moderation, choice, or purity of mind. In this section I summarize key historical contexts and religious shifts that have shaped male sexual abstinence as about mind over body and civilization over nature. The dominant narratives of virginity in North America today were influenced by ancient customs stemming from Greek, Roman, Jewish and Christian practices that European colonialists brought to North America (Carpenter 18). Even supposedly secular views of virginity today were shaped by the development and dominance of Christianity, in which sex has been

traditionally viewed as inherently sinful in stark contrast to Judaism as well as the pagan religious cults of Ancient Greece and Rome. Drawing on Carpenter's summation of history, I highlight the rise of Christianity, the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, as well as the Industrial Revolution, as points of major change impacting gendered conceptions of virginity and virginity loss today. I further contend that through the sexual and moral scapegoating of African diaspora and Indigenous peoples, colonialism enabled the lessening importance of religious sexual abstinence for white oppressors who framed their sexual purity in contrast to those they racialized.

Although contemporary notions of chastity are strongly associated with celibacy, in the pre-Christian world chastity did not mean absolute abstinence from sexual activity (Blank 120). Blank describes chastity in pagan Ancient Greece and Rome as a matter of physical health rather than of religion:

Sex was an integral aspect of the life of the body, and everything that affected the body could also affect health. It was common for men to consult physicians to discover what kinds of imbalances might exist in the humours of their bodies. On doctors' advice they would tailor their sexual activities as well as their diets, exercise, massage regimens, and work and bathing habits. (121)

Temporary abstinence from sexual activity may be prescribed by medical practitioners, but insufficient release of sexual fluids was also believed to be detrimental to the balance of the humours (Blank 121-2). To be chaste in the ancient world was to have sex within acceptable cultural boundaries – ones that were broader for men – and to exhibit self-discipline in not indulging excessively, but it was about moderation rather than abstinence.

The rise of Christianity changed the concept of chastity through the individualization of each body as “a temple of God,” as written in Corinthians (qtd. in Blank 135). Blank describes this as a departure from “the classical model of human contact with the Divine” in which connection was made through a two-fold process involving both acts of material sacrifice and mediation governed by Priests

and Priestesses (135). While some individual bodies were previously considered sacred due to specific contexts that honoured and required sexual purity – such as in the case of the Vestal virgins, Roman Priestesses of Vesta – religious sacrifice became more broadly internalized for all people with sexual abstinence becoming a form of personal connection with divinity. This shift also “transformed the socioeconomics of religion” as favour with the Gods was no longer garnered directly by the quantity of excess material wealth one had available to sacrifice (Blank 136).

Like the word abstinence, the term continence refers broadly to constraint or control, although it is especially associated with sexual restraint. The concept of continence comes from Encratism, a second-century philosophy that encouraged abstinence from sex as a way to prepare for the second coming of Christ, viewing sex as a potential distraction from human relationships with the Divine (Blank 138-9). Continence or celibacy in the time of the Encratites and the Gnostics was part of “boycotting the womb,” a religious protest against conception and human propagation (Blank 139; Abbot 61). Men were framed as naturally closer to God by their less tangible connection to the processes of birth which in turn necessitate death (Blank 139). Virginity was not required to join the Encratites, but a commitment to celibacy began through a desexualizing dedication ritual in which individuals would enter naked into a cold pool which “nullified the heat of their fiery birth” (Abbott 62). Although these sects no longer exist, the evolution of contemporary Christian concepts of celibacy were shaped by both Encratic and Gnostic views (Abbot 61). The discomfort of early Christianity with birth and mortality was situated onto the bodies of women, associating them as more of this-world and less holy.

Although sexual abstinence was the message for early Christians regardless of gender, the terms “virgin” and “chastity” were broadly favoured for women and men respectively (Carpenter, 19). Carpenter's interpretation of this divide is that “sexual purity and abstinence were innate in women, but had to be cultivated in men” (19). This discursive difference also suggests more leniency for men to have previously engaged in sexual activity as chastity is an active choice one makes as opposed to a born state. In his autobiographical works collectively known as *Confessions* written at the end of the fourth century,

early Christian theologian Saint Augustine of Hippo said famously of chastity, “Grant me chastity and continence, but not just now” (qtd. in Carpenter 19). The same levity was not granted to women, whose corporeal state of virginity once lost was considered gone forever.

Across the 16th and 17th centuries, the Protestant Reformation and Scientific Revolution together contributed to the gradual loosening of the importance of chastity for men. Sexual abstinence as a form of contact with the Divine began to be viewed by Protestants as unnecessary and superstitious while scientific secularism gained popularity (Carpenter 20). Carpenter credits this period with the reinvigoration of masculinity as corresponding with sexual activity (20). While sexuality within the context of marriage became less shameful, the concern with male chastity was especially diminished and with that diminishment grew the potential for elite men to freely celebrate their own sexual indulgence (Carpenter 20). It is important to note that these freedoms were gained only for men privileged by race and class status in addition to their gender. The virginity of women remained a commodity until marriage, one notably more valuable for those of lower socioeconomic status (Carpenter 20). The consequences of sexual activity for white men were lesser than those for women as “the abdication of legal, social and religious authorities . . . made it increasingly possible for men to abandon single women whose children they had fathered” (Carpenter 22). By early 19th century colonial America, there was a backlash against the increased sexual activity and childbirth outside of marriage rising over the 18th century, with particular concern surrounding the seduction and corruption of young white women (Carpenter 22).

The effects of the Industrial Revolution on labour, coupled with a social backlash against liberal sexuality that led to the conservative sexual morals characteristic of the Victorian Period, further developed a binary divide between gender and sexuality roles for men and women throughout the 19th century. Industrialization led to more men finding paid labour outside of the home, shaping public/private spheres of life as delegated to men/women respectively (Carpenter 23). This divide emphasized the association of men with the external world and governance of currency and property,

while women became further associated with the home and as being the property of men. Love outside of paternal dictation was considered a destructive force that led to the social and economic ruining of women through the loss of virginity and childbirth outside of marriage, associating the sexual passion of women with destruction (Carpenter 23). Rather than encouraging women to control their sexual urges – as became the model for Victorian men – it came to be believed that women were better off by not having any at all (Carpenter 23). The belief that women possessed sexual desire diminished, yet sexual desire was assumed to be innate and to some extent healthy for men. While newly resurged religious sexual ideals emphasized self-restraint and abstinence as signs “of strength and masculinity”, it was simultaneously believed that sexual release was of importance to male health in a way that was not required by female bodies (Carpenter 24).

Racism and colonialism also enabled the changing standards of sexual morality for white colonists of North America. The sexual and moral derision of peoples of African descent and Indigenous peoples of North America as “promiscuous, amoral, and animalistic” was intrinsic to processes of conquest and racialization (Carpenter 21). White European sexual identity became defined in opposition to those they oppressed through the claiming of land and slaves. The framework of colonialism presumed that it was right and moral to seize control of both human bodies and inhabited land wherever white powers perceived the absence of civilization; Christian constructions of sexual restraint were invested markers of civilization to colonial powers. Different social norms within African and Indigenous cultures surrounding sex outside of marriage and public nudity were used to justify white supremacy (Carpenter 21). This process occurred even in scenarios where sexual restraint was valued by those being racialized: mid-19th century Hispanic culture of the southwest United States cherished the virginities of unmarried daughters, but their practice of dancing in public was still interpreted by white Europeans as “licentious and immoral” (Carpenter 26). The presumption of primitive others is exemplified in Rudyard Kipling's (1899) poem, “The White Man's Burden”. The descriptive line, “your new-caught sullen peoples, half devil and half child” specifically highlights the belief that non-Christian moral frameworks are inferior

and undeveloped: the commonality between the devil and children being the lack of moral restraint. The violence enacted upon racialized peoples under the justification of moral superiority was not erased as white Europeans chose for themselves to move away from religious abstinence. The 21st century trend towards liberal sexuality cannot be disconnected from the history of colonization and the privileged construction of white men as colonizers, civilizers, and thinkers.

Relevant to my analysis of the *Twilight* books is the connection between chaste/virgin divide between not only men/women, mind/body and civilized/primitive, but also white/racialized and rich/poor. The discursive difference between virginal women versus celibate or chaste men alludes to the gendered construction of women as property, bodily and earthly; while men are elevated into the realm of the mind as thinkers, rulers and decision makers. This divide exists along other axes of oppression as well. As straight masculinity has been defined in opposition to femininity and homosexuality, white sexual morality has also been framed in contrast to those racialized by white colonizers. When Meyer chooses to focus on the bodies of her fictionalized account of Quileute men, rather than their minds, she is reducing their worth as people in a way that parallels the value placed on female bodies to be young and beautiful. By the same function, to focus on mental aspects of a white woman – as seen in *Twilight* through the centering of Bella, her voice and choices, even the way her mind is protected from being read supernaturally – further marginalizes the women of colour in the same text who are not given equal voice or choices.

Masculinities and Virgin Stigma

Popular constructions of first sex for men emphasize masculinity as virile. Virility is about strength and power as connected to sex drive and sexual desire, and associated with an active penetrative role in sex. It is explicitly associated with the process of ejaculation and the capacity to father children;

diversities in bodily capacity and fertility such as loss of libido, erectile dysfunction and low sperm count or motility are commonly stigmatized as un-masculine (Tjørnhøl-Thomsen). The association between bodily processes of the phallus and sperm with masculinity are evident through the history of eunuchs who were derided as feminized even within contexts where castration also afforded social status such as in the case of the *castrati*, 18th century classical singers whose testicles were severed before puberty to effect the pitch of their voice (Abbot 427).

The association of masculinity with the presence of a phallus and its capacity to perform specific action is oppressive as it draws cissexist and ableist boundaries about what a male body must be in order to define a man. Julia Serano (2007) identifies a cultural bias evident within fields of medicine and psychiatry towards pathologizing femininity and feminine-associated behaviours in those assigned the gender of the male at birth, suggesting “that 'male femininity' is more psychopathological than 'female masculinity'” (127). Serano terms “effemimania” to name the cultural “obsession with 'male femininity'” (129). The belief in masculinity and manhood as fundamentally attached to the penis contributes to the transmisogynistic rhetoric of “deception” attached to the womanhood of trans women (Serano 247-51). In this way, the framing of (hetero)masculinity to be attached to the phallus, and in fear and opposition to homosexuality, contributes to the murder of and other violence perpetrated against trans women.

One prevalent narrative of virginity loss for men is of first sex as a step in the process of being a man, a step associated with virility and conquest. Common definitions of sex and intimacy for men require ejaculation within the body of another; popular films such as *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and *American Pie* depict ejaculation prior to sexual intercourse as a comical failure. Historically, masculine adulthood was typically defined by marriage and sexual propagation in the creation of a family, as well as the ownership of property and the accumulation of wealth. The virile associations of masculinity have also manifested through the taking of lands in conquest and war, and through the use of rape as a tool of war. Despite contemporary gains in social spheres of gender and sexuality and the withdrawal of explicit imperial control over most of the colonies of the 19th and 20th century, masculinity today remains about

conquest, framed around whiteness and heterosexuality. Being manly today means knowing more about how the world works than another, about being in a position to threaten and enact violence, and about conquering others. As a venue to prove masculinity, sex is one of the few remaining avenues for conquest. Due to the impact of biomedical advances increasing the efficacy of birth control, contraception and decreasing infant mortality – a changing world in which the raising of children is an expense rather than a source of labour – virility cannot be measured by physical progeny, yet virility remains important as a symbol of masculine strength. Wealth and ideological investment in capitalism is another venue of socially acceptable conquest, which Meyer employs in *Twilight* by letting the extreme wealth of the Cullen family reflect their importance and longevity as civilized immortals.

As contemporary masculinity is asserted through heterosexual experience, masculine virginity is broadly equated with feminization and homosexuality. Describing how this creates a doubled stigmatization on young men who know or suspect themselves to be gay, Carpenter states it is “not surprising” that almost all of her interview subjects who identified as gay men understood virginity first as a stigma (109). Carpenter's straight interview subjects reported using first sex as an assertion of their heterosexuality, while gay and questioning men reported first sex with a female partner being a way to shed stigma while at the same time testing out or asserting heterosexuality (138). Highlighting the stigmatization of queerness at a time that also represents increased media visibility for gay characters, one scene in the 2010 film, *Easy A*, depicts a teenage girl pretending to have sex with a gay friend at a party in order to ease the severity of the social stigma on him.

Despite the stigmatization of virginity being a well-known experience that young men in particular contend with – one commonly depicted in films directed for a teenage audience – there is no true cultural momentum concentrated on de-stigmatizing and reconciling virginity with masculinity. Two social movements emerged towards the end of the 20th century whose interests overlap with the de-stigmatization of virginity for men: the evangelical Christian purity movement concerned with sexual abstinence until marriage, and the counter-feminism men's rights movement that emerged out of the

consciousness-raising men's liberation movement of the 1970s. As a reactionary movement, anti-feminism men's rights activism is concerned with countering feminist claims of systemic privilege awarded to men through patriarchy, believing that men's rights need to be fought for in opposition to women's rather than exclusively by dismantling traditional masculinity (Messner, 44). The current online landscape of men's rights activism includes those who identify as “incels” or “involuntary celibates”, viewing women as wielding power through the distribution of sex; women's bodies representing access to sex as a resource that is either withheld from or bestowed upon men. This concept is not unlike the cultural belief propagated by the purity movement in which women are considered to be innately less sexual and therefore the natural gatekeepers of sex, responsible for protecting the purity of the men around them. In addition to viewing women as responsible for the dissemination of sex, evangelical Christian and men's rights groups also prioritize or focus exclusively on the interests of heterosexual men, viewing queerness respectively as immoral or un-masculine. Each of these social movements is a backlash against the perceived gains of second-wave feminism and the climate of greater sexual permissiveness of the 1960s and 70s.

First Sex and Male Sexuality in Recent Popular Vampire Media

There is a recent precedent for virginity being negotiated through supernatural themes in popular media, although the magical properties of virginity are predominantly expressed through female embodiment. When the title character of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*Buffy*) engages in first sex with her vampire boyfriend, Angel, he loses his soul and transforms into a murderous monster. A decade later, the vampire-themed show *True Blood* makes virginity a re-occurring plot point in its second season as Jessica, a newly transformed vampire, has sex for the first time only to discover afterwards that her hymen regenerates as part of her immortal healing abilities. Through discussion of these characters, I

outline the contrasting narratives of desirable male sex partners as sexually experienced versus the message that female virgins are desirable to men, even to century old vampires. I also discuss the way first sex for male characters is treated differently in contrast to the dramatic and romantic weight afforded to female virginity.

While popular series such as *Buffy* and *True Blood* explore the circumstances and consequences of first sex for young romanticized female characters, male characters who are depicted as ideal romantic or sexual partners enter the narratives as already sexually experienced. While Buffy is a seventeen-year-old teenager in the episode in which she first has sex, her boyfriend Angel is a 241-year-old vampire. If it was not explicit before this point in the series that he has had sex over the centuries he has been alive, the consequence of having sex with Buffy – the loss of his soul – illuminates his past as a soulless monster who would not have been concerned with chastity. Sookie, the twenty-five year old main character of *True Blood*, also engages in first sex with a vampire more than a century her senior. In both of these narratives, the value of a sexually experienced partner is coded through the figure of the vampire, representing centuries of experience while simultaneously remaining attractive and youthful.

The importance of experience is also depicted through the male supporting characters in popular vampire media who are sexually inexperienced at the beginning of each series. Buffy's friend Xander is depicted as goofy and unpopular, his crush on Buffy unrequited. Unlike the romanticized depictions of first sex for female characters in *Buffy*, Xander's first sex is spontaneous with an acquaintance with whom he is not in a relationship, as portrayed in a third-season episode titled "The Zeppo" (1999). Afterwards, she says, "that was great, I gotta shower" and pushes him out her door wearing only a towel, holding his clothes in his hands. His experience is treated lightly and as humorous in contrast to the serious and romantic characterizations of first sex for female characters in the same series. This scene is not coincidentally set in an episode dedicated to Xander finding himself as a hero, as sex is commonly used as a way to represent power and initiation into manhood. In Xander's narrative first sex is used as a mechanism to signify growth, importance and independence even though there is not explicit weight

given to the quality of his sexual experience itself.

Female embodiment of virginity is commonly depicted as valuable to men regardless of their level of sexual experience. After Jessica has sex for the first time with fellow virgin Hoyt in a second-season episode of *True Blood* titled “Timebomb” (2009), her hymen is depicted as breaking, but regenerating. Upon realizing that her hymen is regenerating, it is Jessica who exclaims, “oh my god no” and “it grew back” while her previously inexperienced partner attempts to reassure her that her hymen regenerating is beautiful, saying, “every time will be like our first time”. Hoyt expresses this despite the physical pain Jessica experiences from first sex, romanticizing the breaking/stretching of her hymen through vaginal intercourse. In *Buffy*, Angel was a monster cursed with a soul that would disappear if he ever experiences “one true moment of happiness”. That magic cannot refer to orgasm or sex, as Angel later has sex with other characters without losing his soul, and instead it is implied that it relates to his love for Buffy, that it is being with Buffy that causes him to be happy. However, it is specifically having sex with seventeen year old, virginal Buffy that the show highlights as the precise moment of “true happiness” for the male lead. These moments in popular vampire media illuminate that as sexual experience is constructed into idealized masculinity, it is also masculine to desire virginity in female partners no matter how experienced you are.

By examining the supernatural intervention of the vampire into popular television narratives of first sex, I situate the interventions *Twilight* makes into virginity discourse within contemporary vampire media. Meyer conceptualized and wrote the first *Twilight* novel within a six-month period beginning less than two weeks after the last episode of *Buffy* aired⁷. Even if Meyer is not responding to *Buffy* directly, the *Twilight* books are a response to a similar social climate out of which *Buffy* was born.

About the Vampire: Penetration, Phallicism and Queerness

⁷ On her website, Meyer attests to writing the first *Twilight* novel within a six-month period following an inspiration dream she had on June 2nd, 2003 (“The Story Behind *Twilight*”). The last episode of *Buffy* aired May 20th, 2003.

The vampire may have always been a monster representing feared or taboo sexuality. Vampires interrogate and transcend dominant cultural boundaries of permissible sexuality as figures who blur gender/sexual roles and engage in the sexualized act of feeding on blood with multiple partners. It is also one that changes the cultural script on reproduction and gendered sexual roles, the specific symbolism of penetrating fangs tapping into cultural fears of men being sexually receptive. Responding to readings of vampirism in the text of the most famous vampire, *Dracula* (1897), as lesbian by Sue Ellen Case (1991), homoerotic by Christopher Craft (1989) and as representing “heterosexual exogamy” by John Stevenson (1988); Jack Halberstam⁸ (1995) argues that the “mechanism by which the consuming monster who reproduces his own image comes to represent the construction of sexuality itself” is more important as a subject of study than determining which specific fringe or feared sexuality the vampire may represent (100).

As vampires traditionally highlight and explore the cultural boundaries of normative sexuality, it is not surprising that supernatural plots would be a site of inquiry at the turn of the 21st century to explore emerging cultural themes around virginity. Jessica's regenerating hymen appears not coincidentally during an era where the concept of “secondary virginity” – which emerged in sexuality scholarship in the 1970s – has become increasingly promoted with the rise of conservative Christian abstinence education under the term “born-again virginity” (Carpenter 40). Despite the vast realms of possibility that the inclusion of monsters and witchcraft into a plot could open for exploring masculinity and first sex, these popular narratives make only mild investigations into the meaning of male virginity, reifying common tropes and narratives about the unimportance of the circumstances surrounding male virginity loss. The supernatural intervention into Jessica's virginity is relevant to a discussion of masculinity, as the blood and pain associated with the penetration into skin by a vampire's fangs may be read as specifically about the breaking or stretching of the hymen. At a time where the assumption of the hymen as innate and

⁸ Published under the name Judith Halberstam

universal is being challenged, the idea of a regenerating hymen highlights the importance of the concept of the hymen to us: the fantasy of pierced skin and the production of blood as integral to sexuality and reproduction. Through the introduction of a supernatural fang that may penetrate any skin, the category of those who may be penetrated expands to include all bodies.

Noting the capacity of the vampire to reproduce itself, Halberstam states that the vampire itself is, “not lesbian, homosexual, or heterosexual; the vampire represents the productions of sexuality itself” (qtd. in Sommers and Hume 153). The vampire stands in for broader cultural interrogations of sexuality in part by transforming the human mechanics of reproduction. A vampire does not procreate with another to produce a third, but instead singularly reproduces itself into the body of another. Instead of semen entering a womb that carries and eventually discards a new being separate from its carrier through processes of gestation and birth, the bitten body wholly becomes a womb and a new being is almost immediately birthed within that body. Vampiric reproduction is a process of one transforming another rather than two creating a third. When discussing the role of vampiric sexuality in *The Twilight Saga*, it is particularly relevant to discuss the reproductive capacity of vampires as phallic monsters that recreate themselves without the necessity of a womb, as the series emphasizes the importance of paternal and patriarchal roles in the family. *The Twilight Saga* presents a family of heterosexual, monogamous vampires who choose to abstain from feeding on humans.

Through the capacity of vampiric sexuality to reproduce, as well as by transforming chaste women into seductive vampires with sexual appetites, Halberstam reads Dracula as a figure who “blends power and femininity within the same body and then marks that body as distinctly alien” (100). Masculinity in *The Twilight Saga* is complicated by some characteristics of feminization within the supernatural men depicted in the texts, both through the vampires – as they take on these new roles to do with reproduction and birth, as will be further discussed throughout this chapter – and the shape-shifters who transform into wolves.

Reading Masculine Abstinence in *Twilight*

Far from narratives that stigmatize male virginity, the *Twilight* books eroticize male abstinence and restraint through Edward's relationship with Bella. Where *Twilight* flips the script on sexuality is not only through Edward's refusal to engage in sex with Bella before they marry, but also by his refusal to bite her. This abstinence from blood is two-fold: Edward abstains from the pleasure of drinking human blood and, viewing his existence as monstrous, he resists reproducing himself through the turning of humans into vampires. Through these interjections into traditional vampire lore, *Twilight* subverts the dominant narrative of masculine virginity as stigmatized, subverting aspects of masculinity as necessarily virile. Unlike his romantic contemporaries in pop culture, Edward is not only abstaining from sex with Bella to protect her virginity: he himself is a more than a century-old virgin. Edward makes his virginity clear while drawing a moral comparison between pre-marital sex and murder, saying to Bella, "The same principle applies – the only difference is that this is the one area in which I'm just as spotless as you are." (E 454). Born in 1901, Edward's displacement in time excuses him from matching his style of masculinity with the demand that men in the 21st century should be sexually experienced before they turn 100; however, Edward's capacity to transform virgin stigma for himself relies on the social power he possesses through his whiteness, extreme wealth and beauty.

In the following sections I discuss the links within dominant conceptions of masculinity between sex, violence and procreation, and explore these as the conceptual sites where men are expected to perform as conquerors. Within my reading of masculinity in *Twilight*, I analyze the vampire clan's abstinence from drinking the blood of humans as a narrative that mirrors sexual abstinence as well as a demonstration of civility through the overcoming of primitive biological desires. The desires for pleasures associated with sex and with food are depicted as being civilized in *Twilight* only in certain contexts. The fictionalized depiction of the Indigenous Quileute people offer a primitive contrast to the

sparkling white Edward and his family of vampires, the Cullens.

Congflation of Blood and Sex: Men as Dangerous

Edward's appearance is frequently compared to figures of divine beauty from classical art, likened to a greek god, angel and Adonis. Described as though a living statue, "his skin was cold and hard, like a stone" (T 124), his "cool lips, marble hard" (E 43). Wilson (2011) interprets the frequent comparisons to rock as signifying Edward's whole body to be perpetually phallic: "with his hard-as-marble body [he] is, to put it bluntly, a walking erection – always hard, always ready" (84). The books are never explicit about sexual acts between Edward and Bella, the consummation of their marriage takes place between pages and the two do not engage in increasing acts of sexual intimacy prior to marriage such as the stroking of breasts or genitals, yet Edward's entire body is treated as erogenous. Sexual desire and the thirst to drink human blood are conflated throughout the texts. Edward is hyper-sensitive to Bella's mere presence, his vampiric senses heightening the sound of her heartbeat and scent of her blood. The slightest of physical touches between them are intense. When Bella runs a single finger across Edward's forearm, Edward closes his eyes and tells her, "You can't imagine how that feels" (T 261). In a moment when they are about to kiss, Edward physically removes himself abruptly, running away before their lips can touch. Contact between them is heightened by the danger that Edward's vampiric form represents, the implications of his fangs and the instinctual desire of the monster to penetrate her skin and consume her. Just before their first kiss, Bella describes Edward as hesitating, "not in the normal way . . . to prolong the moment", but "to test himself, to see if this was safe, to make sure he was still in control of his need" (T 282). It is this combination of need and control that the *Twilight* books depict as idealized masculinity, centering Edward as the ultimate romantic hero as framed through his virginity, rather than in spite of it.

The dominant conception that men are innately sexual and sexual aggression as natural to men is

not subverted throughout the narrative of the *Twilight* books. Although for much of the story Edward has resigned himself to never consummate his relationship with Bella due to the danger of losing control of himself, his need to consume blood is a constant reminder of his sexuality. Edward may be content to remain sexually chaste, but he cannot turn off his vampiric desire for Bella. The books are clear that men are dangerous because of their sexual appetites, depicted both through the sexual danger represented by mortal men, and the sexualized danger directed at Bella from other vampires who desire to consume her.

Although Edward is firm believer in abstinence – refraining from both sex and from drinking human blood – Meyer sets up multiple foils for Edward who are outwardly sexually aggressive and violent in order to highlight Edward's control over his own desires. Before their relationship begins in the first book, Edward rescues Bella from four men threatening her on the street at night. If there was any doubt as to the threat of sexual violence implicit in the scene before Edward arrives, it is quashed by Edward's mind-reading capability. Saying, “I heard what they were thinking,” Edward admits he found it difficult to not kill the men on the street based off of their thoughts towards Bella (T176). The danger of men on the street is repeated through Rosalie's backstory, as she was assaulted to the point of near death on the street. Highlighting male sexual desire as natural, and Bella's body as a coveted object, Edward routinely both disapprovingly and teasingly comments to Bella what kinds of things Bella's male friends and Jacob think about her. The biggest foil for Edward's sexual restraint is Bella's other love interest, Jacob, who becomes increasingly sexually aggressive with Bella following his transformation into a wolf. Jacob assaults Bella by kissing her without her consent (E 330). Jacob's romantic propositions to Bella include frequently reminding her that he can be physical with her in a way Edward cannot.

The villains of the *Twilight* books also make clear the dangers of men as colonizers who take what they want, including women and those socially below them. James, the antagonist of *Twilight*, becomes obsessed with Bella after smelling her once, despite the territorial protection of her with which the Cullen's treat her and make clear that she belongs to them. He is described as a type of vampire / job description known as a “tracker”, obsessed with the hunt once he settles on a mark (T 382). It is later

revealed that Alice was once tracked by James, that she was turned into a vampire as the only way to protect her from his interest in her. The Volturi, the coven of vampires who rule all other vampires from Italy and comprise a threat to Bella and Edward, and by extension their entire family, in both *New Moon* and *Breaking Dawn*, are led by three men. Although wives are mentioned, they are not active or speaking characters. While the *Twilight* saga makes clear the dangers of men who are uncivilized, who drink human blood, the narrative also valorizes the importance of patriarchal control: the Volturi are depicted as corrupt, but the Cullen's are similarly centered around the father/patriarch Carlisle and Edward as his first son and progeny. The difference between civilized and uncivilized men is restraint, but there is never an implication that women are equal leaders.

Throughout *Twilight* sex is associated with food, creating a fundamental problem: food is a basic need and a right, while sex with others is not. It is perhaps not a coincidence that sex and food are conflated in texts emerging from an era which includes concepts such as “involuntary celibacy”, suggesting that sex is a resource that may be withheld. Edward's desire to consume Bella is not the only time when a lover is depicted as food. Edward and Bella's infant daughter Renesmee is “imprinted” on by Jacob, signifying that when she is an adult he will be her romantic partner. It is established that, from her infancy, although Renesmee can absorb nutrition from human food, she prefers to drink blood. She is non-venomous and regularly bites Jacob. Although this could be read positively, as countering the prominent narrative throughout *Twilight* of men who stalk and wish to consume Bella, it is not a direct reversal of power. Renesmee is white, her skin sparkling as a half-vampire, but the man she feeds from is Indigenous.

Constant Vigilance: Abstinence from Blood

In *Twilight*, while women such as Emily are physically marked by sex prior to marriage, all

vampires are marked by whether or not they abstain from drinking human blood. Edward and all of the Cullen's eyes are described as a copper or gold colour, while vampires who drink human blood have bright red eyes. As the mammals that are the source of the Cullen's food possess blood of the same colour as humans, this distinction is symbolic: vampires who can abstain from drinking blood can assimilate better into human society, while those who are more dangerous to humans are clearly marked as ravenous monsters. It is curious, though, that the main difference between human and animal blood in *Twilight* appears to concern pleasure: drinking animal blood is described as less satisfying, but the only bodily function affected by the consumption of animals instead of humans is the urge to drink human blood.

Twilight is not the only teen vampire series that follows a vampire who drinks animal blood in order to abstain from harming humans, although the effect of animal blood in *Twilight* is contrasted by its function in similar narratives. First published in the early 1990s, L.J. Smith's, *The Vampire Diaries*, also follows the romance between a mortal teen with an impossibly attractive seventeen-year-old vampire, Stefan, who integrates himself into regular mortal life by attending high school in a small town. Within the surge of young adult media focusing on supernatural themes that arose in the wake of the *Twilight* books, a television adaptation of *The Vampire Diaries* premiered in 2009. Like the Cullens of *Twilight*, Stefan separates himself from the sins of his past and of other vampires by refusing to drink human blood; however, animal blood makes him weaker than other vampires, rendering him unable to fight those who are strengthened by drinking human blood.

Within the mythology of the *Twilight* series, animal blood does not make the Cullens weaker than other vampires. In contrast, the ability to survive on animal blood alone and the capacity to interact with humans without murdering them out of hunger is treated as a matter of strength. When one of the leaders of the Volturi, Aro, first meets Bella, he knows through his mind-reading ability exactly how potently her blood smells to Edward. Aro is amazed at Edward's restraint, asking, "How can you stand so close to her like that?" (NM 471) and even compliments Edward on his control, stating, "I did not know such strength

was possible” (NM 472). The Cullen family is never described as weaker or less formidable in fights with other vampire groups due to their diet, and instead it is the temptation to drink from humans that is treated as weakness. If vampires naturally crave human blood, does not it make sense that human blood would sustain them, that the cosmology of human blood as better nutrients makes sense? Instead, *Twilight* depicts that natural cravings need to be curbed. This is clearly the message about sex in contexts outside of marriage – and the difference between civilized and violent men – but it may also extend into criticisms of nutrition and sustenance for readers: in a diet-industry era, the idea that humans must resist foods pleasurable to the tongue and palate – fats, sugars, salt – is a dominant contemporary narrative about abstinence and the importance of personal restraint.

Sommers and Hume argue that as Edward's “defining characteristic” is “his ability to abstain from drinking Bella's blood”, Edward must “be understood to be inherently queer in relation to his family”, because of his “refusal to reproduce” (158-9). Wilson similarly describes Edward as “queer” because of the ways his sexuality subverts traditional masculinity (86). I contend that this is an unkind use of the term: at a point in time when queerness is broadly taken up as a term for lesbian, gay, bi/pansexual, intersex, Two-Spirit and trans individuals, it is inappropriate to transplant that same term onto a narrative that reifies heteronormativity. The Cullens are clearly represented as a family of heterosexual pairs who support Edward's romantic partnership with a human because of how long they have been waiting for him to find the one to complete the family, thus making Edward no longer the odd man out. Sexual abstinence until marriage in the *Twilight* series is interlocked with broader themes of gender, family and identity. “Bella is not only drawn to Edward,” Silver writes, “she falls in love with the entire Cullen family” (126). In contrast to narratives of adolescence “that envision young adulthood as a break from the family towards individuation and autonomy,” Silver asserts the series posits “adult identity as being formed within the context of the family” (127). A child of divorced parents, Bella leaves her humanity behind to join a family of eternal pairings, choosing Edward as a mate over Jacob, who lacks the same family support.

Within *Twilight* food is positioned as a burden on mortals through Bella's unhealthy relationship with food as she is explicitly unable to adequately feed herself without the direct supervision of men. Bella views the vampires' lack of eating as distinctly beautiful: "As I watched, the small girl rose with her tray – unopened soda, unbitten apple – and walked away with a quick, graceful lope that belonged on a runway" (T 19). The connection between grace and abstinence from eating is apparent. Bella frequently says she is not hungry, or goes to her room to do homework without dinner. When she does eat, she eats in an idealistic way, as if she has read a manual on mindfulness and the ethics of eating: "I ate slowly, chewing each bite with care. When I was done, I washed the bowl and spoon, dried them, and put them away" (T 129). At other times, Bella is described as swallowing food without tasting it – "just feeling the ache as it slid down my raw throat" – without pleasure, often because Edward or her father demands that she eats (NM 392). Descriptions of her engagement with food are often incomplete, such as when she picks up a muffin and "started nibbling around the edges" (NM 332). Like the vampires who pick apart mortal food to give the appearance of eating it, Bella describes herself picking at food while out to dinner with her father, "stuffing pieces of it into my napkin when I was sure his attention was somewhere else" (NM 392); but Bella is not a vampire hiding her immortal body from others, she is a human girl. Her reluctance to eat weakens her and also emphasizes her choices as insufficient to sustain her, her body needing to be monitored and controlled by the men around her. Bella's lack of eating keeps her strength down, emphasizing her physical reliance on the protections of men. Her refusal to participate in mortal eating also distances herself from a body that cannot have sex with her vampire partner yet, wishing she were able to join him in drinking blood and in bed. Bella's obsession with youth and beauty links to her disordered eating habits and her desire to shed the burdens of mortal life and her frail mortal form for the immortal life of a vampire. Bella's relationship with food and her inability to sustain herself are emphasized further by the contrast in her reaction to blood before and after first sex. As a further sign of her bodily weakness as a mortal, the smell of blood in the first *Twilight* novel makes Bella feel faint. After being told by a peer at school that humans cannot smell blood, Bella responds, "Well, I can – that's

what makes me sick” (T 100). There is no discussion of Bella menstruating or how she or Edward deal with the smell of menstrual blood, until the scene in *Breaking Dawn* where Bella realizes she might be pregnant. As Edward and Bella fall in love, Bella's journey towards vampirism is charted through her disinterest in human food towards her eventual embrace of blood drinking: while Bella barely eats in the books and seems to actually resent the biological necessity of eating, she embraces eating once she is pregnant, especially once she begins to consume human blood for the half-vampire fetus her body carries. While pregnant, Bella curiously only consumes things associated with female fertility: blood and (chicken) eggs. It is important to note that this change in Bella's desire to eat and her ability to consume human blood takes place not after becoming a vampire but after first sex and her resulting pregnancy.

Body positive and pro-fat feminism provide a useful lens through which to view the way food is portrayed throughout *Twilight*. According to these theories, the consumption of food may be viewed as morally neutral. As it is the feasting on humans and human blood that is the very characteristic that makes vampires monsters, it is impossible for nutrition to be morally neutral for vampires. A hierarchy is created within *Twilight* between vampires who do and do not consume human blood. For the civilized vampires who abstain from drinking the blood of humans, animal blood is the ultimate all-nutritional shake, comparable to the desire within diet culture to replace traditional food and its related pleasures with a drinkable meal comprising all necessary nutrients. Edward and the entire Cullen family are shown to be morally superior to other vampires through their abstention from human blood that they desire and from the pleasures associated with human food diversity. While pregnant with her half-vampire fetus, Bella is determined to drink human blood, while she herself is still human, to feed her unborn child. Consuming human blood begins to heal her, as the fetus stops leaching off of her own body now that it is receiving nutrients from the blood. Bella and Edward's child, Renesmee, is depicted as perfect and innocent immediately upon her emergence from Bella's womb. She grows up craving and consuming mostly blood even though she can stomach human foods, further reinforcing the narrative of blood as an idealized food choice with *Twilight*.

Mapping Masculine Abstinence in *Twilight*

The *Twilight* series represents the dangers of incivility as distinctly racialized. Jacob's sexual aggression towards Bella is explicitly connected to his status as a shape-shifting Indigenous man, his transformations into a wolf representing men of colour and specifically Indigenous men as literally animalistic. His assault on Bella occurs after she has seen the scars on Emily's face left by Sam, already having been warned that, "hanging out around werewolves has its risks" (NM 330). The history of colonialism in North America has left pockets of land where Indigenous peoples can reside according to some semblance of traditional governance, boundaries that the plot of *Twilight* reinforces. *The Twilight Saga* is also clear that nomadic lifestyles are less civilized than sedentary ones: the "tracker" James who attacks Bella is a sparkling white vampire like the Cullens, but he lacks their extreme wealth and ability to live in one place, fostered only through restraint from feeding on the locals. Wealth is distinctly connected to a sedentary lifestyle, through both the depiction of the Cullens and the Volturi; however, the Volturi are racialized as from a distinctly different culture, residing in Italy and bearing the bright red eyes that mark them as monsters despite their sedentary lifestyle.

Edward's virginity matters because the world of *Twilight* is one in which the capacity for life is passed primarily through men. Wilson claims that within *Twilight*, the capacity for "generative 'life' becomes vampiric immortality, with males (such as Edward and Carlisle) creating new vampires with their venom," adding that, "[s]imilarly, wolves are 'made' via the male line" (93). While vampirism can subvert the link between masculinity and virility by portraying all vampires as having equal capacity to create more – which is the initial suggestion throughout the plot of the *Twilight* series, even though the only protagonists to turn others are Edward and Carlisle – virility as masculine is reified through the mythology presented surrounding rare half-vampire children. Not only can half-vampire children only be

created from the union of a male vampire with a female human, but only the male children produced are venomous (BD 737). For the shape-shifting wolves, the process of imprinting is described as something male characters realize upon seeing a woman rather than as a mutual process: “Sam did love Leah, but when he saw Emily that didn't matter anymore” (E 122). Imprinting as coming from a male is emphasized when Quil, another wolf, imprints on a two-year-old child, Claire. Bella asks Jacob, “Doesn't Claire get a choice here?” to which Jacob responds, “Of course. But why wouldn't she choose him, in the end? He'll be her perfect match” (E 176). For both of the supernatural races in *Twilight*, procreation and the proliferation of the supernatural is centered around the males.

The mythos of *Twilight* suggests that the areas outside of cities are playgrounds for nomadic vampires, that the only human-like creatures able to exist off the land itself are mythical. The Cullens separate themselves from other vampires by having made arrangements to live a sedentary life. This lifestyle had to be negotiated with the fictionalized depiction of the Quileute people in *The Twilight Saga*. Meyers refers to a treaty preventing war between the Quileute and the family of vampires who agree never to drink human blood and never to turn another human into a vampire. The treaty keeps vampires off of Quileute land, but it also creates a boundary for the Quileute people within the story, regulating them to the reserve, to remain within the unclear borders carved out as distinctly theirs. The Cullens drive fast cars and book first class tickets on airplanes, making not only the forests and rural areas outside of the reserve their playground, but also the whole world. There is never discussion of any other Indigenous peoples in the world of *Twilight*, let alone their interactions with vampires, who stand in for the descendants of European colonizers. It is implied that the Quileute people are special, but it is not clear from the mythology of the text whether or not other Indigenous peoples would also have shape-shifters emerge if vampires appeared near their communities or whether any other North American Indigenous peoples even survived into the modern era within *Twilight*. Vampires in *Twilight* continue to act as colonizers: they take what rural land they want, and in instances where they encounter defense they create treaties and boundaries that leave vampires as free and nomadic, but further constrain Indigenous peoples

from leaving their land.

Conclusions to Draw

Throughout this chapter I have contrasted the narratives of masculinity surrounding first sex with corresponding narratives of femininity. Virginitly for men has never had the same bodily component that it had for women, which allowed men historically to engage in sex, in certain situations and with certain women, while remaining morally pure. A component of masculinity is the need to be knowledgeable and experienced when it comes to sex. *Twilight* flips the script on Edwards's virginitly, making it a marker of his masculinity rather a stigma, but does so through his control of his desires not only to have sex with Bella, but also to kill her, thus reinforcing the link between male sexuality and violence. The requirement for virility in masculinity positions men as the colonizers of women and suggests the notion of ownership of the women conquered through sex, as well as the history of colonization of Africa and the Americas. The landscapes within *Twilight* contrast the white vampires as civilized, with the Indigenous Quilettes as primitive. The Cullens who own and control the majority of the physical terrain of *Twilight* are positioned clearly as more civilized than the Quilette shape-shifters, who are largely confined to their reserve. The depictions of masculinity in *Twilight* are about whiteness, straightness, the capacity to enact violence and the virility ascribed to procreative agency. For my concluding chapter I now focus on the intersectional analysis I have interwoven throughout my three central chapters, in order first to pull them together as they relate to identity conceptions around virginitly, and then to pull them apart to highlight areas for future study.

5. Intersectional Analysis and Conclusions

Virginity as an identity is complicated as it is simultaneously a privileged one and also one that is weaponized against women. The literature I have reviewed that focuses on virginity privileges the experiences of the women whose virginites are most commonly discussed – those of straight, cissexual, wealthy, able-bodied, white women. The greater range of choices afforded to women privileged along axes of race, class and ability extends to choices about when to have sex, who to have sex with, or whether to have sex at all, and the capacity to form an identity conception based around those choices. The recording and reciting of history also privileges these women as representatives of the dominant subgroups who have been the authors of history.

Despite the longstanding importance placed on women's virginity in many contexts, the value of virginity has not been the same for all women. During the thousands of years in which female virginity has been used as a way to frame the economic structure of families – to control paternity in marriage – there have always been women having sex outside of marriage whose status is othered by their sexual activity, who are defined in opposition to chaste or marriageable women. Sex has likely always been a source of income for some women. Further, there have always been women whose virginites were rendered irrelevant through systemic sexual violence. Rape was used as a method of torture and control by North American slave owners, but it was also employed for the economic purposes of producing more bodies for exploitation. Andrea Smith (2005) discusses rape as a tool of genocide, stating that “where colonizers used sexual violence to eliminate Native populations, slave owners used rape to reproduce an exploitable labor force” (16). What is the relevance of virginity for a woman who has born children but has never consented to sex? How does the meaning of first sex change for the thousands of children who were sexually abused in Canadian residential schools? If virginity is a commodity for women because the ownership of female bodies stands in for reproductive control, what is the meaning of virginity for women of colour whose reproductive capacities were sterilized by state controls without their consent?

I question the value of virginity as an identity because of those who are forgotten and excluded.

It is not enough to say that those who have been sexually abused have the right to call themselves virgins, as it takes a certain amount of privilege to even question whether or not you could be virginal. The dominant ideological framework that conceptualizes virginity as something other than of the body is Christian. Throughout Europe and North America rape has been historically viewed as having constituted virginity loss, as virginity was about bodies and damage to property (Carpenter 20). The dominant spiritual framework for virginity as something that may be maintained by a victim after assault, and also allows for the reclaiming of chastity through concepts such as “secondary virginity” today, is part of the Christian religious theology that was an integral part of cultural oppression and violence enacted through Canada's residential school system and the genocide against First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples.

Smith discusses violence against the land – through environmental contamination and degradation – as a form of sexual violence against Indigenous peoples. In my analysis of *Twilight*, I use the concept of spatiality to frame how virginity is privileged in regards to other systemic privileges, attempting to map narratives of virginity loss within *Twilight*. In my first chapter, I highlight how Bella and Edward take off on vacation to an island owned by Edward's family, likely bought from colonizers who stole it from its original inhabitants. I connect the fertilization and conception that takes place in Bella's womb to the claiming of the island for the purposes of privacy in sex, and the danger of this event to the secluded environment of the island: if Edward had accidentally killed Bella during first sex, it would have been easier to cover this up on a private and secluded island. In my discussion of spatial femininity, I examine the placement of women in the spheres of home and family. To discuss spatial concepts of masculinity in the *Twilight* books, I examine the paternal control of reproduction through the intervention of the supernatural, both for the civilized vampires and in describing the process of imprinting for the men who shape-shift into wolves. As all of these narratives centre the virginites of a young white woman and her love interests, I now re-examine spatiality as sexual autonomy is shaped for Indigenous women in the *Twilight* saga.

I conducted this project on *Twilight* because the series represents a narrative of virginity and first

sex that young women themselves are invested in, represented by the extreme popularity and sales success of both books and film adaptations of the series. To conclude my discussion of *Twilight*, I also offer a positive reading of themes of virginity and first sex in *The Twilight Saga*, highlighting aspects of the narrative that have the capacity to subvert negative messages about virginity and youth sexuality, or elements that present the possibility to become radical through the re-writing or re-framing of the world of *Twilight*. To conclude my investigation into virginity and first sex, I suggest other avenues for future research on early experiences of sex and sexuality that honour the voices and interests of youth.

Mapping the Sexual Autonomy of Quileute Women in *Twilight*

There are exactly three women of colour with speaking lines throughout the *Twilight* saga: Emily, Leah, and Emily's young niece Claire. Like Emily, who becomes Sam's fiancé through a supernatural process of imprinting that causes Emily and Sam to fall in love at first sight, Claire is imprinted upon by Quil. Leah is one of few characters in *Twilight* not paired off with a romantic partner. Coupled with her infertility, Leah's solitude suggests that romantic love for Indigenous women within the *Twilight* series is primarily for the purposes of reproduction and procreation. I discuss how each of these women's romantic and sexual lives are shaped by the intervention of the supernatural through the racialization of the Quileute people to be driven by animalistic properties such as imprinting.

Claire

Claire is two years old, a child unable to consent to marriage or partnership. In explanation to Bella and the reader, Jacob clarifies that Quil's role in Claire's life will not be romantic or sexual until she

is much older, and that while she is young he will be like an older brother to her:

Quil will be the best, kindest big brother any kid every had. There isn't a toddler on the planet that will be more carefully looked after than that little girl will be. And then, when she's older and needs a friend, he'll be more understanding, trustworthy and reliable than anyone else she knows. And then, when she's grown up, they'll be as happy as Emily and Sam. (BD 176)

The texts make clear that not only are older men ideal partners for young women, and that male control over partnership for the purposes of genetic propagation is proper, but they also suggest that lovers are better parental figures for young women than a woman's actual family.

The reproduction of shape-shifters represents Indigenous women as needing greater paternalistic control. The process of imprinting leaves no true choices for those acted upon, a stark contrast to Bella's choice to become a vampire. While the control of reproduction is shifted onto men through Meyer's mythology for vampires and shape-shifters, the Cullen's all choose their partner, while shape-shifter men are controlled by primitive, biological instincts justified as giving their society the greatest chance of passing on the shape-shifter genetics.

As North American Indigenous women have been the targets for sterilization and extermination, what violence is reified by suggesting that the most important quality of any individual Indigenous woman is her womb's capacity for carrying specific genetic material? To be reduced to her womb? How is this violence amplified when examining a woman who is infertile? Through the narrative of imprinting, *Twilight* reifies the importance of control of paternity for the purposes of genetic compatibility.

Emily

Emily is spatially positioned within the domestic sphere; in one scene she is cooking and in another silent, taking notes at a meeting. As the wife-to-be of the alpha shape-shifter, her life is positioned as a vessel for future alphas, a caretaker and secretary. The goals of assimilation for Indigenous cultures into those of European colonialists included enforcing European gender roles: Emily stays at home and cooks, while Sam goes out into the world as a leader of their people and a fighter who will defend his people through violence if necessary. If Emily ever chose to leave their relationship, it is clear she would be in danger: she had already been accidentally attacked by Sam during his early transformations into a wolf.

Leah

Leah's story is one of abuse and rejection shaped by the potential incapacity of her body to bear children. She has sex with Sam outside of marriage prior to Bella's arrival in Forks and without the supernatural approval of their relationship granted by the imprinting process. Their relationship is described as ending when Emily visits, and Sam imprints on her upon meeting her for the first time. If Leah is infertile, this is a story about her infertility excluding her from the supernatural aspects of her people: invalidating her as a woman if she cannot bear children. Valuing women in this capacity as owned property and vessels for reproduction is a transplantation of European values placed on virginity and women's bodies; it is not representative of Indigenous family structures.

A woman who has already been sexual and abandoned, Leah's mind becomes routinely penetrated by a group of men when she undergoes the transformation into a shape-shifter. These men are less concerned with the privacy of their minds, although they hate her for exposing them to her misery. While the nudity of Sam, Jacob and the other men is used to heighten their hyper-ability, Leah's body is not given the same permission, she is described as having to hide her body from these men or risk further

violation beyond what is already accomplished by their presence in her mind.

When she is given the option to choose to follow Jacob instead of Sam, she is given some small semblance of autonomy, although she is still not sexually liberated or free. It is implied that she cannot partner, as wolves find partners through a supernatural process controlled by men, which she is not a valuable subject for. It is suggested that she will not be able to imprint, since she cannot impregnate another woman for passing along the magic of shape-shifting genetics. Through the boundaries laid out for Indigenous women in the *Twilight* series, the importance of breeding keeps women who are already imprinted upon – Emily and Claire – bound to the home and to the reserve. Leah is the only subject who has a possibility for escape, as she could potentially run far enough away that her pack would not be able to hear her thoughts. The message is clear though: the purpose of sex and love for these racialized women is for procreation only, ensuring the best genetic compatibility for future children.

The implied colonization of the Quileute lands by the Cullens and the treaty agreed upon between the vampires and shape-shifters sets the tone for the spatial world of *Twilight*. It is the land and the spaces that are afforded to different bodies within the narrative that create the conditions where the distinction between virgin and non-virgin weaves within the colonial landscape to impact differently the lives of characters based on their race and gender. A world more like our own does not provide these same supernatural forces. There is no imprinting in the real world and there are no people living in rainy, grey bio-climates to hide the way their skin sparkles in the sunlight. There are many reasons why readers found *Twilight* an enjoyable book to read and the existence of these supernatural forces waiting to be discovered right within the main character's school was no doubt part of the attraction for many young readers. I would like to now position my analysis of the *Twilight* series as one that also seeks to respect the choices, pleasures, and taste of the youth who so overwhelmingly chose to read these books.

Positive Readings of *Twilight*

Twilight was undoubtedly influenced by the vampire culture that came before it. A meme on the internet combines images of the actors who played Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) in *Buffy* and Edward (Robert Pattison) in the *Twilight* films with text stating simply: “Then Buffy Staked Edward. The End.” The same phrase has been sold on buttons and t-shirts, pointing to tension between the fans of the two genres. Airing for seven seasons and ending two years before the first *Twilight* book was published, there is perhaps a decade gap between the teen fan-base of each series, and the annoyance of the older fans of *Buffy* on the internet is clear. Although *Twilight* is inarguably more sexually repressive, especially in the absence of any queer characters at all and the promotion of eternal lifelong heterosexual coupling starting at a young age, there are similarities between the stories and shared criticisms that can be made of both.

The meme of Buffy killing Edward represents the presumption that *Buffy* was somehow more feminist than *Twilight*. There is no political use in such an argument. It is a charitable remembering of a popular series from one generation being contrasted with a more critical view of a series from the next generation. While Buffy is at times heralded as a feminist hero, Bella is criticized for her poor choices and blamed for the violence her body is subjected to, through giving birth and through her subsequent transformation into a vampire. In this lens, Buffy has the right kind of sex – being strong enough to fight her would-be rapist in a scene where she is assaulted by a former lover – while Bella chooses sexual partnership with a man who saves her life while also warning her that he might kill her at any moment, whose control and protection she relies upon. I am not arguing that the *Twilight* books are feminists texts – to the contrary, I believe the world constructed by Meyer romanticizes capitalism, heteronormativity and colonization, as well as had real world consequences as tourism flooded the land of Quileute Nation, whose people she made into fictionalized monsters – but it would be a disservice to dismiss these texts that have been so popular among young women. The reason this project examines *Twilight* as a text is because the immense popularity of the series reveals the relevance of first sex for that audience, and

suggests that there is a desirable narrative in the depiction of young sexuality within *Twilight*. Although I draw on many texts that criticize it, and I have sought to challenge the violence it also enacts, it has been important for me throughout this project to remember that many young women care deeply about this series. This project has never been about criticizing young women for liking or caring about *Twilight*, and I would like to examine a possible reading of why it has been so popular.

A positive reading of *Twilight* relating to sex and sexuality shows the continuing changes to the social discourse around women's sexual desires. Bella is openly sexually throughout the series and although the message for Edward and Bella is clearly not to have sex before marriage, there is no discussion, such as in an epilogue, of their daughter marrying or having children in her partnership with Jacob; it is possible that while marriage is suggested as necessary for safety in sexuality now, that Meyer does not mean to suggest it must always be necessary in the future. Sex between vampires cannot be reproductive, and although sex and parenthood are both celebrated through the context of marriage for Bella and Edward, sex after Bella is transformed into a vampire can only be for the purpose of pleasure. Part of the attraction of the vampire fantasy is their sexual prowess granted by their lack of need to sleep coupled with strength and agility beyond that of normal humans. By choosing to become a vampire, Bella knows that she is also choosing a life free of the necessity of birth control or contraception; through supernatural transformation, Bella and Edward effectively “boycott the womb” – escaping the human cycle of childbirth, life and death – without having to abstain from sex or sexual pleasure.

Twilight also makes suggestions about sex education, that while not entirely palatable, may give insight into future virginity research. The *Twilight* saga does not depict sexual education as something positively received from adults, instead sex is treated as a secret to be uncovered between lovers. When Bella's father grows concerned about the intensity of her relationship with Edward, she compares having a discussion about sex with him as “beyond the seventh circle of Hades” (BD 59). The text also hints that sex does not need to be learned about it because physical knowledge is inherent in the body. This is suggested, for example, when Bella is preparing to take a running leap across a river for the first time as a

newborn vampire and thinks to herself: “This was physical – it should be instinctive” (BD 411). While there are real-world problems with the suggestion that sex is instinctual and best explored alone with a partner, the intense privacy afforded to Bella and Edward's discovery of sexual intimacy with each other alone is perhaps one reason why the story was so popular.

There is an also appealing narrative within *Twilight* of Bella as a seventeen-year-old ethnographer exploring a research topic she is compelled by. Having been in an advanced placement program at her previous school, Bella learns nothing new during her last year of high school, re-reading the same books and even completing identical assignments. While she is described as diligently attending school and completing assigned homework, she is bored, and her interest is completely captivated by Edward for more than romantic reasons. Bella researches the supernatural qualities she deduces about him until she uncovers the existence of vampires, and it is only through her determination to learn about and enter his world that they also begin a romantic relationship. A potential message from Bella's positioning as a researcher, combined with the lack of sexual education in *Twilight*, is that maybe young women are tired of being told how to approach love and sex, that the fantasy of not needing to be educated about these topics – or worry about sexually transmitted infections, or birth control – is appealing. Contrary to messages about thinking carefully about sex and circumstances of first sex told to young women today, Bella throws herself at Edward without restraint.

The common gendering of women as the natural gatekeepers of sex, and the shaming of women who are open about their sexual desires or who take pleasure in sex is noticeably absent from Bella's story: it is Edward who must pull back from their intimate encounters. Although the interjection of the supernatural positions this as being necessary for Bella's safety, she is still in many ways the more sexually aggressive partner throughout their relationship. According to Christine Seifert and Yvonne Clark (2013) writing for *Bitch Magazine*, “[y]oung-adult literature is an important arena in which teens work through what it means to be in a romantic relationship. For some readers, these books will be their first exposure to mature relationships or frank conversations about sex”. *Twilight* was able to centre the

main story arc of the four volume series on Bella's desires to have sex without explicitly detailing any sexual acts. The way that *Twilight* focuses on sexual desires and feelings but not sex itself – the questions of should and when, but not how – leads into the final section of my thesis, where I will link my analysis to broader areas of study including sex education.

The Future of Virginity Research

I have sought to outline a model and a method for analyzing depictions of first sex in popular media and I will now discuss areas of future and further research, as well as some further implications of this type of analysis that are important for future study. My argument throughout this thesis has been that virginity discourse is centered around and privileges specific bodies. This does not mean, however, that narratives of virginity and first sex are not subjects worth examining. The books previously written on virginity centre their critiques on the experiences and lives of women who are already privileged. Throughout this project, and as I cite their work, I have been acutely aware that in some ways I am reproducing this same problem. Writing for her blog *feministkilljoys* in an entry titled “Making Feminist Points” (2013), Sara Ahmed describes citation as “a rather successful reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies”. Ahmed describes how even within women and gender studies, women are encouraged to frame their ideas within “an established male intellectual genealogy”. The established intellectual genealogy of virginity is white, cissexist, and does not centre the production of children or the sale of sex as sources of labour or income.

Beneficial research on virginity should be done through methodology that centres the voices of racialized women, trans women, poor women, and sex workers – the voices most often ignored in public health policy citing risky behaviour, correlations between sex and drug use, lack of contraception as “risky” and teen pregnancy rates. Those groups who have been historically either ignored entirely by

discourses of virginity, or whose virginities were presumed to never matter, need their experiences centred in any future research that allows interviews with human participants. For a smaller project, if I were to write a second thesis on the same subject, I would turn to *Tumblr*, a social media platform where young folks already publish commentary and personal anecdotes on virginity (loss). The voices that should be given the most representation are those of young women, including those who would qualify as minors and be unable to participate in the kind of interview research Carpenter conducted. *Tumblr* is an exceptional open-access resource for young women writing on the internet and thus represents an important space for critical inquiry into discourses around sexuality.

Other useful work that can be done on virginity loss may ask questions not about personal experiences of first sex, but about how to decolonize virginity within comprehensive sexual education. Even within narratives of first sex of representing a rite of passage or a step in a process towards becoming an adult or gaining knowledge about sexuality, there is a fundamental power imbalance created between the sexually initiated and uninitiated. When sex becomes a way to assert adult identities, where does this leave individuals who have no interest in participating in sex at all, or who abstain from sex for other reasons? Instead of studying the experiences of virginity loss, studies may be devised to examine the motivations and experiences of those who position themselves as sexual education experts, as well as about the experiences of youth in receiving sexual education.

Throughout this project the I have identified virginity narratives as colonial because of the focus on the conquering and claiming of supposedly untouched bodies and spaces. As a concluding thought, I would like to note that it is interesting to me how I can extend this critique into academia as well. Research for a project like this one is required to be novel, graduate projects often being described as needing to “fill a gap” in established knowledge. The claiming of new ideas, and the conquering of new academic areas, repeats the colonial pattern I accuse virginity of. So I ask myself: what status do I personally gain as a researcher for writing this project, for positioning myself as specifically knowledgeable about virginity? Although I have personal motivations shaped by my younger experiences

framing my interest, neither those experiences nor this project make me an expert on the meaning of virginity, virginity loss and first sex for youth of the future. It is my hope that future inquiries into virginity and first sex may be humble, may hold the importance of not taking personal ownership over the subject, over the bodies and subjective sexual experiences of youth. Virginity research more rightfully belongs to those exploring first sex in any given time period.

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