



## CHC S2 Ep2: The History of Sexuality

February 1, 2016

[Society for the History of Children and Youth](#)

Interview with John Spurlock and Kim Phillips is available [online](#)

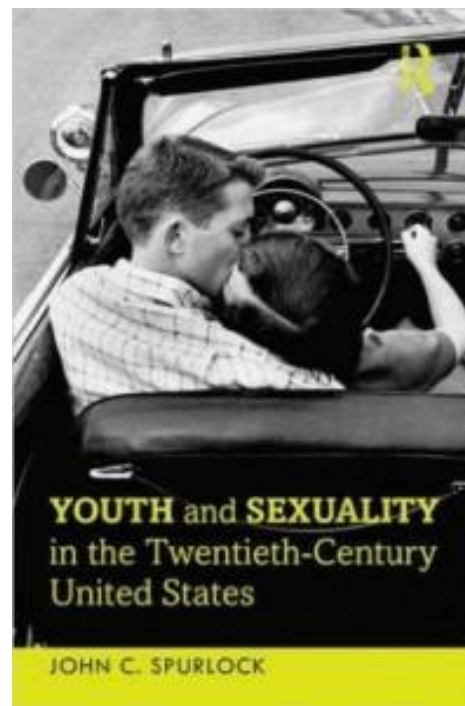
CHILDHOOD: History and Critique (CHC) is a series of interviews, commentary, and happenings in the historical studies of childhood by Dr. Patrick J. Ryan, Kings University College at Western University, Canada

John Spurlock and Kim Phillips belong to different communities of scholarship and live on opposite sides of the world. Their paths might never have crossed.

Yet, the briefest sketch of their scholarly efforts reveals important similarities and shared questions. John's doctoral thesis centered on the mid-19th-century "free love movement" and later he joined with Cynthia Magistro to produce a study of 20th-century American woman's self-writing – *New and Improved: the Transformation of American Women's Emotional Culture* (NYU Press, 1998). This past year he published *Youth and Sexuality in the Twentieth-Century United States* (Routledge, 2015). Kim's doctoral thesis was published as *Medieval Maidens: Young women and gender in England, 1270-1540* (MUP, 2003). She collaborated with Barry Reay to produce *Sex before Sexuality: A Premodern History* (Polity Press, 2011), and has since written or edited a number of books on the ways women, Asians, and others were positioned in medieval writing.

John and Kim study worlds separated by our discipline's well-policed boundary between modernity and the middle ages, but they

share an interest in marriage, sex, youth, and women's life course. Moreover, when asked about their own intellectual journeys, they respond with familiar words. John wanted to test "the larger narratives of continuity and change," fashioned through important academic works (Smith-Rosenberg's "The Female World of Love and Ritual" 1975) and to challenge popular beliefs (e.g. the idea that the



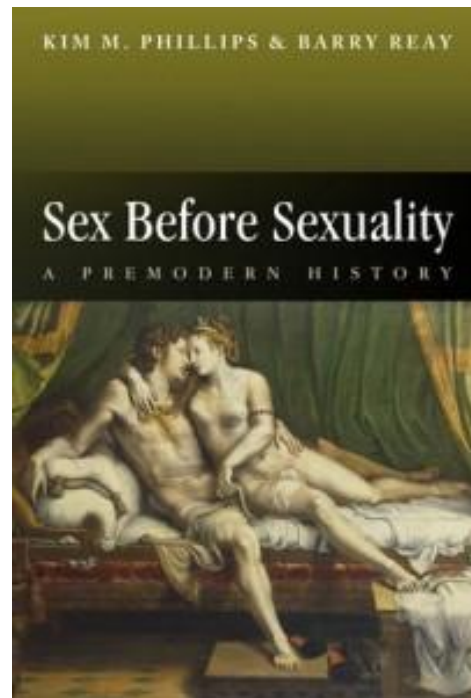


sexual revolution began in the 1960s). Likewise, Kim emphasized the larger significance of a history of difference, diversity, and change. When historians examine how cultures form “rules around sexuality (and gender),” and show that these rules are historically contingent, people gain the remit to rethink dominant categories or assumptions. John concurred: covering historical trivia should be secondary to helping students learn to “think historically and (develop) the tools to really follow through...”

I called upon John and Kim precisely because I wanted to talk about foundational ideas within the discipline as they are confronted by those writing the history of youth and sexuality in significantly different periods of time. We began by discussing the reasons for and challenges of pursuing histories of states of being that are widely considered essential features of the human subject – like sexuality. Kim emphasized the importance of trying to read evidence on its own terms. For example, she finds little reason to invoke the concept of “sexual identity” when we read medieval documents. John added that historians would benefit from the way *Sex Before Sexuality* clearly and convincingly showed that contemporary distinctions, such as the one between heterosexuality and homosexuality, can not be sensibly used to interpret writing prior to modernity. In fact, his research suggests that a careless use of this dualism would cause us to misread middle-class 19th-century Americans. As Phillips and Reay put it, “... one of the great problems with the history of

heterosexuality is that we all think we know what it is.” But, what if the very “ordering of desires” is in-and-of-itself historical? (pg. 42)

We shared thoughts on the discontinuities in the history of sexuality at length, and delved into differences between modern and medieval source materials. I asked them how they confronted the popular narrative of sexual liberation. Kim responded by concisely explaining why the middle ages can not be adequately cast as *an age of repression*. She reminds us that cultures and people in the deep past were complicated too. John associated



sexual liberation with a “Whig” history of linear progress. His *Youth and Sexuality* challenges this way of understanding change and the standard assumption that



the 1960s was a point of origin or a turning-point for youth sexual liberation. For him, the entire idea that sexual experience and activity is a precondition for being an “integrated” person has become an ontological trap.

It is no coincidence that scholars interested in thinking about change over time, and questioning universal claims about who we have been, are, and might be, would be drawn to historicize things typically considered most essential – sex, love, and the life-course. It seems to me that this propensity applies a number of historical fields that have flowered over the past several decades – including the history of childhood. I hope you enjoy this conversation with John Spurlock and Kim Phillips as much as I did. Take care.

**Select Publications by Kim Phillips:**

Kim M. Phillips, “Gender and Sexuality” in *Routledge History of Medieval Christianity, c.1050-c.1530* edited by R. N. Swanson (London and New York: Routledge, 2015): 309-321. URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2292/26340>

Kim M. Phillips, *Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

Kim M. Phillips, ed. *A Cultural History of Women in the Middle Ages*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay, *Sex Before Sexuality: A Premodern History*. Cambridge:

Polity, 2011. URL:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2292/13493>

Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270-1540*. Manchester ; New York: Manchester University Press, 2003.

**Select Publications by John Spurlock:**

John C. Spurlock, *Youth and Sexuality in the Twentieth Century United States*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

John C. Spurlock, “AIDS.” *Encyclopedia of Military Science*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012.

John C. Spurlock, “Peyton Place and the boundaries of sexual desire in 1950s U.S.A.” in *On the Borders of Convention* edited by Aleksandra Nikcevic and Marija Knezevic (Niksic: Faculty of Philosophy, 2010): 183-190.

John C. Spurlock and Cynthia A. Magistro, *New and Improved: The Transformation of American Women’s Emotional Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

John C. Spurlock, *Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America, 1825-1860*. New York: New York University Press, 1988.

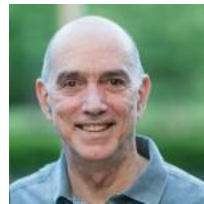


Kim M. Phillips is Associate Professor in the Department of History, University of Auckland,



New Zealand. She is interested in the histories of medieval women, gender, sexuality, and representations of foreign

lands and peoples in medieval travel and ethnographic writing.



John C. Spurlock is Professor of History, at Seton Hill University in Greensburg, PA where he teaches courses in American history, comparative genocide, global cultures, and

geography. He is the author of *Youth and Sexuality in the Twentieth-Century United States* (Routledge, 2015).

**Patrick J. Ryan** is Associate Professor at Kings University College at Western University – Canada with appointments in the Childhood and Social Institutions Program and the Department of History. He is a co-founder of H-Childhood (est. 1998).