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**Edited by**

**Steven Kohm, Kevin Walby, Kelly Gorkoff, Katharina Maier,  
Alex Tepperman, Bronwyn Dobchuk-Land, and Amelia Curran**

**The University of Winnipeg**

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## **Queer Pleasure: Sexual Liberation and Abolition Within and Against State Violence**

Vivian Swayne (University of Tennessee)

### **Abstract**

What does the pursuit of queer pleasure and sexual liberation look like within the limits of discriminatory institutions structured by patriarchal police and mass punishment? Writing from a perspective largely indebted to queer and Black feminist thought, diverse formations of sexuality are considered within key sociohistorical contexts of racialized sexual deviance. Proliferating carceral constructions of sexual offense are troubled by looking at cycles of violence definitive to the prison industrial complex, patriarchal family relations, and white supremacy. In response, this paper then considers moves toward sexual liberation, theorizing a politics of erotic autonomy, comprehensive sex education, and abolitionist intervention. Interrupting unequal access to self-determination and pleasure will require structural intervention that prioritizes accountability and transformation rather than additional exposure to violence. Providing people of all races, genders, and abilities consistent age-appropriate knowledge focused not on gender-role socialization but on creating norms of empowerment, mutual respect, consent, and communication can help develop social foundations that refuse embodied entitlement and outsourcing conflict resolution to the state. The paper concludes that even with a comprehensive introduction to sexuality that celebrates autonomy, pleasure, and communication, collective sexual liberation ultimately requires building new life-affirming institutions and ways of life that reduce and eliminate violence.

**Keywords:** state violence, queer, liberation, pleasure, masturbation, sex education, abolition

Moves away from state violence are moves toward sexual liberation. Derived from Black and queer abolition feminist frameworks, this paper is an interdisciplinary exercise that challenges normative power

structures by drawing complex connections between autonomy, race, sexuality, relationships, criminalization, policing, education, and abolition. I seek pedagogical avenues that navigate ongoing structures of white, cisheterosexist carceral capitalism, structures that have historically denied Black, Indigenous, poor, and queer people agency and autonomy (Collins, 2004; Richie, 2012; brown, 2017; Ritchie, 2017; Desai, 2022). I begin by placing the term queer in its carceral social context. I then discuss how white supremacist discourses constructed racialized sociosexual diversity as deviant and created “queer criminal archetypes” (Mogul et al., 2011, p. 23). Queer criminal archetypes are especially apparent in legal and cultural constructions of sexual offense. Thus, I rethink sexual offensiveness in a way that names institutional violence, emphasizing the need for abolitionist intervention and new pleasure pedagogies. Together, pleasure activism and abolitionist praxis understand sexual liberation and embodied justice through various forms of erotic autonomy while underscoring the importance of self-determination, personal and community accountability, trauma-informed healing, and collective love (Alexander, 1997; hooks, 2000; Palacios, 2016; brown, 2017, 2019; Destine, 2019; Kaba, 2021; Kim, 2021; Whynacht, 2021) From this context, a legitimately comprehensive sexual education engages intersecting power dynamics at a multitude of social scales to position what is at stake in building sustainable interpersonal relationships within a carceral world. It also serves as a primary strategy to prevent the perpetration of interpersonal sexual violence (Wooda & Panfil, 2021). However, as I conclude, in addition to pleasure pedagogies, abolitionists demand new life-affirming institutions and conditions that reduce and eliminate poverty, criminalization, and violence.

### **A Note on Terminology**

Queerness cannot unbind from pre-existing racialized socioeconomic hierarchies if it truly intends to fulfill its phenomenological promise as “a way to inhabit the world that gives ‘support’ to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 570). Rather, we continually learn how the oblique and strange get named in a world structured by cisheterosexual white supremacy. Taken from the German word for oblique, *quer*, the earliest recorded use of “queer” as an anti-gay slur in English was record-

ed in 1894 when Marquess of Queensbury John Douglas led a smear campaign against Oscar Wilde for having an affair with his son (Goldman, 2004; Krishnakumar, 2019). By the 1910s and 1920s, American men who identified with homosexual interest rather than effeminate gender identity referred to themselves as queers, but reclaiming the term was met with continual stigma. By the 1930s and 1940s, the media's construction of murderous, sexually deviant queers afforded the term especially sinister connotation, leading to younger generations of homosexual men who preferred to identify as "gay" (Chauncey, 1994). As discussed in the next section, queer criminal archetypes are racialized constructions (Mogul et al., 2011), a key point largely omitted by early white founders of academic queer theory unsatisfied with mainstream gay and lesbian studies (Butler, 1990; Weston, 1993; Stryker & Whittle, 2006). That early academic white, queer theorists erased the racist deployment of "queer" from within its carceral context raises immediate concerns and signals a disconnect from queer theory's claim of analyzing relationality beyond the single axis of sexuality (Weston, 1993; Goldman, 2004; Stryker, 2006). In her analysis of *South Park*, a cartoon on Comedy Central "known for its dark celebration of perversity and excess," Puar (2007) notes that queer (and f\*ggot) "are the only non-racial and nonethnic epithets" deployed in the show (p. 67). However, as Haley (2016) explains, at the turn of the twentieth century in Southern news, the term "queer" was routinely used to dehumanize Black women. Without Haley's attention to the carceral, the racist context of queer in American discourse goes overlooked.

The use of queer in this paper acknowledges that contemporary sexuality emerged amid white racial formations in which white homosexuality has achieved relative cultural normativity at the expense of communities of colour (Cohen, 1997; Ferguson, 2005; Spade, 2011). Historically, policing sexual norms produces racial orders, even while they might be classified under the label of "heterosexual" (Cohen, 1997). Drawing from Cohen's (1997) sense of queerness as relational to power, queer pleasure as conceptualized below remains loyal to a queer abolitionist "organizing praxis that refuses the myopia of single-issue identity politics" (Reed, 2022, p. 236). hooks (2014) notes the term is not only about sexual practice (although that might be one

dimension of it), but queerness is more “about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.” The expansiveness of the term as used in this paper is particularly useful to cover a range of sociosexual issues pertaining to gender and sexuality. However, using queer as a subversive umbrella term must account for how cisheteronormativity interacts with white supremacy, patriarchy, labour exploitation, and other systems of power. To expand upon this point, the next section traces overlapping social constructions of race, sexuality, and criminalization. How have racialized colonial constructions of queerness been policed and structured by mass punishment?

### **Sociosexual Criminalization**

Given the force of colonial violence in the reification of contemporary race and gender categories, colonization must be explicitly linked to ideologies of sex and sexuality in which whiteness, maleness, capital, and ability all shape one’s relationship to freedom and the consumption of pleasure. The prohibition of sex work, sodomy, cross-dressing, polyamory, and other sexualized behaviours largely functioned to expand surveillance over Black, immigrant, Indigenous, poor, and already heavily policed communities. Thus, sexual moralism cannot be divorced from settler colonialism, slavery, incarceration, and other systems of racial inequality as “race in America is the foundational arbiter of sexual innocence and guilt” (Levine & Meiners, 2020, p. 41). Using race as its central technology, the invention of gender and sexual deviancy was essential to justify violence against Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour throughout colonial conquest, transatlantic enslavement, and border imperialism. These systems of oppression constrained and criminalized diverse pleasure pursuits within and beyond interpersonal sexuality. For centuries, European colonizers infiltrated Indigenous communities across the globe, rationalizing genocide, enslavement, rape, displacement, and extraction in relation to liberal ideas about citizenship and who was capable of self-governance (Mies, 1986; Martins & Coelho, 2022). Religious and legal institutionalization forced assimilation and punished various sexualized behaviours including nudity, polygamy, miscegeny, lust, sodomy, collective housing, and cross-dressing. There was no homophobia or homelessness in the Americas before

1492 and the onslaught of settler colonialism (Chua, 2020). White settlers constructed non-Anglo behaviours as sexually unclean, addictive, sinful, deceitful, immoral, and uncivilized, in which sociosexual diversity was punishable via spiritually violating haircuts, loss of property, burning, dismemberment, sexual violence, and/or mass death (Mogul et al., 2011; Martins & Coelho, 2022). For example, in 1531, traveling across what is today known as Panama, Spanish conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa encountered the Indigenous people of Quaraca. After observing open cross-dressing and homosexual activity, Balboa sentenced a group of forty Indigenous men to dismemberment by his hunting dogs (Mogul et al., 2011; Martins & Coelho, 2022). As settlers colonized the United States, whiteness consumed Indigeneity by deploying civilization discourses that collapsed thousands of Indigenous groups into a singular race. Settlers removed myriad tribes from their lands to secure plantations for enslaved labour by institutionalizing “a racist legal system that secures and reproduces white property ownership at the expense of other racialized groups” (McKay et al., 2020, p. 5). In these ways, European settlers imposed restrictive racial, gender, and sexual taxonomies upon their captives cognitively, spiritually, culturally, and physically.

Additionally, generations of European colonizers relied on similar tropes of racialized sexual abnormalities throughout the transatlantic slave trade. Colonizers searched for projected physiological differences to suggest people racialized as Black experienced less physical pain and were more prone to homosexual practices and/or sexual aggression, tropes used to rationalize torture and exploitation. Consider how scientific racism authorized “the unrelenting scopic availability that defined blackness,” bolstering essentialist myths about primitive African hypersexuality (Snorton, 2017, p. 33). The racist myths that emerged about Black hypersexuality gave white people, including women, the power to freely accuse Black men of sexual assault, accusations used to initiate torture and lynchings and maintain racial hierarchy (Bederman, 1995; Collins, 2004). Developing the controlling image of the insatiable jezebel (Collins, 2004), white society also cast Black women as sexually aggressive and especially “predatory toward white men, who were characterized as powerless to resist their advances” (Mogul et al., 2011, p. 6). Society affords whiteness inno-

cence, ideologically and materially. Furthermore, while Blackness was culturally attached to deviancy, it was also interpreted as an expectation to labour and care for whiteness, “wherein sex and gender became inexhaustibly revisable according to the racial logic of consumption as they passed in and out of carceral states” (Snorton, 2017, p. 64). What becomes apparent is that the gender binary is a fragile construction when met with violent atmospheres of anti-Blackness and anti-transness (Sharpe, 2016; Snorton, 2017; Shange, 2019; Stanley, 2021), one in which race itself constitutes gendered, sexual differences. Race and gender collapsed into contemporary victim–offender tropes loaded with affect — namely fear, anger, and shame — wielded by people across genders to maintain racial social superiority.

The historical development of white supremacy contextualizes whose identities, expressions, and pleasure pursuits are valid, mediated by institutionalized sexual and gender domination. Take, for instance, ordinances, codes, and laws throughout the mid-1800s that prohibited cross-gendered attire in over 50 cities of various population sizes across the United States, authorizing police to inspect suspects’ undergarments and dress (Eskridge, 1999). Framed as public indecency, cross-dressing laws disproportionately targeted people already perceived as problematic, including people of colour, immigrants, people with disabilities, the indigent, trans people, feminist dress reformers, female impersonators, and sex workers. In popular public discourse, “political campaigns for Chinese exclusion relied heavily upon cross-dressing imagery to vilify Chinese immigrants as hyperfeminine, deceptive men” (Sears, 2015, p. 20). Propaganda and police reinforced cycles of white cisheteronormativity as the state physically assaulted marginalized people, tearing off a suspect’s wig or veil “to confirm an officer’s suspicions and to restore gender legibility to the cross-dressing offender” (Sears, 2015, p. 82). The criminalization of cross-dressing naturalized a strict gender binary in which authentic gender expression was mediated by race, class, ability, and additional vectors of inequality. Conflating behaviours that defied cisheterosexism and non-whiteness constructed new criminal and cultural categories of sexual offense, including the racist construction of the “super predator” and transhomophobic archetypes of the child predator.

Constructions materialize as legal logics and public panics that exacerbate, not alleviate, cycles of harm (Mogul et al., 2011; Levine & Meiners, 2020; Kaba, 2021). The next section problematizes how society currently perceives sexual offense and who escapes scrutiny. How can we rethink sexual offensiveness in ways that account for and intervene in perpetual cycles of violence structured by discriminatory institutions and intersecting oppressions (Collins, 2006)?

### *Rethinking Sexual Offense*

In the public imagination, sex offense conjures the most heinous act of sexual violence, often assuming the victims to be white children (Levine & Meiners, 2020; Schenwar & Law, 2020). Child molestation is the paradigmatic sex panic of the twenty-first century United States (Barnard, 2017), in which panic is marked by “the level to which the societal and personal expressions are out of proportion with the threat posed” (Herdt, 2009, p. 1). Yearly, more children drown in swimming pools than are abducted by strangers (Barnard, 2017). While sexual harm against children rightfully remains a prevalent social concern, less mentioned are relatively benign sex offenses including public urination or masturbation, streaking, sexting, and consensual sex between teenagers (Story, 2019; Levine & Meiners, 2020; Wooda & Panfil, 2021). As the list of sex offenses continues to grow, people convicted of sex crimes are the fastest growing segment of state and federal prison populations (Levine & Meiners, 2020). Yet, the monolithic sex offender continues to be “portrayed in terms of their *absolute* otherness, their utter detachment from the social, moral, and cultural universe of ordinary, decent people” (Greer & Jewkes, 2005, p. 21, emphasis in original). Alongside tropes about stranger danger or “the assumption that the typical sexual perpetrator is an unknown person who snatches children” (Schenwar & Law, 2020, p. 110), popular culture is saturated with the hypersexualization of children (Greer & Jewkes, 2005; Barnard, 2017; Levine & Meiners, 2020). As Levine and Meiners (2021) write, “an adult man’s attraction to a sixteen-year-old in fact, [is] a common subtext of mainstream advertising” (p. 55). Perhaps, as Greer and Jewkes (2005) suggest, the “public vilification of child sex offenders is so intense because, on some level, there exists a sense of guilt at the inappropriateness of living in a society that not merely tacitly sanc-



tions, but actively commercializes and aggressively markets the sexualization of children” (p. 29). At the messy intersections of age and queerness, sex panics are bolstered by popular culture and media, forming the detestable pedophile archetype and the carceral proliferation of sex offender registries.

As the law historically defined homosexual touch and gender transgressions as sex offenses, sex offender registries (SORs) continue to have a disparate impact on queer populations. In 1947, California enacted the United States’ first SOR, requiring people to register with the police for acts of sodomy and prostitution. Sodomy was largely a symbolic transgression that further expanded surveillance over Black, immigrant, poor, and other already heavily policed communities (Mogul et al., 2011). Like definitions of sodomy, the legal category of sexual offense has always been “historically elastic,” disproportionately targeting disabled and queer people of colour, and until 1968 included interracial marriage (Story, 2019, p. 149). Although the landmark Supreme Court case *Lawrence v. Texas* ruled criminal punishment for sodomy unconstitutional in 2003, lewd conduct statutes remain on the books in all 50 states. Legal actors are given wide discretionary power to set the standards for decency, and researchers document how state actors commonly fabricate evidence to support lewd conduct charges (Mogul et al., 2011). Also, the case includes a loophole in which children’s sexuality remains criminalized under ambiguous definitions of sodomy (Wooda & Panfil, 2021). The expansion of SORs also disproportionately criminalizes trans women of colour, such as CeCe McDonald, for their self-defense against life-threatening abuse (Thuma, 2019; Levine & Meiners, 2020; Kaba, 2021). Additionally, SORs disproportionately contribute to homelessness as the criminalized face extreme discrimination in labour and housing markets (Story, 2019; Schenwar & Law, 2020). Registry restrictions place a special emphasis on geographical proximity to children. Milwaukee banned offenders from living within 2000 feet of a park, daycare, or school, leaving only 55 addresses where people on the registry could live (Schenwar & Law, 2020). City locals in Los Angeles purposefully built what Story (2019) calls a series of “pocket parks,” or small parks used to displace sex offenders from dwelling within a nearby halfway house. Lastly, there is a clear connection

between personal information made public by SORs and those labelled sex offenders being murdered, as well as media humiliation and high rates of suicide among the criminalized (Mogul et al., 2011; Story, 2019; Schenwar & Law, 2020). Moral outrage, steeped in racism and cisheteronormativity, functions as the main affective motivation to punish sex offenders (Greer & Jewkes, 2005; Herdt, 2009; Mogul et al., 2011; Barnard, 2017; Story, 2019; Levine & Meiners, 2020). The consequences of this extreme othering are life and death.

The legal construction of sexual offense has played an integral role in current carceral expansion and increased surveillance of queer people of colour, in which public same sex affection and gender transgression in already hyper-policed communities are disproportionately deemed offensive (Meiners et al., 2014; Story, 2019; Levine & Meiners, 2020). Specifically, the state disproportionately charges queer youth with sex offenses. In 2013, 18-year-old Kaitlyn Hunt was charged with lewd and lascivious battery of a child after having consensual sex with her 14-year-old girlfriend. Their coach reported their relationship to their parents, who reported the relationship to the police, who arrested Kaitlyn (Wooda & Panfil, 2021). When Galen Baughman was 19, he was convicted of a sex offense for asking a 15-year-old to share naked pictures, an increasingly common practice with the proliferation of personal smart devices (Levine & Meiners, 2021). Ten-year-old Charla Roberts pulled down a classmate's pants as a prank and was subsequently placed on a SOR (Wooda & Panfil, 2021). In addition to criminalization, consequences for transgressing cisheteronormativity include mandatory and damaging sex offender treatment and conversion therapy. Plainly, there is no palpable evidence that SORs, community notification laws, and public shame work to keep children safer; sometimes they entrench children in the system (Meiners et al., 2014; Levine & Meiners, 2020; Schenwar & Law, 2020). Original advocates for SORs have spoken out against them. After 11-year-old Jacob Wetterling was abducted and murdered in 1989, the United States passed the 1994 *Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act*, establishing the first national SOR. In 2017, Jacob's mother Patty Wetterling commented on the inefficacy of SORs, "[w]hat we really want is no more victims. So how can we get there? Locking them up

forever, labeling them, and not allowing them community support doesn't work. I've turned 180 [degrees] from where I was" (Schenwar & Law, 2020, p. 112). Sex offenders have some of the lowest recidivism rates (Levine & Meiners, 2020), but they endure ongoing pathologization and stigma. Patty Wetterling's statement highlights the crux of abolitionist concern: the need for community support to heal from trauma rather than expand control, violence, and confinement. To address the conditions that foster the most sexual harm against children, the next section looks at two social formations that tend to escape scrutiny when addressing sexual abuse.

### *Who Escapes Scrutiny?*

Ultimately, SORs, age-of-consent laws, spatial restrictions, and the stranger danger trope obfuscate two social institutions deeply responsible for sexual harm against children: the carceral police state and the patriarchal nuclear family. Both police and family mask the fortitude of patriarchal authority and discretionary disciplinary power, insulating police, doctors, parents, clergy, and state officials from scrutiny. For example, Bowling Green State University's Henry A. Wallace Police Crime Database keeps record of all criminal offenses committed by police officers including acts like forcible fondling, forcible rape, forcible sodomy, incest, indecent exposure, online solicitation of a child, pornography/obscene material, prostitution, sexual assault with an object, statutory rape, and "other." Undercover police have infiltrated environmental justice groups, formed intimate relationships, and had children with activists (Evans & Lewis, 2012; Neocleous, 2021). Genuine concerns for young people's well-being must also consider most survivors of sexual violence know their abusers, and sexual violence against children most often takes place in the home (generationFIVE, 2017; Levine & Meiners, 2020). The sex offense regime fuels the "mystification of the patriarchal family as a central site of violence," obscuring the amount of abuse and incest children and their families experience (Story, 2019, p. 154). Doctors have historically avoided acknowledging signs of incest, resulting in false racist assumptions that father-daughter incest is rare and/or does not happen in affluent white families (Sacco, 2009; Richie, 2012; generationFIVE, 2017). Additionally, queer and marginalized children are made "particularly vulnerable to attention and

interest from adults who intend to sexually abuse” due to issues like youth medical and sports bans, bathroom politics, bullying, discrimination, and social isolation (generationFIVE, 2017, p. 23; Harrison, 2021). Anti-trans and anti-Black political oppression maintain the social hierarchies that neglect marginalized children of colour especially vulnerable to sexual harm *as well as* abandoning people who have harmed.

Abuse in the home and state violence are not isolated phenomena, rather, they are mutually reinforcing patterns (Alexander, 1997; Richie, 2012; Speed, 2014; Whynacht, 2021). Richie (2012) names the intersectional violence between the interpersonal, community, and social spheres “the violence matrix,” characterized by power and control. In both state and domestic contexts, central features of violence include emotional abuse, intimidation, stalking, coercion, threats, financial abuse, abuse of privilege, denying, blaming, isolation, or using children (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022). In the violence matrix, individual police, carceral, and military personnel themselves have families and commit high rates of intimate partner and family violence (Stinson & Liederbach, 2013; Schulman, 2016; Whynacht, 2021). Researchers suggest the normalization of violence work, or the wide range of coercive and authoritarian work dependent “upon the threat or potential for violence, because their authority relies on that threat” (Seigel, 2018, p. 12), spills over into violence workers’ homes (Johnson et al., 2005; Stinson & Liederbach, 2013; Schulman, 2016; Whynacht, 2021). Family and police are both socially constructed as “safe,” concealing how white patriarchal authority was used to access and control vulnerable children, amplified for those most directly impacted by histories of colonization, slavery, and capitalist exploitation. Focusing only on individual cases erases broader patterns of sexually offensive racial and sexual domination. Current formations of “sexual offense” constitute part of a larger discourse of predation that serves gendered and racialized class interests rather than protects society’s most vulnerable children. To be clear, police power benefits from individualized narratives of child predation by the displacement of their own predation (Wall, 2020; James, 2021).

How do we intervene in intergenerational cycles of violence and systems of abuse? Relying on carceral violence to navigate family and

interpersonal relationships does not interrupt violence. Various Black, Indigenous, and queer critiques understand love and family not as relations of authoritarianism and domination but of sharing and transformation (Cohen, 1997; hooks, 2000; Carruthers, 2018; Tallbear, 2018; Martins & Coelho, 2022), while others call for the dissolution of the family altogether (Lewis, 2022). Abolishing the family as a privatized unit emphasizes the need for a social commons, or systems that provide and build rather than deprive, punish, isolate, and kill. Ways of dealing with harm that do not depend on the racist criminal punishment system *always begin by meeting peoples' basic needs*. Clean air and water, universal healthcare, workers' rights, community-based responses to violence, comprehensive accessible education, and other life-sustaining and enriching resources will all help create a safer world without cops or cages. This paper aims to contribute to that list by calling for new pedagogies that uplift pleasure and situate sexuality as a basic need (brown, 2019; Wooda & Panfil, 2021). In the next section, I zoom in to discuss the concept of erotic autonomy and how new “sex talks” might interrupt cycles and systems of abuse and violence.

### **Toward Sexual Liberation**

The following sections address collective implications for uplifting self-governance within neoliberal systems that individualize responsibility for social ills. I approach the inevitable tensions between agency and structure with a pedagogical politics of erotic autonomy that argues for more robust, radical, and transparent discussions about pleasure in society. How would acknowledging and indicting the criminalization of sociosexual diversity transform the messages we receive about our bodies, relationships, and desires? People can commit to sexual practices, including our desires and the media we consume, that resist violence and racist, sexist surveillance. Institutions can provide people of all races, genders, and abilities consistent age-appropriate knowledge about touch, pleasure, and autonomy. This would help develop social norms that refuse embodied entitlement, by which I mean the ways power abuse and insecurity actualize as sexual assault, as well as outsourcing interpersonal conflict resolution to the state. I grapple with, and advocate for, a sexual education that focuses not on gender-role socialization but on cementing norms

of autonomy, consent, and communication. Unequal access and entitlement to self-determination and pleasure calls for abolitionist intervention that prioritizes accountability and transformation rather than additional exposure to violence. First, I explain what does and does not constitute erotic autonomy, complicating sex-positive discourses that do not address power imbalances or the sociocognitive impacts of living under intersecting oppressions (Collins, 2006).

### *A Politics of Erotic Autonomy*

I situate erotic autonomy by way of Lorde's (1978) conceptualization of the erotic and Haiven and Khasnabish's (2014) definition of autonomy. Here, the erotic is more than tantalizing sexual arousal; rather, it is a creative life force that defies oppression and embraces the human need for deep connection. Living under oppressive structures complicates any idea of freedom or autonomous action, which Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) account for in their definition of autonomy: "a critical element of 'play' within the network of social power relations, a limited and always tenuous degree of wriggle room within the neoliberal confiscation of all things public or common" (p. 60). These authors describe the tension between agency and structure, what looks like attempting self-actualization amid cycles of violence within power hierarchies predicated on people internalizing oppression. Erotic autonomy has been theorized within feminist critiques of heterosexist nationalism (Alexander, 1997) and possessive forms of monogamy (Kleese, 2018), but what happens if we conceptualize erotic autonomy at its most literal biopolitical location, that of self-pleasure, or masturbation? At first glance, using masturbation to theorize structural issues might seem oxymoronic, but how people understand themselves overwhelmingly determines interactions and milieu. Masturbation is an example of how institutions and ideologies work in tandem to discipline and disempower the polis at the level of embodiment. Building from Foucault, Garlick (2014) argues that the social regulation of the population is not isolated to high-order institutions, such as police, but is also animated individually. People consume centuries of medical, legal, and religious messaging that shames, pathologizes, or criminalizes masturbation, which in turn dictates how they understand their sexuality (Rubin, 1984; Bederman, 1995; Dodson, 2004; brown, 2017). It was only as recently as 1972

when the American Medical Association officially de-pathologized masturbation, and it was not until 2005 when Australian urologist Helen O’Connell first published a comprehensive anatomy of the clitoris (Dodson, 2004; O’Connell, 2005). People assigned female at birth are overwhelmingly socialized to seek sexual approval or satisfaction rather than making basic knowledge about themselves normal and accessible. Regardless of intention, the stigmatization of masturbation serves the interests of powerful political elites whose accumulation depends on various forms of biopolitical oppression and political insecurity.

To be clear, not all masturbation qualifies as erotic autonomy. Masturbation is fundamentally a question of imagination and consumption. Consider a recent academic scandal that unfolded when a high-ranking, qualitative methods journal published an academic paper in which Manchester-based Swedish doctoral candidate used masturbation as a “sensory ethnography.” The author consumed *shota*, a Japanese genre of self-published sexual comics that feature young boys. Detailing his own masturbation habits, his methods included a diary of thoughts and feelings (including climax) and the theorization of such as empirical research. He quotes Lorde’s (1998) *Uses of the Erotic*, completely twisting Lorde’s legacy of the erotic as something beyond the physical sexual realm and something also feminist, anti-racist, empowering, and liberating. The article has since been redacted by the journal, with a note from the editorial team recognizing that the published academic article legitimized sexual activity involving graphic images of young Asian boys with potential to cause harm. Here, Lorde’s theory of the erotic, and the author’s violation and manipulation of such, are key. Lorde indicts abuses of power while the other actualizes it. Consequential of living in a social world is that people even masturbate in social context, much to the unethical article’s conclusion, highlighting the importance of talking to people about how we consume sex.

Yet, around the globe, talking about sex remains taboo and sex education is considered optional rather than necessary (Desai, 2022). When we develop and use shared language to talk about sexuality in a positive context, that communication creates new opportunities for intervention in sexually inappropriate behaviour. Talking about sexu-

ality should not be limited to one “sex talk”; cyclical, age-relevant conversations centered around sensual and erotic milestones are important for sexual liberation. Instead of shamefully keeping sexuality a cultural secret or superfluous sin, giving people access to anatomically accurate information about their pleasure would transform socialization. Despite its stigmatization, modern research documents the psychological, physiological, and interpersonal benefits of self-pleasure, thus a legitimate practice of self-care (brown, 2019; Chirla, 2019; Moon, 2020; Nagoski, 2021; Desai, 2022). brown (2019) writes that it became clear to her “if more people were encouraged to masturbate early and often, to learn what feels good to them and that they have the right to communicate that, there would be less sexual trauma, assault, patriarchy, misogyny, and general awkwardness” (brown, 2019, p. 118), indicating its potential to interrupt cycles of violence by giving people language for sexuality, consent, and bodily autonomy.

Promoting the power of erotic autonomy within a politics of queer pleasure transcends borders in favor of boundaries. By naming and rejecting the racist myth that Black women did not possess personhood, Black women and activists staked erotic autonomy as inherently bound to justice (Thuma, 2018; Kaba, 2021). Furthermore, Alexander (1997) writes, “erotic autonomy signals danger to the heterosexual family and to the nation” as no nationalism has survived without compulsory heterosexuality (p. 64). In other words, empowerment and agency threaten the authoritarianism that sustains carceral capitalism. Morgan (2015), quoting fellow “Pleasure Ninja” Brittney Cooper, writes “[t]here is no justice for black women without pleasure” (p. 36). The pleasure of all Black women and gender non-conforming people drives abolitionist analyses precisely because “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective, 1986, p. 23). Rather than abiding by strict ableist, racialized gender norms, centring disparate power dynamics that are upheld and policed by the state would help create new practices toward mutual respect. An abolitionist intervention pays close attention to how privilege and social



capital interfere with autonomous politics in ways that reinforce, rather than subvert, existing power relations.

### *Abolitionist Intervention*

Queer abolitionist momentum pushes analyses beyond observations that prisons and police disproportionately harm queer people, redefining queerness in its collective effort toward “liberatory futures without prisons, police, or the tyranny of colonial gender systems” (Bey & Goldberg, 2022, p. 160). As contemporary police and carceral institutions face the ongoing legitimacy crisis (McDowell, 2019), alternative forms of safety and conflict resolution that do not rely on policing or incarceration create grassroots opportunities to practice social change. An anatomically accurate and sex-positive education that prioritizes pleasure and non-possessive relationality can build solidarity and safety when rooted in alternatives to isolation, confinement, and criminalization. A cruel moniker, carceral safety, refers to the insistence that banishment and criminalization are the only legitimate forms of protection from, and responses to, harm and violence. It actualizes as policies and practices that endanger and eliminate communities of colour, far removed from alternatives that limit threats and expand possibilities (McDowell, 2019). Responsible alternatives to carceral safety “can only be applied in relationship to the specific context in which it is being practiced” (Kaba, 2021, p. 136). There is no one-size-fits-all model of mediation or healing, which is why transformative justice advocates conduct “bold, small experiments” that build space for accountability throughout repair (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020, p.19). Harnessing energy from the collective power of continually demanding abolition, alternative justice movements facilitate responses to harm including demands for reparations, storytelling, harm reduction, teamwork in crisis response, developing organizational protocol to respond to harassment/abuse, creating intervention and de-escalation plans, lifting marginalized leadership, confronting organizational rumours about harm, forming community support pods when harm occurs, securing safe spaces and sanctuaries from violence, and supporting popular education in communities about alternatives to policing (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Kaba, 2021). Methods that prioritize trauma-informed care and life-affirming resources over punishment dilute the

victim/offender binary by addressing shared conditions that foster harm.

However, restorative and transformative techniques do not evaporate conditions of social privilege under patriarchal white supremacy. When successful, middle-age, white sex educator Reid Mihalko was accused of sexual misconduct by over 10 people in 2018, his accountability process was meticulously documented and published for the public. Mihalko stepped down from teaching, speaking, and creating content as he, and the person who made the initial accusation, formed support pods. The process was transparent, well resourced, and gained national attention. Women and community helped Mihalko reposition his career, potentially with a new “expertise” on boundaries, accountability, and safety. Compounding aspects of Mihalko’s privilege allowed him this accountability process without the state, ultimately increasing his social capital and reaffirming his authority on relationship navigation. More generally, white, able-bodied sex educators are pushed to the front, occupying large platforms (Jones, 2018; Desai, 2022). Symptomatic of white supremacy’s constant co-optation of resistance efforts, Mihalko amplified his pedagogical platform by freely consuming alternative justice processes developed by and for marginalized people. When someone teaching safer sex and communication is accused of sexual misconduct, like Mihalko was, it complicates their pedagogical positionality. Expectedly, Mihalko’s work is queer and sex positive. Like many independent sex educators, he works for himself conducting workshops at college campuses, hosting private parties and workshops, and creating content to publish and sell. One year after his accountability process, Mihalko resumed working in sexual education. In a critique of his return to work, Farmer (2018) suggested Mihalko permanently step down and send his clients to other educators, expressing concern for marginalized educators who make mistakes and never have a chance for public accountability. I do not deny any harm caused by Mihalko, but this situation exemplifies more broadly the advantages of white and male supremacy when navigating institutional and ideological social forces.

We live in a dialectic. Abolitionists are committed to personal transformation (Cullors, 2022; Kaba, 2021), but the individual power of

sexual empowerment, self-love, body positivity, and personal accountability processes like Mihalko’s will not be enough to transform society (Carruthers, 2018; Harrison, 2021). In their review of Taylor’s (2018) radical manifesto of self-love, Harrison (2021) explains “irrespective of how much internal work one does for themselves, the systems under which they live that actively lay claim to their bodies are not and cannot be reversed” (p. 6). As someone assigned male at birth, fat, Black, and transgender, Harrison discloses their own experiences with childhood sexual abuse, state violence, and the invisibility of their suffering. They disclose the formation of their own insecurities to reclaim them. Insecurity is symptomatic of increasing individualism, fragmentation, and white supremacy. Reclaiming insecurity is their “indictment of the World” (p. 15). Perhaps accepting and grappling with internal insecurities displaces the internalization of structural oppression, making room for transformative relationship building amid social crises. Yet structural violence remains intact.

Take for example the ongoing onslaught of anti-trans legislation that has erupted across the United States. Where I reside down South, Tennessee leads the charge as the first state to ban drag shows in public settings. The bill’s ambiguous wording constructs trans people and Pride celebrations as potential targets of criminalization. The criminalization of sociosexual diversity is certainly not a relic of the past, but it persists institutionally and ideologically in ways that continually obscure the social formations most responsible for harm against children — the state and the patriarchal nuclear family. Conservative lawmakers revitalize moral panics, as discussed above, and accusations of trans groomers have erupted locally. While grassroots organizers stage protests and mobilize, moving toward sexual liberation must acknowledge how intersecting forms of oppression compound, weighing most heavily on disabled and queer people of colour who bear a disproportionate load of radical work. People survive by practicing forms of self-care, rooted in community and imperative to the longevity of radical movements (Carruthers, 2018; Destine, 2019; Kaba, 2021). That is why transformative efforts that centre erotic autonomy as a form of self-community-care remain vital to young people’s socialization and subverting legacies of objectification, possession, and control. A collective struggle for queer pleasure seeks plac-

es to openly discuss our wants and needs and includes avenues for all people who have harmed (not only those with the most privilege) to ask for help without fueling cycles of violence. Ultimately, reaching for sexual liberation demands abolitionist intervention that resists pathologizing and policing sociosexual diversity while simultaneously working to abolish racist criminalization.

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