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Reflections on Pleasure Activism: Queer Women and Genderqueer Folk's Sexual Narratives



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Introduction

“Whilst it is important to continue to interrogate and draw attention to patriarchal domination of women’s sexuality, we need to also provide their obverse, the counter-narratives to this hegemonic discourse of sexual terrorism. Such counter-narratives must include stories of women’s quest for erotic fulfilment, agency, pleasure and desire that transcend discourse of sexual danger.” (Bakare-Yusuf, 2013: 29)

Pleasure is a pathway for accessing sexual liberation, and pleasure activism is a means to resist the heteronormative, traditionally gendered narrative (brown, 2019). Sexual pleasure, eroticism, and intimacy with ourselves and others can be both healing and powerful (brown, 2019). Embodying sexual empowerment can look like many things, but the underlying tenet remains the same: to resist capitalistic notions of production of orgasms, and to find the erotic, the pleasure, the satisfaction—the power—that is within ourselves. As Audre Lorde (1978: 89-90) tells us in *The Uses of the Erotic*: “For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of.” Lorde reminds us that women have historically been taught to devalue their sexual worth—to dismiss the creative energy and joy that comes out of allowing ourselves to deeply feel all aspects of our lives. To sacrifice our entitlement to pleasure. The radical act of self-love, the sharing of joy, are erotic sources of information and knowledge that may be used to dismantle oppression.

There is liberation in the exploration of one’s joy, and telling stories of joy. In fact, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2013: 29) contends that “women’s sexual and embodied agency is potentially more threatening and disruptive to a hetero-patriarchal controlling logic than a

focus on danger and violation, hence its repression and suppression.” By this, she means that although addressing issues of sexual violence and power are undoubtedly important, not including the desire, sexual pleasure, and eroticism in women’s lives perpetuates the narrative that women are passive victims who need protection from their sexuality. Conversely, Bakare-Yusuf (2013) argues that negative representations of women’s sexuality is purposeful, in that this violence-centered perspective coincides with patriarchal underpinnings that perpetuate the policing of women. Therefore, inserting sexual pleasure and joy into sexual research is doing transformative, activist, work. Framing sexual pleasure as a feminist choice reclaims women’s agency, empowerment, and enjoyment within sexual behavior.

There is necessary and useful work in studying disparities and marginalization in women’s sexual lives. Understandably, for a group to be pushed to the margins, inequity and disparities are common consequences, and they are important to address. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of examining systems of power and their influence on marginalized folk’s experiences. Critically looking at how systematic oppression impacts specific groups of people allows us to have conversations as to how we can implement social change. However, as with a sole focus on sexual trauma, when we only examine these disparities, we are not fully centering the voices and experiences of a marginalized group; rather, we are only telling one piece of a multifaceted story and experience. In fact, incorporating sexual pleasure, agency, and resistance work shown in women’s sexual narratives allows us to better understand the weaving of these stories alongside their stories of violence, trauma, and violation. Toward this end, sexual liberation and pleasure activism are centered within my research and reflections. There is resistance work in finding one’s sexual power, and embodying it. Pointing to forms of sexual liberation in the bedroom allows room for sexual liberation outside of it. In essence, the personal is political.

Queer Women and Genderqueer Folk’s Sexual Narratives

This past year, I studied women and genderqueer⁴ folk’s sexual pleasure stories. I collected 30 sexual history narratives, the majority of whom were within the LGBTQIA2S+ community (24 out of 30), and had varied gender identification (23 cis-gendered women, 2 non-binary folk, 1 agender individual, and 4 questioning). The participants were comfortable being considered as women or genderqueer throughout the study analysis. The intent of this research was to examine the ways women and genderqueer folk create meanings that are important to their sexual experience and how

⁴ A person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions but identifies with neither, both, or a combination of male and female genders. In this case, I will be using genderqueer to identify participants who are genderqueer, and have a vagina. Not all women have vaginas. Not all folk who have a vagina are women. However, my analysis centers around queer folk who have a vagina. Anyone who self-identifies as a woman, is referred to as woman. Those who identify as nonbinary, agender, and questioning, but still felt comfortable being included in the analysis due to their experiences with having a vagina and growing up with the constructs of gender, are referred to as genderqueer folk. Genderqueer was an agreed upon term by the participants.

these meaning-making processes related to their gender and sexual identity⁵, as well as how intersecting hierarchies of power influence women and genderqueer folks' narration and experience of their sexual history and pleasure.

This particular piece on my research reflects on how sexual liberation and agency are enacted within the participant's sexual history and pleasure narratives. More specifically, I examine sexual liberation within these participants' lives through queering sexual pleasure. I investigate how participants deconstruct, or queer, understandings of sexual pleasure beyond producing orgasms. This think piece serves to push sexual research beyond the scope of violence and trauma in relation to women and queer folks' sexual lives. We must critically analyze femme and queer sources of pleasure and joy, to more fully represent narratives about their bodies, as well as ensure what rises out of these narratives does not contribute to the creation of a new standard of appropriate sexual pleasure⁶.

Queering Sexual Pleasure: Pleasure Beyond Orgasms

Admittedly, I went into my research focused on the orgasm gap⁷ as it is something I personally care about. As I delved deeper into my interviews, I realized that for many women and genderqueer folk I spoke with, achieving orgasm is not the best measure of sexual satisfaction. It is most certainly important, but people construct and experience pleasure in many diverse and unique ways that we fail to assess when we only gauge sexual pleasure and gratification as an orgasm.

Queering pleasure is more than just broadening our studies to who people sleep with. It is more than same sex or gender fluid interactions. Queering pleasure is broadening our scope and our understanding of what sex looks like. It is queering the norm, and in this specific case of sexual pleasure, the norm is a hetero-patriarchal norm⁸. Queering pleasure is to include sexual behavior and sexual satisfaction that extends beyond orgasm frequency; queering pleasure actively critiques the able bodied, cis gendered,

5 Throughout this essay and research, I am speaking specifically of one cultural construction (i.e., colonialist, Americanized-Westernized) of sexuality, gender, and pleasure.

6 By this, I mean we must maintain an ambiguity, diversity, or fluidness in measuring pleasure. Sexuality researchers must be cognizant that establishing new boundaries around ways to experience pleasure, are still boundaries nonetheless. For example, the work of Masters and Johnson (1966) deconstructed notions around women's orgasms by integrating the importance of the clitoris into sexuality research. Their work is considered to be a breakthrough in conducting research on women's sexual behavior, as it normalized their sexuality and desires in ways that extended the scope beyond penetrative, procreative sexual interactions. Media has since transformed, normalizing women's sexual pleasure in many ways (for example, Cosmopolitan having an entire section of their magazine dedicated to it). However, an expectation to always be sexual and produce orgasms in particular ways, fails to examine the stigma and newly constructed boundaries that, once again, provide scripts to women as to how they may experience and navigate sexual pleasure. The intent isn't to provide an opposite, newfound script of sexual behavior to women (from sexual conservative to sexual deviant). The intent is to abolish the static boundaries of the script altogether.

7 A representative U.S sample of orgasm frequency, conducted by Frederick, John, Garcia, and Lloyd (2018), shows that an orgasm gap persists between heterosexual men and women, with heterosexual men as most likely to say they usually-always have orgasms when sexually intimate (95%), followed by gay men (89%), bisexual men (88%), lesbian women (86%), bisexual women (66%), and finally, heterosexual women (65%).

8 These hetero-patriarchal norms that surround sexuality suggest folk with vaginas center their experience around penetration with cis men, and are passive creatures that have little to no agency (no vocalization of their desires, use of sex toys, sexual play, or masturbation).

monogamous, heterosexual male. Queering is a verb, not a noun. My definition represents a challenge to hegemonic practices and discourses. So, when I talk about queering pleasure that means I am asking: What do desire and pleasure look like through a queered lens? What is sexual satisfaction and how can we see this on a spectrum rather than seeing it against the normative expectations (that is, the orgasm)? Solely examining orgasm rates put sexual pleasure in a dichotomous “all or nothing” box of production. Instead of solely examining the orgasm gap, my participants’ narratives suggest that we must examine how our understanding of sexual satisfaction is structured by patriarchal heteronormativity. They tell us orgasms are certainly important, but they aren’t the only important thing.

For example, one of my participants, Parker (35, Latinx, questioning, pansexual) speaks to the fluidity in their experience of sexual pleasure:

[Parker]: Orgasms for me were never the litmus for a good interpersonal sexual experience. I love giving myself orgasms. It’s great. I’m very good at it. And it took me a long time to be able to do it manually. I just learned how to do it manually not this past winter, but the winter before. So, placing this bad boy, a body wand for clitoral stimulation, on my clit at full power was the only way that I could orgasm and I would squirt.

[Spencier]: So there seems to be a distinction for you between an orgasm and still being sexually satiated or satisfied.

[Parker]: Oh yeah. If I’m in a fantasy situation or something that’s really, really thoroughly orchestrated, like a really intense scene. That’s why I love BDSM⁹ so much. In BDSM orgasms aren’t necessarily the point. Getting into subspace is the point. Being rigged in a new position. Being able to take a really heavy amount of impact play, that’s the point. Experiencing different sensations. Submitting in new ways that are challenging. That’s the point. Making art. If you’re doing wax play and you can take all this wax and they get to take pictures and it’s a full artistic experience. That’s the point. Penetrative sex isn’t the point. Orgasm isn’t necessarily the point. Pleasure is so much more than orgasms. And in those scenarios, when my dom has used a toy like this on me, yes, I’ve cum. But there was no pressure. It wasn’t about feeding their ego.

Parker illuminates how narratives and research centered on femme and genderqueer bodies is centered around heteronormative, patriarchal understandings of sexual pleasure. Many of my own questions in my interviews centered around participant’s prioritization of their climax. However, it is this capitalistic understanding of producing

⁹ Abbreviation for bondage, discipline/domination, sadism/submission and masochism. Centered around intense sensations.

sexual pleasure that misses the nuanced ways women and genderqueer folk experience pleasure, sensuality, and sexual play. To center queer, femme, and genderqueer voices demands that we reorient, or queer, what we are even including as sexual pleasure.

Parker articulates how their interest in the artistry and power within BDSM provides them sexual pleasure that doesn't necessarily revolve around orgasms. Around 45 to 60 percent of people report having fantasies that include dominance or submission, and around 30 percent of people have fantasies that include whipping or spanking (Joyal et al, 2015; Jozifkova, 2018). In a qualitative study of queer folk who practice BDSM, Robin Bauer (2014) found that there was not only a celebration of sexuality and pleasure among the research subjects OR within this group, but a skill in communicating one's desires, fantasies, preferences, and abilities. Bauer (2014) goes on to explain that many participants were able to separate and distinguish their sexual behaviors, emotional connections, and desires, to create a safe space that explored boundaries and identities. Bauer's research included participants, like Parker, who explained that "sex" or "orgasm" was not necessarily the point of BDSM, and that many "scenes" could not even include genitals. Similar studies centered on BDSM have found that participants drew distinctions between BDSM and sex, in that BDSM is not just about sexuality, but rather about respecting power, security, consent, and discipline (Spratt et al, 2020; Carlström, 2018). Again, these studies align with Parker's emphasis on enjoying things other than orgasm in their sexual experience.

Notably, Parker points out that they love giving themselves orgasms, and even goes on to discuss their favorite vibrator they use when masturbating. However, Parker separates their reasons for autonomous masturbation and interpersonal sexual relations. For Parker, sexual relations with another person are a holistic experience featuring a full range of sensations, power, emotions, intellect, and artistry. Masturbation is for creating orgasms, for themselves. However, as they mention, orgasms aren't necessarily or always the point.

This explanation Parker provides about their sexual experiences crystalizes the concept of queering sexual pleasure in that they actively deconstruct notions around sexual pleasure as penetrative, heteronormative, orgasm-mandating, male-centered experience. As queer scholar Cathy Cohen (1997) argues, queerness interrogates heteronormativity, which can look like many different things inclusive of single motherhood, sex work, use of sex toys, and more. Cohen reminds readers that heteronormativity works to reinforce institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation, all of which intersect with the lives of those labeled "heterosexual," and that inclusive, intersectional queerness is required to destabilize those in power. Indeed, queer scholarship has provided a space within social research to break apart preconceived notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, to disconnect these concepts from one another and re-

align them in unexpected and new ways. Consequently, Parker's queering of sexual pleasure is not just sexual liberation for oneself, but an act of resistance and activism that challenges heteronormativity.

Another way participants' queer sexual pleasure is in sexual "play," such as foreplay and stimulation of the entire body. For example, when I ask Morgan (33, white, cis, sexually ambiguous) about what she likes or prefers in her sexual interactions, she gives me a small smirk and begins to tell me her interests in foreplay:

[Morgan]: I have really sensitive skin. The lightest touch on me will send shivers down my spine. Sometimes ticklish, sometimes not. I feel like if some kind of foreplay is starting once we've been sitting on the couch watching a movie or something like that, if you have been touching the inside of my wrist or rubbing down my hip or something like that, that is already a pretty big start for me. The rest of it goes from there. So, I think that is part of it. But especially when I'm doing any kind of sexual play. It's very mental as well, the power dynamics behind it. If I was texting them dirty pictures while they were working and they come home, 'you're in so much trouble right now...' Just that one sentence can really get me ready to go. I feel like it's such a combination of what I do and what is done to me physically with the mental capacity and the mind games behind it.

Morgan, like Parker, remarks on how power play can be sexually stimulating. Beyond BDSM, however, Morgan remarks that she enjoys light touches along her skin, sexual "playfulness" and texting sexual pictures to one another. Morgan ends her statement referring to how she enjoys a combination of both mental and physical stimulation.¹⁰

There is power and agency in women and genderqueer folk exploring sexual pleasure for the sake of pleasure itself. The act of "play" allows them to explore their bodies, fantasies, pleasures, and kinks instead of reducing sexual interactions to identity categories, trauma, and power. It pushes back at reductive notions of sex as merely a vehicle for procreation. It is queer, as these participants rework the boundaries of sexual norms and sexual pleasures. It is experiencing sensuality and pleasure outside of orgasms, or working through their mental pleasures that stimulate and connect to their bodily ones. It is seeing pleasure as an experience, and not as a means to an end. Lastly, such play pushes against the sexual hierarchies of "good" sex; i.e., heterosexual, procreative, interactional¹¹ sex.

Sexual play, as Susanna Paasonen (2017) argues, is a space to explore and utilize fantasy to actively disrupt power relations, to actively resist social sanctions, gender roles,

¹⁰ Sexual play and BDSM may heavily overlap, dependent on the individual.

¹¹ Not all forms of sex are with another person. Sex may also be understood as sexual behavior with oneself (i.e., masturbation)

and sexual scripts, and to experiment with resistance. Play may assist in queering binary categories of sex and sexuality. Play may be a process of becoming or unbecoming, of both learning and unlearning, of both performance and unmasking. We make these connections in the bedroom by playing out what is expected while allowing space to play, to explore, to fantasize. It allows us to pursue desire, sensations, and pleasures that shed normative notions of our identities—to experiment with ourselves in a way that opens up both ourselves and the potentialities of others (Paasonen, 2017).

Sawyer (30, white, cis, bisexual) also touches on the importance of sexual playfulness and the full range of sexual sensations one can experience. However, as Sawyer chats with me over Zoom in her office, she informs me of learning this knowledge through her experience as a store manager of a sex toy shop:

[Spencier]: You mentioned working at a sex store. Can you speak to that a little bit?

[Sawyer]: I definitely learned a lot in regards to—that there are so many things other than actual penetration that can be used sexually: just little tickles, touches, flavor, scents. There're so many things. All five senses can be used and the education portion and talking to customers and teaching them about things, in the most professional manner. People that genuinely came in and wanted our help and had no idea what they wanted or what they were looking for. You know, we would ask a couple of probing questions, pun intended, and we found what they want. Selling the fantasy was our thing. That was the company's motto. They would ask: "What does selling the fantasy mean to you?" And it's basically letting a customer -- showing the customer what they want even if they don't even know they want it. And there's just so many aspects that go into any kind of sexual pleasure from beginning to end. I mean, there's, again, not even penetration. Like massage candles, that's touch and that is sight and that is smell. You have three right there that are just super important other than just getting fucked.

Sawyer speaks to many aspects of Paasonen's (2018) definition of sexual playfulness, such as sensory openness, curiosity, and exploration. She also touches on sexual playfulness toward the end of her statement as she adds "there's just so many aspects that go into any kind of sexual pleasure from beginning to end." What I found particularly interesting in this explanation of her experience as a sex shop worker was the use of selling sex toys as a form of sex education. Sawyer begins as a student, and then becomes an educator to her clients about varying forms of sexual pleasure beyond the coital imperative. This sex toy shop, then, is an outlet of activism and sexual liberation as it creates a safe space of education, sexual exploration, and a queering of sexual boundaries surrounding sexual pleasure.

However, it bears mentioning that one of the few forms of queering sexual pleasure and sex education is in the form of capitalistic consumption. By this, I mean that one of the few avenues people may receive a ‘queering’ of sex education, is in the mandate and format of being a consumer of goods. Future research is necessary to problematize the intersections of capitalistic consumption and sexual empowerment.

Reflections

In this analysis, I examined how queering allows for not just plural sexualities, but also encompasses non-normative sexual acts, experiences, and consciousnesses (Rubin 1984). Cohen (1997: 439) speaks to this understanding of queer, stating: “In queer politics, sexual expression is something that always entails the possibility of change, movement, redefinition, and subversive performance—from year to year, from partner to partner, from day to day.” For folk such as Parker or Sawyer then, the point isn’t to “normalize” fluid sexual behavior and identity, but rather, to destigmatize it. To queer sexuality doesn’t mean to center particular forms of sexual behavior, but rather, to condone the fluidness of sexuality that directly interrogates that there is a “normal” or “center” in sexual pleasure.

Taking a “normalization” approach could simply reconfigure sexual behavior into new static, essentializing categories. For example, consider the complications in a sexual binary of straight and gay. Creating the additional, static box of “gay” leaves no room for folk who move within and beyond these essentializing categories. It is necessary to understand sexual identity and behavior as a space for continual re-adjustments in multiple ways in relation to time, bodies, experiences, and environment. Queerness is not a petition for normalizing queer identity, but rather, an interrogation and destabilization of taken-for-granted truths surrounding identity itself. Consequently, the narratives throughout this section make the case for queerness within sexuality, and how it is a demand for fluidity, destabilization, and destigmatization of sexual behavior and pleasures. Queerness problematizes the assumed inner workings and connections made between sex, gender and sexuality (Esterberg, 1996). These dominant, deceptively ‘normal’ traditional sexual and gender roles we each choose to accommodate, inhabit, resist, embody, perform—they are in place to privilege a particular group of people: white, high socio-economic status (SES), heterosexual, cis men.

In each interaction, queer folk have to make choices. They may choose to feel safe through performing traditional gender and sexual scripts, they may both accommodate these scripts in the bedroom through faking orgasms while resisting them by choosing to go take a shower and masturbate until they self-climax. They may sleep with and love women and genderqueer folk. They may communicate their desires to their partners. These moments of interaction are, in fact, symbolic. Hence, there is a political power in sexual pleasure. There is activism within embodying and demanding pleasure. There are politics embedded within feeling good—in a world that tells wom-

en and genderqueer folk, particularly queer women and genderqueer folk, they are not entitled to it. Resistance begins within oneself, and with what we feel we are entitled to, especially within our most intimate, private moments. How can we claim and establish equity in the public sphere when we do not examine the ways in which we fail to receive equity in our private spaces? Orgasms are revolutionary. Sexual pleasure is radical. Queer women and genderqueer folk are entitled to feeling good.

Consequently, we must reintegrate joy and pleasure into our analysis. We must reintegrate the power and resistance uncovered in the lives of women and genderqueer folks' narratives.

Cumming (or not) to a Consensus of Creating Change

Change does not arise out of asking why women and genderqueer folk do not just speak up. Pleasure activism begins when we listen, and realize their stories tell us an underlying theme: it is not on their shoulders to accommodate traditional gendered constructions of sexuality and sexual pleasure. It is not women and genderqueer folks' responsibility to communicate and produce more labor in teaching others how to pleasure them. Consequently, the activism and resistance work must begin outside of the bedroom: in reworking our narratives. Narratives in our sex education, our health classes, our adult-accessible courses, our sex shops, our narratives we push in films, shows, and books, our narratives that influence how doctors and researchers measure sexual pleasure. How we define, and measure sex.

It begins with listening to genderqueer folk and women, and then allowing these stories to sit alongside our own understanding of sexual pleasure. To allow these stories to sit with you, to mull over, to work through. To align with, break away, or to weave within our own. To jar our sensibilities and preconceived notions as to what sexual pleasure, sensuality, and sexual joy looks like. The power of narrative—of stories—cannot go unaddressed. Society is built, and thrives, on stories. Stories are our history, our media, our art, our conversations, our structured reality. The more we center women and genderqueer folks' stories, the more we deconstruct, or queer, the social truths surrounding femme identified and genderqueer folks' sexual lives. This, in itself, is a form of pleasure activism. Queering sexual pleasure.

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