

Egale

Learning From Queer and Trans Sexual Joy:

Cultivating Just, Pleasurable, and Affirming Sexual Cultures

Queer Sexual Joy

November 2023



We deserve to flourish



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In Partnership with Egale Canada



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Land Engagement

The participants whose voices are featured in this report live in Canada and the US which are lands that have been violently seized through the genocidal process of settler colonialism. One of the central forces of this historical and ongoing genocide has been the rape and murder of Indigenous people but particularly girls, women, and Two-Spirit people (Deer, 2015). We cannot think about gender-based violence without highlighting the ways that exploitation, devaluation and destruction of land and animals is connected to the objectification, rape, and violence humans inflict upon each other in a settler colonial society.

We recognize the land that the researchers in the study reside on and with this recognition ask readers who are settlers to reflect upon their own relationship to the lands they occupy. The authors of the report reside in Toronto, or T'karonto, and Edmonton, which the Cree call amiskwacîwâskahikan (Beaver Hills House), the Nakota Sioux call ti oda (Many Houses), and the Niitsitapi call Amakowsis, or omahkoyis (Big Lodge). Both Toronto and Edmonton may also have been known by other names in languages that have been lost or not yet revitalized. Tkaronto is the traditional territory of many First Nations, including the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. Edmonton is located on Treaty 6 territory, where the prairie and boreal forest meet, which is the homeland of Blackfoot, Métis, Nakota Sioux, Iroquois, Dene, Ojibway/ Sauteaux/Anishinaabe, and Inuit peoples. We are mindful of broken treaties that persist across Canada and the US and encourage readers to reflect upon their responsibilities as Treaty people to engage in a meaningful, continuous process of truth and reconciliation with all our relations.

About the Authors

Dr. JJ Wright (she/they) is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at MacEwan University. Dr. Wright's primary area of research is gender-based violence, sexual health and consent education, and issues impacting 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. As a community-engaged researcher, Dr. Wright works with regional, provincial, and national organizations to advocate for gender justice and to research ways to address gender-based violence that are trauma-informed and community responsive. Their research is inspired by a commitment to community-building and creating cultures that are more just, caring, and connected. When not researching or teaching, JJ likes to play sports, spend time in nature with friends, or tend to their garden.

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About Egale Canada

Egale is Canada's national 2SLGBTQI organization. Egale works to improve the lives of 2SLGBTQI people in Canada and to enhance the global response to 2SLGBTQI issues. Egale achieves this by informing public policy, inspiring cultural change, and promoting human rights and inclusion through research, education, awareness, and legal advocacy. Our vision is a Canada, and ultimately a world, without homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and all other forms of oppression so that every person can achieve their full potential, free from hatred and bias.

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Thank you to all of the participants who shared their perspectives and experiences with us. Though this was a project on queer sexual joy, it was also about gender-based violence prevention, and some of the discussions were necessarily about romantic, sexual, or other situations that did not bring joy and instead brought harm and suffering. We thank participants for their candidness, their vulnerability, and their bravery. Shame cannot exist in the light.

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Glossary

2SLGBTQ+: Two Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and plus (plus signifies the ever-changing nature of gendered and sexual constructs and the multitude of queer and trans identities beyond the acronym). The order of acronym beginning with Two Spirit recognizes the presence of Two Spirit and Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island, and the historical erasure of Two-Spirit people through settler colonialism and in mainstream queer organizing. For a full list of 2SLGBTQ+ terms and definitions, see: <https://egale.ca/awareness/terms-and-definitions/>

Ableism: Discrimination and exclusion based on one's abilities (mental, neurological, intellectual, emotional, and/or physical) and productivity. It often manifests as social stigma and the maintenance of physical and systemic barriers to resources and opportunities.

Cisgender: Refers to people whose gender is felt by them to align with the gender assigned to them at birth.

Cisheteronormativity: A set of societal assumptions, norms, expectations, and beliefs that centers cisgender and heterosexual experiences. These beliefs and practices perpetuate the privileging of heterosexuality and binary, cisgender identities, and lead to stereotyping and policing of people, beauty standards, and relationships for 2SLGBTQ people and communities.

Cisheteropatriarchy: A system of power and control that positions cisheterosexuality as the norm while promoting white cisheterosexual, able-bodied men as superior and deserving of positions of leadership over women and trans people. This system of domination functions to police those who are not cisheterosexual and do not fit into the binary of female/male and woman/man including through violent means.

Classism: A belief that a person's social or economic station in society determines their value in that society. Classism also refers to behaviour that reflects this belief, such as prejudice or discrimination based on class or socioeconomic position.

Fatphobia: Fear, hatred, or contempt for fat people and the stigmatization of individuals with bigger bodies. It often exhibits through the treatment of fat bodies as being in need of correction and discipline.

Racism: Ideas or practices that establish, maintain or perpetuate the racial superiority or dominance of one group over another.

Settler Colonialism: A form of colonization where settlers claim Indigenous lands as their own in perpetuity and seek to control the land and populations that threaten settler rule by way of rape and other genocidal tactics meant to eradicate Indigenous peoples.

Rape culture: Perpetuated by settler colonialism and cisheteropatriarchy (along with other systems of oppression that intersect with it), rape culture is one in which domination and exploitation of other human beings is normalized. This specifically results in the systemic devaluation of women and trans and nonbinary people, in particular, making their sexual harassment, rape, and murder not just insignificant but justifiable through misogynistic and transphobic logics (among others).

Sexism: Prejudice and discrimination against people based on their sex or gender, often based on the belief that male supremacy is a natural fact, and that biological differences in sex characteristics can and should dictate social status and gender(ed) roles.

Transgender: Refers to someone whose gender is not felt by them to correspond with the gender assigned to them at birth.

Woman+: In this instance, we are using the term woman+ as a more inclusive term than woman. It encapsulates cis women as well as those such as genderfluid people and femmes.

Executive summary

Part 1: Introduction

This report shares findings from The Queer Sexual Joy Project which was led by Dr. JJ Wright and is a collaboration with Egale Canada. The project aimed to explore the challenges that queer sexual joy poses to rape culture. In other words, the project explores how queer and trans sexual joy disrupt the colonial, racist, homophobic, transphobic, sexist, ableist cultural norms that lead to gender-based violence. This report also acts as a contribution to the queer archival work of documenting 2SLGBTQ+ communities' narratives of liberatory sex, which challenges how queer and trans communities are systematically absented from archival processes. The study took place from March 2022 to June 2023 and included 100 2SLGBTQ+ participants, aged 18–25, from across Canada and the US. It involved a survey, cellphilm (creating short videos on phones) workshops, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews. The study asks: how does queer sexual joy challenge rape culture? What does it look and feel like to experience queer sexual joy, particularly as a departure from the confines of

compulsory cisheteronormativity? What can be learned from experiences of queer and trans sexual joy for gender-based violence prevention?

The research team is aware that a report on queer and trans sexual joy¹ in a political climate of rising hatred towards 2SLGBTQ+ communities is not published without risks attached. Indeed, when the call for participants for the study was released on social media in 2023, the Principal Investigator of the project, Dr. JJ Wright, was subject to a slew of homophobic, transphobic, and misogynist vitriol. We are living in a time when a small but vocal minority of bigots are fuelling a fire of hatred. Given the backlash the project has already faced in its initial stages, it is even more important for this report to be published. The research team recognizes the ways in which discourses of queer and trans sexuality are used towards homophobic and transphobic ends, and we know that some may read the report eager to cherry-pick material and change their meanings in order to spread hate. We

¹ We use queer sexual joy throughout the report though in many cases it also stands in for trans sexual joy. More work needs to be done to elucidate the significant differences between the concepts and people's relationship to them.

did not write the report, however, for these people. This report is for people who are open to learning about the ways in which queer and trans peoples' experiences and insights about sex, relationships, and society more broadly highlight structural oppression as well as ways that things are being done differently in the periphery to allow for more liberatory futures. The report was also written for queer and trans young adults as well as older 2SLGBTQ+ people who in the pages of the report may find feelings of joy, belonging, connection, excitement, pleasure, and hope.

1.2-1.3. Literature Review and

Methodology. The report begins with a literature review followed by a section on the project's methodology.

Part 2. Defining Queer and Trans Sexual Joy and its Importance

Part 2 of the report describes the positive impacts and significance of queer sexual joy. It identifies three ways that queer sexual joy affected participants. First, participants described how queer sexual joy fostered trust, authenticity, and connection with sexual partners despite the barriers to queer sexual joy identified in this report such as rape culture. Second, participants

described finding a shared sense of creative play, experimentation, and openness with partners and friends through queer sexual joy, also called intercreativity. Intercreativity is rooted in interdependence, connection, and the cultivation of a space in which participants can feel safe and embodied enough to be spontaneous while also being tuned into one another's needs. Enacting intercreativity consists of an interactive process of mutual exploration grounded in intersubjective recognition of needs and boundaries. Third, participants felt greater freedom, expansiveness, and liberation as a result of queer sexual joy, highlighting not only the personal benefits but also the broader political potential of queer liberation through sexual joy.

Part 3: Barriers to Queer Sexual Joy

Part 3 of the report describes specific phenomena that produce barriers to experiencing queer sexual joy. The report analyzes how these barriers are connected to oppressive systems and attitudes including transphobia, homophobia, sexism, racism, ableism, classism, and cisheteronormativity/cisheteropatriarchy.

3.1. Introduction: Unsafety. This section begins by contextualizing barriers in connection to participants' understanding of safety. Unsafety is exacerbated by these oppressive systems and attitudes and has several effects: it reduces connection and communication between sexual partners and in other queer spaces, compounds internalized shame and trauma, and challenges embodied attunement with one's desires and needs, relational practices of care, and community accountability.

3.2. Lateral Violence. Lateral violence within queer and trans communities impacts interpersonal relationships and presents barriers to sexual joy. The study finds that participants overwhelmingly seek to reject dominant social and sexual norms and standards fueled by cisheteronormative beauty standards, gendered expectations, misogyny, whiteness and ableism. Nevertheless, fatphobia, transphobia, sexism, racism, and ableism in sexual contexts within queer communities remains a problem, which often reproduces relational harms, social exclusion, and negative self-valuation. Experiences of lateral violence left participants feeling afraid to express themselves authentically

in sexual encounters or feel physically embodied, empowered, and connected to their desires. As one participant (Kai, they/them) put it, *"whenever we talk about bodies...I just feel like everything is out there to tell us that our bodies are not perfect enough, or they're not good enough."* As participants' voices will illustrate, experiences of barriers are typically overlapping, reflecting the complex, multiple, and intersectional lived experiences of participants who partook in the study.

3.3. Sexual Harm, Trauma, and Disembodiment. 75% of survey participants identified as survivors of sexual violence, and almost all focus group, cellphilmaking workshop, and interview participants described experiences of sexual and gender-based violence. Participants understood their experiences of sexual violence and harm as emerging out of cisheteropatriarchal sexual scripts that construct men as voracious sexual subjects and women as submissive sexual objects. Although participants primarily described experiences of sexual violence in heterosexual contexts, some noted that harmful cisheteropatriarchal sexual scripts are often reappropriated into queer sexual cultures vis-a-vis masc-

femme binaries. Participant Winter (they/them) described experiences of sexual harm as existing on a *“spectrum of unpleasant to traumatic,”* which captures the grey area sexual experiences described by many participants that were not easily classified as consensual or criminal but still caused harm (Wright, 2021a; 2022; Wright & Greenberg, 2023). Cisheteropatriarchal sexual norms were internalized by some participants, which led them to engage in harmful sexual encounters that were not aligned with their sexual desires and needs. For participants that survived sexual violence, trauma manifested as a barrier to queer sexual joy through hypersexuality, dissociation, disembodiment, and shame.

3.4. Lack of Representation. Another significant barrier to queer sexual joy that emerged in the research is the lack of positive, diverse, and nuanced representations of queer and trans people, relationships, and sex. Participants noted that the lack of representation of queer and trans people both in the media and in their personal lives stifled the development and acceptance of their queer and trans identities, and discouraged them from pursuing their queer sexual

desires. Stereotyped or harmful media representations of queer and trans people also negatively impacted participants’ self-concepts and led to discrimination and misrecognition from their peers. In addition to the general lack of representation cited by participants, the failure of sexuality education to address and affirm queer and trans identities was frequently referenced by participants as harmful to their identity development and sexual lives. As participant Teddy (she/they) noted, *“we only teach about sex as a penis going in a vagina and like that just isn’t applicable to my experience.”* The cisheteronormative assumptions underlying participants’ sexuality education made them feel invisibilized and left them with very little relevant information about sexual safety, which resulted in greater risk of STIs and sexual harm for some participants. In addition, some participants received abstinence-only-until-marriage sexuality education (AOUM), which was explicitly homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic. These participants noted lasting feelings of shame and alienation that functioned as a barrier to queer sexual joy.

Part 4. Finding Sexual Joy

The next part of this report turns to how participants found queer sexual joy, despite and in spite of the barriers identified, examining four major themes.

4.1. Introduction: Safety. Before turning to these themes, the report re-examines safety as a critical condition to cultivate queer sexual joy and reduce the potential for harm to occur or be reproduced in sexual contexts. Safety does not mean the complete elimination of spontaneity, surprise, or a degree of pleasurable risk that sustains creativity, play, and exploration of erotic desires. Rather, safety is connected to the baseline conditions that allow such sexual risks and new explorations to feel joyful and pleasurable, rather than harmful and threatening. As one participant put it, *“it’s a combination of this intimacy and safety you get with somebody that you really trust, and it’s also being seen genuinely for who you are.”* Each person’s boundaries and conditions for establishing safety are different and unique to their needs and desires.

The report then turns to four major themes identified that describe how participants cultivate queer sexual joy.

4.2. Ethics of Care. As participant Wren (they/she) explained to their eight-year-old child, *“sex is care between people. Sex is like expressing care with our bodies.”* This quote reflects one of the overarching findings in the report, which is that care is an essential part of creating and sustaining queer sexual joy. Participants described care for self, care for sexual and romantic partners, and care for community as the primary modes through which care facilitated queer sexual joy. Participants described identifying and setting boundaries as an act of care for self that facilitated their experiences of queer sexual joy. An ethic of care in romantic and sexual partnerships showed up in several ways for participants, including clear communication about desires, needs, and boundaries prior to sexual encounters and engaging in aftercare following sexual encounters. Partners also showed participants care by engaging in thoughtful, sensitive, and creative sexual practices that helped create containers of safety for participants who are survivors of sexual violence and/or who experience gender dysphoria. Additionally, community practices and standards of care such of those in queer and trans polyamorous communities, kink and

BDSM communities, and chosen families helped facilitate queer sexual joy for participants.

4.3. Embodied Knowledge. Next, the report discusses how participants overcame disconnection and dissociation by cultivating embodied knowledge, finding that self knowledge and connection to one's own body is crucial to experience emotion such as pleasure and joy. As a participant (Wyatt, they/he) described, sexual joy involves *“a soft agreement with yourself and the space around you, whether it's people or things that you're interacting with, that is grounded in self-acceptance and self-trust.”* Strategies to cultivate self knowledge included drawing on personally-meaningful sources and rituals, which facilitated holding space to be more intentional, ground oneself in sexual experiences, and check in with partners and oneself. Additionally, participants emphasized that self-knowledge was important for understanding a partner's needs and practicing consent. Through self knowledge, sexual partners also help reduce the barriers to sexual joy informed by the insidious influence of normative sexual scripts that do not

represent diverse queer and trans sexualities.

4.4. Knowledge Sharing. Developing embodied self-knowledge was an integral part of queer sexual joy for participants, and knowledge sharing between partners, friends, and communities was identified as an important factor in the development of this self-knowledge. Participants learned about queer sexual practices from partners, and better understood themselves and their desires through discussion with and modeling by sexual and romantic partners. Participants also learned how to create containers of safety through communication and boundary setting with partners. Participants emphasized the importance of knowledge sharing between queer and trans friends for gaining practical knowledge about sex acts as well as for learning how to navigate identity-related barriers and challenges to queer sexual joy. This was most explicitly demonstrated by Naseem (name as pronouns), who said *“[my friends and I] all just care about everyone else or each other experiencing pleasure.”* Additionally, participants discussed broader queer community spaces, such as online platforms and queer and

trans-specific workshops, as important sites for building self-knowledge through knowledge sharing.

4.5. Breaking Free: Queer and Trans

Sexual Joy as Resistance. A major part of the freedom participants felt related to queer sexual joy was in their ability to break the gender binary inherent to compulsory cisheteronormativity. Participants were not met with misery when breaking away from cishetero structures but, rather, found deep embodied pleasure, joy, and a sense of personal empowerment. By moving away from gendered binaries inherent to cisheteronormative sexual scripts, including prescribed masc and femme dynamics in queer and trans communities, participants found a path to greater authenticity. Luciana said “[In queer relationships] You’re not looking at each other through the male gaze. You’re looking at each other through this loving queer gaze where you’re allowed to be whatever you are, you know? You don’t have to have long hair if you’re a girl, you don’t have to wear dresses with high heels. You can like what you like and you can be the way you are...You’re just allowed to be. And I think that’s something beautiful that being queer has given me.” The “loving queer gaze”

is what many participants described in different terms, and this alternative gaze helped them embody sexual joy.

The kinds of interactions that fostered queer sexual joy were elucidated in relation to clear and open communication, and this is discussed in this section. In the queer and trans relationships spoken about in the study, there was an emphasis on communication that was not present in interactions with cishetero partners participants had engaged with. Lastly, in this section, the queer sexual joy of casual sex is discussed. Demonstrating the lineage of care and interdependence woven throughout queer and trans communities’, participants resisted and queered dominant understandings of casual sex and found safety and care where otherwise casual sex is popularly understood as risky, objectifying, and characterized by disposability.

4.6 The Healing Power of Queer & Trans

Sexual Joy. The last section of the report discusses how queer sexual joy is an experience that supports participants’ healing from interpersonal violence and the systems of oppression that cause this violence to continue. Queer sexual joy helped create the possibility for embodiment and a reclamation of not

just one's body but deeply embodied pleasure and intimacy. Shared identities helped facilitate this joy and pleasure. T4T ("trans-for-trans") relationships, in particular, were described as "subversive" and "raw" and offered authentic experiences involving being seen and genuinely respected. Sara noted: *"I feel like that kind of bond is something that if, especially if you have not had that before, if this is your first time having a T4T relationship, it's literally life-changing. Just having that little bit of intimacy, that little bit of acceptance and vulnerability, it's like it breaks the dam or whatever, and then someone's able to be fulfilled in themselves."* The process of finding and embodying queer sexual joy created space for participants to acquire self-knowledge that supported their self-esteem, bodily confidence, understanding of what is pleasurable for

them and what is not, and their self-care regimes. Darby found immense freedom in sex with queer and trans partners that helped them reclaim their body. They said: *"I think it has been the way that sex happens in queer relationships--that I can show up authentically, and that was really healing for me ... And you know, being able to talk about sexual violence in a queer lens has been really healing too... I think, absolutely, having a queer and trans --and my partner is non-binary and disabled-- has really helped me navigate my triggers and feel safe in my body again."* Queer sexual joy thus offered profound learnings and was a protective factor in that it no doubt dulled the impact of future encounters with homophobia and transphobia since participants--having experienced the connection of queer sexual joy--felt more secure in their identities and desires.

Participant Demographics

Name	Location	Age	Sexuality	Gender	Racial Identity	Disability and Neurodivergence	Class Status
Kai	Canada	30	Queer	Non-binary he/they or they/he	Mixed white and East Asian	Neurodiversity, Mental Health disability	Working class/low income
Kit	Canada	29	Queer	Queer, they/them	White	Neurodiversity, Mental Health disability	Poor/living in poverty
Sal	Canada	26	Bisexual	Trans man	White	Neurodiversity, Mental Health disability, Mobility disability, Chronic illness	Poor/living in poverty
Jodie	US	27	Queer	Non-binary, they/them	Mixed/ Bi-racial/ Multi-racial	Mental Health disability	Middle class/financially stable
Jude	Canada	20	Queer	Non-binary she/they or they/she	White		Middle class/financially stable
Wyatt	Canada	27	Queer	Non-binary he/they or they/he	White	Neurodiversity	Middle class/financially stable
Teddy	US	25	Queer	Non-binary she/they or they/she	White	Mental Health disability	Middle class/financially stable
Olive	Canada	23	Queer	Cis-woman	White	Neurodiversity, Mental Health disability	Middle class/financially stable
Willow	Canada	28	Queer	Non-binary she/they or they/she	White		Middle class/financially stable

Jiva	Canada	23	Queer	Cis-woman	South Asian	Neurodiversity	Middle class/financially stable
Pearl	US	25	Queer	Cis-woman	White	Neurodiversity, Mental Health disability, Chronic illness	Working class/low income
Deva	Canada	26	Queer	Non-binary, they/them	West Asian	Neurodiversity, Mental Health disability, Chronic illness	Poor/living in poverty
Kamal	Canada	21	Pansexual	Non-binary, they/them	South Asian	Neurodiversity, Mental Health disability	Middle class/financially stable
Scarlett	Canada	25	Queer	Cis-woman	White	Neurodiversity	Middle class/financially stable
Chidi	Canada	27	Queer	Two-Spirit	Black		Working class/low income
Dayo	US	25	Queer	Non-binary, they/them	Black	Middle class/financially stable	
Darby	Canada	30	Queer	Cis-woman	White (Portuguese)	Mental Health disability	Middle class/financially stable
Noshi	Canada	24	Bisexual	Trans man	Latinx	Neurodiversity, Mobility disability	Working class/low income
Dallas	Canada	30	Pansexual	Cis-woman	White	Mental Health disability	Middle class/financially stable
Quinn	Canada	27	Pansexual	Non-binary, they/them	Mixed/Bi-racial/Multi-racial	Neurodiversity	Middle class/financially stable

Wren	Canada	35	Queer	Non-binary she/they or they/she	White	Neurodiversity	Upper class/wealthy
Frankie	Canada	28	Pansexual	Non-binary, they/them	Black	Neurodiversity, Mental Health disability, Mobility disability, Chronic illness	Working class/low income
Eden	Canada	23	Queer	Non-binary, they/them	Black		Working class/low income
Luciana	Canada	24	Bisexual	Cis-woman	Latinx		Middle class/financially stable
Sara	Canada	25	T4T	Trans woman / Non binary / Gender Fluid	White	Neurodiversity	Middle class/financially stable
Aubrey	Canada	22	Lesbian	Non-binary she/they or they/she	White	Mental Health disability	Upper class/wealthy
Mickey	US	29	Lesbian	Cis-woman	Black	Chronic illness	Working class/low income
Saabira	Canada	26	Queer	Non-binary, they/them	South Asian	Neurodiversity, Mental Health disability, Chronic illness	Working class/low income
Winter	Canada	30	Queer	Non-binary, they/them	White		Working class/low income
Naseem	Canada	23	Queer	Trans non-binary, they/them or no pronouns	South Asian	Neurodiversity, Mental Health disability, Sensory disability	Working class/low income

Nox	US	18	Bisexual	Trans man	White	Neurodiversity	Middle class/financially stable
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Part 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This report shares findings from The Queer Sexual Joy Project which was led by Dr. JJ Wright and is a collaboration with Egale Canada. The project aimed to explore the challenges that queer sexual joy poses to rape culture (see glossary for definition). In other words, the project explores how queer and trans sexual joy disrupt the colonial, racist, homophobic, transphobic, sexist, ableist cultural norms that lead to gender-based violence. This report also acts as a contribution to the queer archival work of documenting 2SLGBTQ+ communities' narratives of liberatory sex, which challenges how queer and trans communities are systematically absented from archival processes (ware, 2017; ware & Wyngz, 2020).

Between March 2022 and June 2023, 100 2SLGBTQ+ people aged 18–35 from across Canada and the U.S. participated in the study through arts-based workshops, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, or a survey. The Queer Sexual Joy project traces queer and trans young adults' experiences of great consensual sex and queer sexual joy to develop understandings of consensual sex that challenge the violent, cisheteronormative scripts underlying rape culture.

1.1.1 Context of the Report

The research team is aware that a report on queer and trans sexual joy in a political climate of rising hatred towards 2SLGBTQ+ communities is not published without risks attached. Indeed, when the Call for Participants for the study was released on social media in 2023, the Principal Investigator of the project, Dr. JJ Wright, was subject to a slew of homophobic, transphobic, misogynist vitriol. We are living in a time when a small but vocal minority of bigots are fuelling a fire of hatred. There are a

number of hateful discourses that have been on the rise as part of the backlash against human rights progress and the societal integration of 2SLGBTQ+ communities, such as the notion that all queer and trans people are groomers of children, pedophiles, or otherwise out to corrupt children. Another example is the discourse that queerness and transness is a Western concept and that the rise of 2SLGBTQ+ identities are a product of social contagion. This discourse presents an ahistorical account of queerness

and transness that misses the way terminology shifts over time, how queer and trans people have always been present in societies around the world, and how non-Western cultures have identity categories—such as hijras in India, muxes in Mexico, or Two-Spirit folks in Canada—that challenge the naturalization of binary gender.

There have also been rising numbers of policies and laws that situate queer or trans people as mentally unwell vis-a-vis queerness and transness being positioned as pathological. These are just some ways in which 2SLGBTQ+ people are facing villainization and attempts at eradication. Unfortunately, the backlash we are seeing in society has been associated with rising hate crimes including gender-based violence against 2SLGBTQ+ communities—especially those who are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour), disabled, or poor or working class (Aiello, 2023; Boynton, 2023).

In the face of this violence, we could talk about queer and trans sexual joy or the other beautiful aspects of 2SLGBTQ+ communities less, and become smaller out of fear. Instead, we speak out and chose to proudly share the Queer Sexual Joy project's report,

which features narratives from queer and trans young adults about how they are finding pleasure, care, and deeply loving and respectful relationships by challenging the status quo and the violent norms it upholds for relating to each other, such as those perpetuated by cis-heteronormativity and rape culture. Given the backlash the project has already faced in its initial stages, it is even more important for this report to be published. The research team recognizes the ways in which discourses of queer and trans sexuality are used towards homophobic and transphobic ends, and we know that some may read the report eager to cherry-pick material and change their meanings in order to spread hate. We did not write the report, however, for these people. This report is for people who are open to learning about the ways in which queer and trans peoples' experiences and insights about sex, relationships, and society more broadly highlight structural oppression as well as ways that things are being done differently in the periphery to allow for more liberatory futures. Some of these readers may be curriculum or policy writers, educators, lawyers, administrators, researchers, or general community members. The report was

also written for queer and trans young adults as well as older 2SLGBTQ+ people who in the pages of the report may find feelings of joy, belonging, connection, excitement, pleasure, and hope. The project was one of world-making, dreaming, and mapping futures that are more sustainable, just, and pleasurable. We as queer and trans people will imagine the futures we need and want, and we hope this report offers inspiration in that process.

1.1.2 Structure of the Report

We offer a literature review situating the study and a description of the project's methodology before moving on to the core of the report. What follows is not an exhaustive summary of the project's findings as there were myriad ways that participants felt and experienced queer sexual joy, and the power of queer sexual joy cannot be summed up in one report. Overall, however, the project findings disrupt normative homogenous depictions of queer and trans people as alienated, depressed, and self-hating (Rasmussen, 2012; Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018). The study found that many queer and trans young adults felt connected to community around them and found liberation and embodied pleasure in queer and trans sexual joy.

Finding queer sexual joy, however, was narrated as a journey or process as will be discussed.

The next part of the report, [Part 2](#), explores the contours or definition of queer and trans sexual joy such as those of intercreativity, freedom, expansiveness, and liberation. Notably, we consider queer sexual joy a heterogenous experience that defies any singular definition. Instead, we look to participants' narratives about queer sexual joy to elucidate its meaning. [Part 3](#) on barriers to queer sexual joy will begin with an examination of participants' discussion of lateral violence, as gendered expectations and transphobia, misogyny, racism, ableism, and classism all resulted in violence within 2SLGBTQ+ communities. We understand this interpersonal violence to be deeply related to systemic injustice. Continuing an examination of barriers, embodiment, and dissociation will be explored before the final sub-section which will discuss representation. [Part 4](#) explores the conditions through which participants found queer and trans sexual joy. The contours of queer sexual joy are examined through themes that came up in conversation with participants, and these include: safety;

an ethic of care; embodied knowledge; knowledge sharing; rejecting scripts; empowerment through pleasure, and; queer sexual joy as healing.

A supplementary report titled “Developing Queer Joy-Centered Gender-based Violence Prevention Education: 2SLGBTQ+ Youth-

led Recommendations” is being published alongside this report. It offers suggestions from participants, including specific and illustrative examples, that support the development of gender-based violence prevention education, namely consent education, that centers queer and trans sexual joy.

1.2 Literature Review

This section provides an academic literature review to situate the study within scholarly conversations and describe the theoretical framework for the report. The material may be uninteresting for some readers. The empirical findings from the study begin to be discussed in the next section, Part 2.

The Queer Sexual Joy project emerged in response to deficit-based narratives dominating public discourse about 2SLGBTQ+ people’s lives (Rasmussen, 2012; Shuster & Westbrook, 2022). Though it is important to trace the ways that 2SLGBTQ+ people face social, political, and economic marginalization—barriers to queer sexual joy that all show up in this report—it is critical to understand queer and trans people not just as victims of systemic injustice but also as full human beings who are tied to vibrant, imaginative 2SLGBTQ+ communities. When research on social injustice equates oppression with misery, these narratives become entrenched and shape how queer and trans people come to understand themselves (Shuster & Westbrook, 2022; Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018). It is also crucial to explore how 2SLGBTQ+ communities experience joy, as joy can sustain mobilization against oppression (Wettergren, 2009).

The project began from an understanding that cisheteropatriarchy is at the core of gender-based violence and that queer and trans joy shake the foundations of rape culture. Despite over 30 years of tireless feminist advocacy to end gender-based violence, it has only increased (Rotenberg & Cotter, 2018; Perrealt, 2015), and we posit

that this is because cisheteronormativity has not been fundamentally challenged in gender-based violence prevention education. Conversations about the importance of cisgender men obtaining consent from cisgender women have become more widespread since around the time of #MeToo (2017), yet this has failed to challenge the ways in which cis women and those who are feminized in society more broadly (e.g., effeminate gay men) continue to be treated as if they exist to sexually please cis men (Reid et al., 2011). While cis women's participation in the workforce has increased, and in some cases they are the breadwinners in their families, they are still expected to take on the double shift of caring labour in their homes (Rao, 2019). These kinds of relations maintain cisheteropatriarchy and naturalize cis women as subservient caregivers to cis men, which translates into sex wherein cis women's sexuality is expected to revolve around being sexually objectified for the pleasure of their male partners while their genuine embodied pleasure goes unexplored (Weirderman, 2005; van Anders et al., 2022). Within this cisheteropatriarchal sexual order, it is not just cis women who are sexually objectified and dehumanized. Those who are racialized

as non-white, disabled people, and effeminate men have been feminized in dominant public discourse, situated as less than human, and, resultantly, face higher rates of violence than cishetero white, able-bodied men (Kessel, 2022; Razack 2000). Since queer and trans people often defy cisheteronormative logics, we have much to offer the conversation about building more just, consensual sexual cultures. Expressions of queer and trans joy are one site through which alternative imaginaries form. Narrating the experiences of queer and trans sexual joy acts as public counter-education.

The preeminent form of gender-based violence prevention education is consent education. Consent education is increasingly embedded in sexuality education and considered the most popular way of preventing gender-based violence. However, preliminary research demonstrates that it does not reduce instances of violence but, rather, results in survivors more often recognizing assault as such (Beres, 2019; Brownell, 2018; Camp et al., 2018). This can be explained by gender-based violence prevention programming's reliance on a binary model of consent ("Yes"/"No") as well as the absence of a framework that includes analysis of

social relations of power (Gilbert, 2017; Gavey, 2018; Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Wright, 2021; Wright, 2022). Arguably the biggest gap in consent education is its reliance upon the ‘miscommunication hypothesis,’ which centers a cisheteronormative logic through the assumption that violations of consent can be prevented primarily through improved communication: boys and men need to be taught to listen, and girls and women need to be taught to assert themselves more clearly (Abbey & Jaques-Tiura, 2011; Beres, 2014; Beres et al., 2014; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999; O’Byrne et al., 2006). These gendered lessons assume biologically essentialist notions of sex and gender rooted in binary colonial logics (i.e., men are from Mars, women are from Venus) in order to try to ‘equip’ young adults to avoid perpetuating or being victim to violence (Beres, 2022). In practice, however, the miscommunication hypothesis holds little explanatory power. Research suggests that men ‘misperceiving’ women is, in fact, more deliberate or motivated than the miscommunication hypothesis allows for (Beres et al., 2014). Moreover, in spaces where essentialist lessons about consent and gender-based violence are being taught, non-binary and trans students are rendered invisible (Wright & Greenberg, 2023).

Little research has taken up how queer and trans communities are absented in gender-based violence prevention education, how they can shed light on the limits of current discourses of consent, and how they use non-dominant models of consent which follow a legacy of critical consent in queer and trans communities (Bauer, 2021; de Heer et al., 2021; Fink, 2021). This report helps fill this gap and calls not only for queer and trans young adults to be included in consent education, but also for the concept of consent used in gender-based violence prevention to be transformed by queer and trans epistemologies, particularly the knowledges of those who are poor and working class, disabled, Mad, QTBIPOC survivors.

T4T relationships are highlighted in the report as offering particularly transformative models of relationality. Malatino (2022) has theorized about how some of trans people’s negative affective experiences come about because of transantagonism—or hatred of trans people perpetuated by cisheteronormativity that seeks to ‘correct’ us—which shapes the worlds that trans folk inhabit. Malatino (2022) suggests that it is important

to name those affects that emerge from transantagonism because they “transform us and recalibrate our possibilities for survival and resistance” (p. 11). It is necessary to render these feelings visible to counter narratives that present trans experience through an oversimplified logic set around a binary of dysphoria pre-transition and euphoria post-transition. Taking care not to reproduce such logics, the Queer Sexual Joy study brings a relational lens to good feelings, highlighting the crucial role that trans and queer communities play in shaping sexual joy and individual empowerment. As demonstrated by participants, T4T sexual experiences that are imbued with queer and trans joy can feel distanced from transantagonism and cisheteronormativity and provide space for liberatory sex that feels deeply mutually pleasurable. Trans joy through T4T relationships has the potential to cultivate new sexual worlds through practices that shake free from discourses and attitudes that perpetuate rape culture.

The legacy and ongoing practice of queer and trans communities disrupting colonial, cisheteronormative logics opens up space to reimagine care and intimacy in sexual relationships. In this

way, queer and trans sexual joy provides an opportunity to re-envision consent education with a deeper, more nuanced framework for consensual sex.

1.2.1 Theorizing and Mobilizing Joy

Joy is an affect and a feeling which is shaped by the sociopolitical context it happens within. As Ahmed (2004) notes in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, feelings “take the ‘shape’ of the contact we have with objects” (p. 5). Feelings are shaped by culture, and are historically specific and particular to context. There is then no homogenous version of joy, and the Queer Sexual Joy project does not aim to crystallize a queer version of it for political purposes. As Simmons (2019) notes: “Joy might be impossible to reduce to an operational definition that is measurable and grasps the essence of a thing. Joy by its very nature eludes conceptualization” (p. 32). The work of the Queer Sexual Joy project is not to conceptualize what joy itself is but instead to use queer sexual joy as an ‘analytic’ to investigate 1. the ways in which queer and trans joy disrupt the colonial, racist, sexist, homophobia, transphobic, and ableist cultural norms that lead to gender-based violence, and 2. what queer and trans epistemologies can teach us about the possibilities for

collectively imagining fuller, vaster, more just sexual cultures.

Joy can be a powerful instigator for social change. As Simmons (2019) notes:

“ Among the affects, for Spinoza joy occupies a privileged place as the most powerful, potentially leading to the greatest changes to the individual. It is the affect that opens up the most possible future affects. Joy with its intensity, sudden onset, and quick recedence, affects the self the most with the most unpredictable of effects (p. 29). ”

The impact of affect on a person—being affected—opens them to potentialities for creative action. *Ann Cvetkovich (2003) writes in An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* that “affective experience can provide the basis for new cultures” (p. 30). The possibilities for “new cultures”, however, are impacted by how affects are organized. Murphie (2010) discusses how some affects are organized into what they call “territories” which are “spaces of concreteness in a sea of affects” (p. 29). Territories can be positive or oppressive,

freeing or constraining. Some positive affects can be neutralized by what Deluze and Guattari (1988) would call ‘refrains’, or repeated experiences. The traditional sexual scripts for cishetero sex, for instance, invoke affects that can reify normative sexual cultures. A cishetero man coercing a woman into sex after buying her dinner may experience associated sexual affects as ‘right’ or ‘proper’ through a cisheteronormative framework that suggests he is owed sex and that women’s bodies should always be accessible to men. These cishetero affects may harness the ego and close off the potentiality of different, new, or more creative sexual experiences. In other words, to return to Murphie’s (2010) concept of territories, we can understand that affect imbued with cisheteronorms may create territories where the possibilities for sexual joy to transform are suffocated. Though affect, and joy in particular, holds power to move someone and potentially create social change, there are “attempts to harness affects into logical accounts” that can dull their transformative power. As Bertelsen and Murphie (2010) note, “[o]ne of the recurring tasks of conservative politics, is the attempt to capture and control affect” (p. 140). Though not discussed at length in this report, the

appropriation of queer sexual joy by homonational projects like some Pride parades and events may be one way in which queer and trans joy as affects are being drained of their transformative power.

Resisting what might be called normative sexual affects, queer joy—the Queer Sexual Joy project asserts—holds much power to shift people’s being in the world and thus broader culture. As Simmons (2019) says, “joy reforms the subject...and potentially makes the subject anew” (p. 30). Izard (1991) describes joy as “a special kind of link or bond...[that fosters [a] keen sense of belonging, or of oneness with the object of joy and with the world” (p. 138). By embodying this connection, our sense of self and the way we perceive the world shifts: “[joy] tends to be accompanied by a feeling of transcendence or freedom, the feeling that we are more than or different from our usual selves and that for a moment we exist in the realm of the extraordinary. In ecstatic joy we may feel light and bouncy... that we are soaring and that everything has a different perspective because of our unusual vantage point” (p. 138).

Joy can also open the door to more joy by showing a person that they have

more capacity for joy than they might have thought. In other words, “The effects of joy can lead to an upward spiral of positive affects” (Simmons, 2019, p. 35). The ‘contagion’ of joy—like not being able to stop laughing when hearing a baby’s laugh—is why conservative politicians want to prohibit things like drag story time hour, as the last thing they want is for joyful affect associated with queerness or transness to proliferate.

However, it is not just queer and trans joy that conservatives want to quell, it is also crip joy, Black joy, and native joy among other kinds that intersect. Queer Indigenous scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt (2020a) writes about the importance of joy as an act of resistance against colonialism and racism, as an act of rebellion and a path to liberation for Indigenous people. Speaking to CBC News about his book *A History of my Brief Body*, he said:

“ Part of how colonialism works is by trying to eliminate joy in the lives of Indigenous people whether through eradication of cultural traditions which we saw throughout the 20th century, or by distracting us with racism, and

Toni Morrison tells us that racism works as a mode of distraction from oneself and one's life. Joy becomes political because it is diminished, and I think there's an urgency to refusing to allow it to be (Belcourt, 2020b).

”

Focusing on queer, trans, and Two-Spirit Indigenous youth, Jeffrey Ansloos and collaborators (2021) identify joy as a central component of the ways in which these youth experience their gender and sexuality and work towards anti-colonial futures.

Black joy similarly refuses erasure. As Antonio Tiongson (2022) notes, “Black feminist theorizing speaks to the indispensability of creating and sustaining spaces of joy as a way to counter ongoing threats against Black existence” (p. 170). Joy serves many purposes, but for marginalized groups who face oppression for falling outside the white, cishetero, able-bodied norm, joy can be life-sustaining and giving. Tristano (2022) writes that “queer of colour joy is vital for creating better and more sustainable worlds [as] a joyous state allows us to...use desire to propel us through the social worlds where

we refuse colonial futures and expand decolonial options” (p. 279).

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Jose Muñoz (2009) explores the queer utopian potential offered by the failure to be ‘normal’, and the Queer Sexual Joy project is shaped by his invitation to collectively step out of ‘this place and time to something fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter’ (p. 189). Nicolazzo (2021) argues that in order to combat the “trope of misery” with which oppressed groups are depicted, we must center counter-stories of joy that originate from within the communities themselves (p. 513). The following report aims to center the narratives of diverse 2SLGBTQ+ young adults as part of imagining sexual cultures that are more just, caring, and pleasurable.

1.3 Methodology

The Queer Sexual Joy project is a mixed-methods project that asks: how does queer sexual joy challenge rape culture? What does it look and feel like to experience queer sexual joy, particularly as a departure from the confines of compulsory cisheteronormativity? What can be learned from experiences of queer and trans sexual joy for gender-based violence prevention?

Data for the project was collected using two surveys, two cellphilmaking workshops (cellphilmaking refers to creating short videos on phones), two focus groups, and eight in-depth one-on-one interviews. A call for participants for each stage of data collection was disseminated on social media and through the researchers' networks. The first survey, launched in March 2022, gathered preliminary data from 14 participants on queer sexual joy that informed the rest of the research. The second survey added a question specific to trans sexual joy and was released in March 2023, receiving 55 responses. The total survey responses equaled 69 participants. Following the release of both surveys, the researchers held two virtual cellphilmaking workshops in May 2023, followed by two virtual focus groups and eight virtual one-on-one interviews in June 2023. In total, 100 2SLGBTQ+ young adults aged 18–35 participated in the project ($n = 100$).

Both surveys and qualitative workshops and interviews gathered demographic data about participants. Participants were spread evenly across the 18–35 age range, with representation of each age. Among the 100 participants, 13 were from the U.S. and 87 were from Canada. Eight provinces were represented including Ontario (34), Manitoba (5), Alberta (24), British Columbia (10), Nova Scotia (6), Quebec (5), Newfoundland and Labrador (1), and New Brunswick (1).

One participant was from the Northwest Territories. The states represented among U.S. participants were California, New York, Indiana, Illinois, and Pennsylvania.

Participants were asked two questions about sex and gender identification and were given a list of categories as well as an option to self-identify² for each question. Participants identified their sexuality as: queer 59% ($n = 58$),

² In the results listed, self-identified terms are followed by an asterisk (*).

pansexual 12% ($n = 12$), bisexual 12% ($n = 12$), lesbian 9% ($n = 9$), gay 4% ($n = 4$), asexual* 3% ($n = 3$), Two-Spirit 1% ($n = 1$), and T4T*³ 1% ($n = 1$). Only 26 participants identified as cis-gender (4 cis men and 22 cis women), leaving nearly 3/4 (74%) of participants in the study identifying otherwise, with the largest proportion (63%, $n = 63$) selecting non-binary (e.g., non-binary they/them or non-binary she/they). Two percent of participants identified as Two-Spirit ($n = 2$), 1% as trans masculine ($n = 1$), 5% as trans women ($n = 5$), and 3% as trans men ($n = 3$).

Participants were likewise given both suggested categories and an option to self-identify their racial identity. The majority of the participants identified as white (56%, $n = 56$), followed by mixed race/bi-racial/multi-racial (15%, $n = 15$), Black (9%, $n = 9$), South Asian (5%, $n = 5$), Latinx (4%, $n = 4$), Indigenous (4%, $n = 4$), Southeast or East Asian (4%, $n = 4$), and West Asian (2%, $n = 2$).

Participants' identification in terms of disability and/or neurodiversity⁴ was not examined in the first survey, however,

specific questions were added in the second survey and for the qualitative workshops, focus groups, and interviews. Of the 66 participants who were asked, 54 (82%) identified as having a disability and/or being neurodiverse. The second survey explicitly asked respondents ($n = 55$) about different kinds of disability, and notably 43 (79%) identified as neurodiverse. Disability and neurodivergence were highly represented in this study and reflects other research noting the interconnections between 2SLGBTQ+ identities and neurodiversity (Brown, 2017; Shapira & Granek, 2019; Yergeau, 2018).

The qualitative data collected in the study was analyzed using a code set, which the research team developed iteratively using a grounded theory approach that identified emergent themes from the data as it was collected (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). In this process occurring primarily between May–June 2023, the research team met once or twice a week to discuss how the research was going and what was

3 T4T means “trans for trans” or “trans loving trans,” that is, a trans person who is romantically and/or sexually interested in other trans people.

4 This report uses these terms in alignment with scholarship and disability justice and Mad activism that seeks to promote non-ableist and non-pathologizing understandings of disability and neurodiversity, and in recognition that not all people who identify as neurodiverse also identify as disabled and that disability may include physical, mental, cognitive, and learning disability or difference. The report also interchangeably uses the terms neurodiversity, neurodivergen[t]/[ce] and neuroatypical identities.

standing out to us from initial surveys and cellphilmaking workshops, informing focus group interview questions and one-on-one interview questions in an iterative and collaborative process. Memos were taken over the duration of data collection and throughout data analysis so that important themes and moments of group discussions and interviews were not missed. This iterative process of analysis generated a code list which the research team used in the second stage of analysis, involving close coding of the qualitative responses and transcripts of the data. Coding of each transcript was done individually and cross-checked by at least two researchers. Analysis remained iterative as new codes were added, re-coding the full set of data as needed. Coding was completed on Dedoose, which allowed for multiple collaborators and memo-taking that the entire team could simultaneously access. Dedoose also offered analysis tools that allowed the research team to identify and visualize the frequency of a code across different transcripts and data sources and view co-occurrences of codes and their frequencies. Drawing on these tools, memos, and continued conversations about ongoing and new themes, the

research team selected the substantial themes featured in this report.

As described above, a survey, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and arts-based workshops were used in the study. Each modality is not represented equally in the report. The survey responses reflected what was found in the other modes of research in the study, but it was the narrative based data such as from the one-on-one interviews that we found more compelling material with which to describe the patterns we traced. Furthermore, some participants are featured much more than others, such as Nox. We made a choice to, as much as possible, avoid using short, disembodied quotes that may shock. Instead, we use longer narratives from interactions with participants which helps to show nuance; people face barriers such as the violence of homophobia and transphobia but also have agency in resisting and navigating these barriers—like through joyful experiences. A focus on joy means not ceding to the usual approach to sociological research that relies on deficit-based conversations which tend to remove participants from their contexts where participants are both encountering systemic discrimination and resisting it.

Thus, there are fewer participant voices from the survey than, for example, the focus groups. We also recognize that researcher objectivity is a myth and a colonial construct (Harding, 2013). Some narratives moved different team members for different reasons but, through iterative conversations, we identified the themes that stood out the most among all of us. There will be gaps in the research as there are with any project, but we aim to offer some foundational work on queer sexual joy that provides a basis from which more pathways can be explored on the subject.


This report describes these themes in three parts: the next section of this report, [Part 2](#), will define queer and trans joy using participants' narratives, and [Part 3](#) is concerned with barriers to queer sexual joy. [Part 4](#) emphasizes key tools to cultivate queer sexual joy despite barriers.



Part 2:

Defining Queer & Trans Sexual Joy and its Importance





This report begins by giving shape to queer and trans sexual joy through the reflections and descriptions of participants in their own words. We do this in order to demonstrate how critical queer and trans sexual joy is to the project to end gender-based violence. This section identifies three ways that queer sexual joy gave meaning to participants. First, participants described queer and trans sexual joy as empowering. Despite societal barriers (as identified in Part 3) such as rape culture, participants accessed trust, authenticity, and connection with their partners through queer and trans sexual joy, which was deeply pleasurable. Second, participants described finding a shared sense of creativity, play, experimentation, and openness with partners and friends, which we call *intercreativity*. Third, participants felt greater freedom, expansiveness, and liberation through queer sexual joy, highlighting not only the personal benefits but also the broader political potential of queer liberation through sexual joy. These findings align with literature that has theorized the propensity for joy to be a connecting and contagiously positive force that strengthens bonds and belonging (Izard, 1991; Simmons, 2019). As scholars suggest, queer joy has the potential to bring powerful and unpredictable effects that can challenge norms, positively impact the self, and connect communities (Lorde 1978/1984; Muñoz, 2009; Nicolazzo, 2021). This report extends these ideas about queer joy to consider how sexual joy, in particular, has healing and transformative potential towards the project to end gender-based violence and create more just, pleasurable, and affirming sexual cultures.

2.1. Empowerment Through Pleasure

For queer and trans participants in this study, experiencing moments of pleasure was rarely only about personal gratification, but rather about “compersion,” or sympathetic joy forged through mutual sexual connection. Reflecting theorizations of queer and trans joy, participants described feeling not only physical pleasure but deeper gratitude and trust for sexual partners (Izard, 1991). As Naseem (they/them) described,

“

It's pretty clear when someone is experiencing pleasure because generally you can observe physical signs. But for someone I care about and I want to have pleasure and knowing how hard it is to feel that pleasure, I feel satisfaction and gratitude in my own body that they trust me and this is something that we can build together. When that happens, that's energy being created, that's love being created. And I get more aroused too.

”

Pleasure was also empowering for many participants. In the words of Audre Lorde (1978/1984, p. 90), erotic pleasure that comes from “our internal knowledge and needs” is empowering because it “becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives.” Participants in the study echoed this sentiment as they discussed the empowering effect of connecting with their own bodily pleasure. For example, Saabira (they/ them) described efforts to connect to their body through solo play, explaining

that “*engaging in self-pleasuring myself has immensely helped me with body image issues and body dysphoria, and really boosted my confidence level as well.*” Sharing the impact of this, Saabira added:

“

Interestingly enough, that is something that is also being picked up by other people. When I go out, people are like, ‘Yeah, you're more confident,’ ‘you take up the attention when you step into the room,’ and whatnot. It's interesting seeing how embodying and expressing myself... is also being interpreted as that.

”

As Saabira emphasized, their confidence came from being more connected and accepting of their body and expressing themselves more authentically, which was registered and amplified by other people. As Williams (2019) suggests, joy can have powerful and unpredictable effects on the self that spreads to others, something which Saabira described newly embracing, discovering, and being recognized for, through sexual empowerment.

2.2. Intercreativity: Play, Experimentation, and Openness

In addition to experiencing connected forms of pleasure and empowerment, experiencing queer sexual joy was often described in reference to a sense of play and creativity. Many participants described joyful queer sex in terms of experimentation, non-judgment, humility, openness, and embracing “weird” or embarrassing moments with humour. This highlights the centrality of sexual joy in shaping queer utopian futures that allow one to step outside of the normative to a more welcoming place (Muñoz, 2009). Sharing the impact of this, Nox (he/him) explained that in building comfort with a sexual partner, there’s a “lightness” in not feeling like he is performing for someone else, which leads to greater play and creativity. As he described,

“

I do think communication is key and having someone that you can be comfortable being weird with and like being uncomfortable with is awesome. Sex is not like porn. Gross things happen, funny things happen, and that doesn't have to kill the mood. You can laugh and then move on and keep having good sex. That can be a joyful kind of intimacy because it's not from a place of judgment. Shame arrives in the dark and shining a light on things can be massively helpful. So whether that's how you feel about your body or a weird kink you want to try, talking about

it in a non-judgmental way can be really useful. Being awkward is better than not communicating at all. There are worse things to be than a little bit awkward during sex and better than like a potential miscommunication or breach of consent. I think just having the freedom to laugh at yourself, laugh at the situation without it ruining the mood. It's really important.

”

For Nox, sex observed through mainstream porn created an invalidating norm about how sex should proceed. Rejecting this pornographic imaginary of sex, Nox realized that his own comfort

and pleasure was more important than maintaining a perfect performance.

Additionally, participants noted how creative and playful communication with partners was important to establishing comfort, intimacy, and sexual joy through a sense of play and experimentation. For example, experimentation through language allowed Nox, who identifies as a trans man, to experience gender-affirming sex. Nox described that,

“ Language can tie into building that fantasy of how I'm thinking about my body. How I'm thinking about the acts might be different than what's actually going on, and it feels more gender-affirming and sexually arousing for me. ”

Like Nox, Pearl (she/her) shared how she and her partner used words as an artistic means to share and express sexual connection. Pearl stated that,

“ I am someone who really expresses myself through words, so writing or sharing sexual

erotica, reading it and talking about it. We love to read erotica and talk about it. What did we like, what did we not like, what interested us? Just having openness with sexuality. ”

As Lorde (1978/1984) suggests, the erotic is the “most profoundly creative source” for women+⁵ people in a “racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society” (p. 91). Pearl further explained that engaging erotica was not only a way to be artistic but also a creative response to barriers that limit sexual joy:

“ Because I'm disabled, it sort of limits sometimes the amount of how I can express myself sexually and physically, so being able to connect that sort of artistic element and have that be something shared with my partner is really special to me. ”

Nox and Pearl’s descriptions of creatively collaborating with partners to build sexual joy together reflects the bonding power of sexual joy (Izard,

5 In this instance, we are using the term woman+ as a more inclusive term than woman. It encapsulates cis women as well as those such as genderfluid people and femmes.

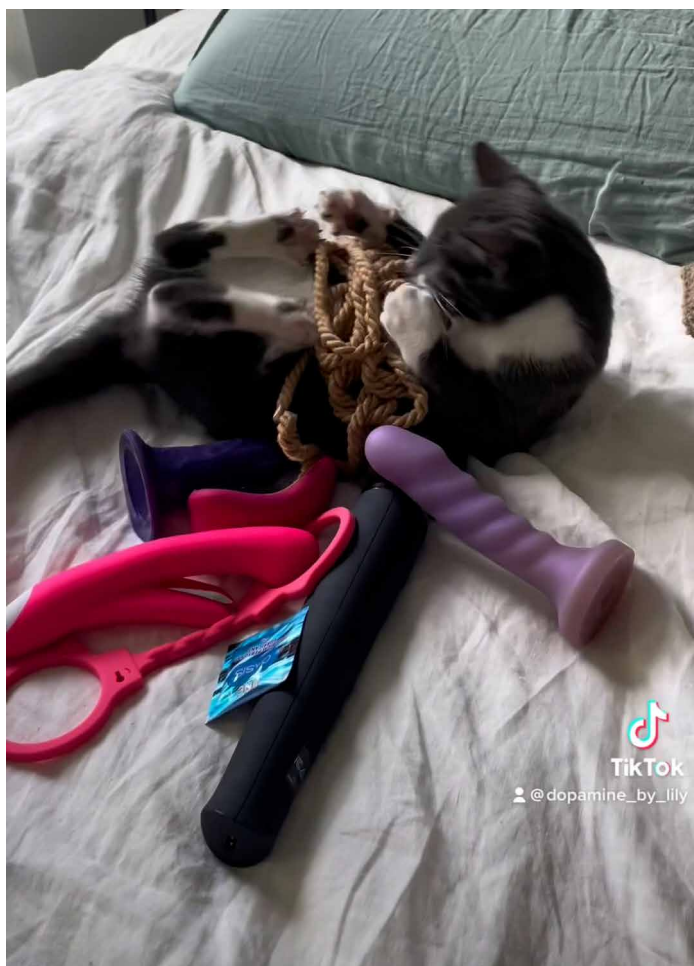
1991). Indeed, many participants discussed how they shared or co-created sexual joy with partners through experimentation and fantasy, a process which can be characterized as intercreativity. Intercreativity is rooted in interdependence, connection, and the cultivation of a space in which participants can feel safe and embodied enough to be spontaneous while also being tuned into one another's needs. Enacting intercreativity consists of an interactive process of mutual exploration grounded in intersubjective recognition of needs and boundaries. As one survey participant reported,

“ With my current partner, because there's mutual desire and non-judgment and safety, sex is integrated in all of life - it doesn't start and stop with certain acts, but part of our continuum of relating and care. It's creative and different every time, connected to our moods and desires as they shift - it's a space for being creative or comforted or intimate or whatever we want to be. The first time we had sex we just 'clicked' and I finally understood

that attraction and intimacy can coexist. Consensual sex with my queer trans partner is gay trans magic.

”

The creativity inherent to queer sex was reflected in cellphilmaking workshop participant, Jodie's film which featured a series of sex toys they and their girlfriend use as well as a series of words Jodie associated with queer sexual joy: innovative, full of consent, sexy, fun, wonderful, special, and “can be full of pussy”.



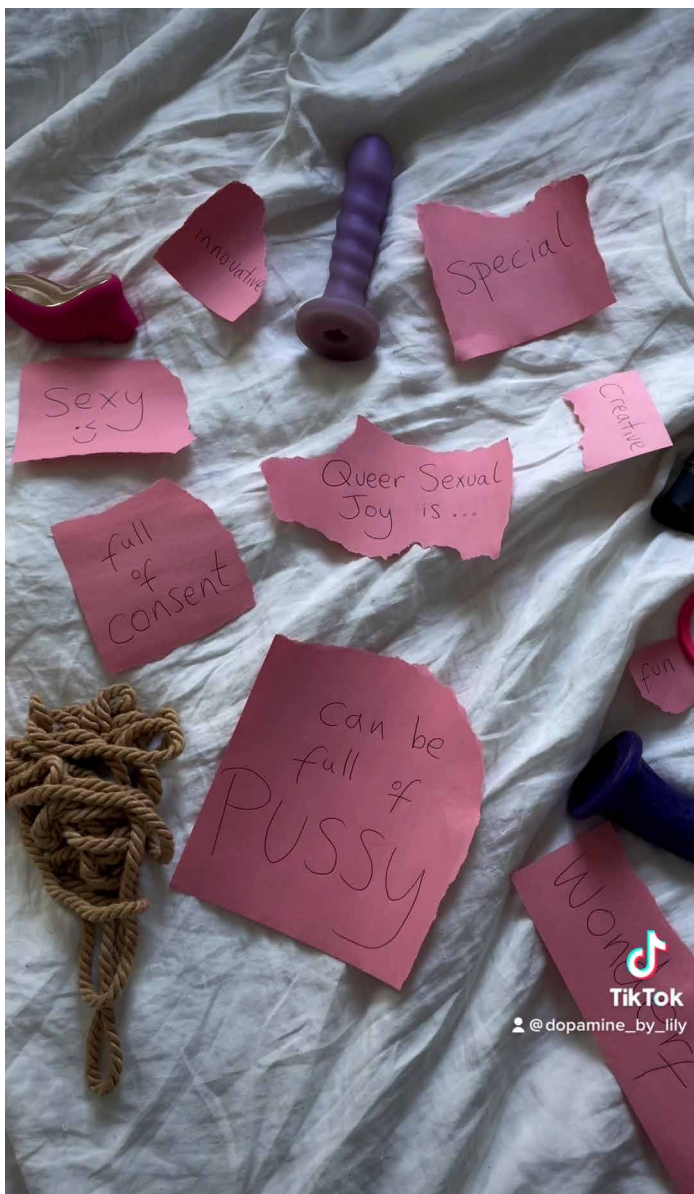


Figure 1: Stills from Jodie’s cellphilm. [Image description: the image on the left depicts Jodie’s cat tussling around in rope Jodie has tossed on the bed into the pile of sex toys which include purple and pink dildos, a black wand, and pink handcuffs. The image on the right shows some of the sex toys on the bed amidst torn pieces of pink paper. The center piece of paper reads “Queer sexual joy is...” and it is surrounded by other pieces

of paper that read: special, innovative, creative, fun, wonderful, can be full of pussy, full of consent, and sexy.]

In discussing their cellphilm, Jodie noted how in cis-hetero encounters when toys are introduced there can be feelings of shame, rejection, or insecurity. In queer dynamics, however, toys can be looked at more positively and as wholesome play leading to (queer) sexual joy.

Some participants also talked about the shame-fighting significance and intimacy of playful communication about sex not only with romantic partners but also within more platonic friendships. As Naseem (name as pronouns) shared, sometimes sexual play and creativity involved friends more directly:

“ Me and a really good friend, M, are talking about the two of us having sex to help each other out. She wants to work on her oral technique, and I want to work on giving directions. So we're currently exploring the idea of having sex with each other and figuring out how we can still maintain our friendship and still explore our budding relationships

outside of this. It's just a very honest conversation, we're just down to try and help each other out in the ways that we can.

”

This quote suggests that the comfort between Naseem and Naseem's friend and openness to mutually explore and experience sexual play allowed them to

creatively re-imagine the boundaries of their relationship. This intentional centering of sexual joy in friendship reflects Muñoz's (2009) imaginings of queer utopian futures, in which the boundaries of 'normal' friendship may be reconstituted in the bold vision of queer experimentation.

2.3. Freedom, Expansiveness, and Liberation

In addition to supporting empowerment and fostering intercreativity, queer sexual joy gives participants a sense of greater freedom, expansiveness, and liberation. As Pearl (she/her) explained, *"I love having total freedom to do what feels good for me and my partners that's not confined by societal expectations—that sense of freedom, I think, is really important."* For Wren (they/them), the expansive and liberatory experience of queer sexual joy was connected to exploring their identity, body, and polyamorous relationship structures:

”

I'm in my mid-30s now and for the first half of my 20s, I presumed myself to be straight and cis, and now I exist within polyamorous relationship structures as a queer, non-binary person. My experiences of queer and transsexual joy feels so beautiful to me in part because of the contrast. Sex being so expansive and not so focused on anatomy is a part

of what brings me great joy. I talk with my partners about 'doing sex' rather than 'having sex,' because it feels like this really active connection. It's not something where we're like both together going there and just having and taking, it's like we're doing it together, we're creating it together, and there's an expansiveness in that where it's not about a particular anatomical destination and that's true no matter what the

body parts are involved. I have multiple partners and to just do sex without a lens of anatomy or a sense of destination brings me so much joy. It feels much more expansive, much more free, much more liberatory, much less constrained and then ultimately safer. I feel I get to be just who I am, where I am in that moment, and meet the other person where they are in that moment and we're not like following scripts in the same way. We just get to make our own scripts and that feels very joyful.

”

As Wren explained, expansiveness comes from rejecting scripts, being connected to their body and desires, and engaging in an intentional space with their partners.

Participants also described liberation in terms of broader political ideals, reflecting the works of many queer scholars, especially queer scholars of colour, on the political potential of joy (Ansloos et al., 2021; Tiongson, 2022; Tristano, 2022). For example, Naseem (name as pronouns) reflected on the dynamism of queer sex and connected

it to the ideas of the liberatory educator Paulo Freire:

“

It's so dynamic because there's so many ways that it can look. There's so many times of pleasure. It's not always penetrative and it's not always expected to be penetrative. It could be one partner getting pleasure, both partners getting pleasure. It could be alternating, simultaneous, it can be whatever, it can be all of that. It allows for pause and for discussion. We can stop, we can talk, we can assess. Paulo Freire talks about praxis as like action and reflection. And it's that is what queer sex is. Queer sex is action and reflection.

”

Naseem added that:

“

I think my queerness is not just a sexual queerness, it's a political queerness. This is the language of Rinaldo Walcott, who is a black gay man based in so-called Toronto, and he talks about queerness being a vanguard of opening minds. I think a lot of

queerness is like being like, 'Okay, like this is not working. But what we're doing now is trying different things, or different ways of being, to see what feels good and what is possible.' And so I think the experimentation that I'm doing is very queer inherently.

”

pleasure–challenge the enactment of cisheteropatriarchal power that produces gender-based violence. As the report describes below, queer and trans sexual joy is critical for cultivating less violent, more just sexual cultures. It is also deeply significant because it confronts the structural barriers that queer and trans communities face in experiencing sexual joy.

These quotes highlight what many liberatory thinkers have expressed—that the links between personal and political freedom and liberation are crucially forged through embodied and subjective joy (Belcourt, 2020; Lorde 1978/1984; Nicolazzo, 2021; Tiongson, 2022). In the words of Audre Lorde (1978/1984), sexual joy is moving because the “deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible” (p. 89). Thus Lorde (1978/1984) says, “recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world” (p. 91).

The concepts invoked through this section—such as empowerment, embodiment, intimacy, intention, creativity, and respect for mutual



Part 3:

**Barriers to Queer
Sexual Joy**



3.1. Introduction: Unsafety

Before turning to a discussion of specific barriers identified in the study, this report emphasizes a resonating theme across discussions: the significance of a sense of psychological and emotional safety. This corroborates research finding that psychological and emotional safety are more significant considerations for individuals in practicing ‘safer sex’ than even biomedical considerations such as avoidance of sexual infection (Bourne & Robson, 2009). A lack of safety creates barriers to connection and communication as well as increases the potential for harm (Murchison et al., 2017). Unsafety creates disconnection from oneself which can make physically feeling joy challenging.

Lack of safety was most commonly connected to personal histories of and ongoing experiences of trauma stemming from transphobia, homophobia, sexism, racism, ableism, classism, and cisheteropatriarchy. Participants described how these oppressive systems and attitudes impacted them on many levels and how this created barriers to experiencing safe embodiment and sexual joy. These structures of oppression cause internalized shame (Hertzmann & Newbigin, 2023), and shame was a key mechanism through which oppressive discourses created personal and interpersonal barriers to sexual joy for participants. As Nox (he/him), put it, *“It’s very hard to have good, joyful, consensual sex when you are feeling*

ashamed of who you are and ashamed of your desires.”

Shame and unsafety were perpetuated by experiences such as: everyday discrimination in society; enduring misogyny and the cishetero male gaze in public and intimate relationships; having a lack of media representation and sexuality education; knowledge about queer sexuality and gender diversity; navigating personal histories of sexual abuse and/or intimate partner violence; and experiencing sexual discrimination or normative expectations within queer spaces or relationships. The lack of safety to experience sexual joy appeared in participants’ narratives in several ways, such as feeling afraid to hold hands with a partner in public or struggling with dissociation and other blocks during sex

because of trauma related to sexual and gender-based violence.

This section expands on three major sub-themes related to barriers to queer and trans sexual joy that arise from a lack of safety. These are lateral violence, struggles with dissociation and embodiment, and a lack of

representation in popular discourse and sexuality education. It further discusses how these barriers reduce connection and communication between sexual partners in queer and trans communities, exacerbate internalized shame and trauma, and challenge embodied sexual joy, care, and community accountability.

3.2. Lateral violence: Calling for accountability within queer and trans communities

Lateral violence within queer and trans communities impacts interpersonal relationships and presents barriers to sexual joy, and this report reflects calls for greater accountability within queer and trans communities (Thom, 2019). Lateral violence can be defined as “the ways in which members of a minority group covertly or overtly perpetrate bias and violence toward members of their own group” (Tran et al., 2023, p. 1310). Lateral violence can be related to the reproduction of histories of trauma and harm in interpersonal relationships, and/or other times connected to strategies of respectability, which refers to one’s desire to abandon aspects of their identity that do not conform to mainstream standards in order to protect oneself from further marginalization, assimilate into socially acceptable social roles, and achieve social mobility (Tran et al., 2023). Unsurprisingly, the further one’s multiple facets of identity are from dominant cultural norms, the more ways one may be harmed by lateral violence (ibid). Though queer and trans communities have sexual cultures that disrupt the behavioural norms and sexual scripts that perpetuate rape culture, they are not utopias and face disproportionately high rates of sexual violence including both against and within community (Patterson, 2016). As one survey participant explained:

“

I definitely have assumptions that queer and trans people will be more careful about consent as we are more likely to have experienced sexual violence, and generally I feel more comfortable with queer and trans people, but I have also encountered plenty of people within the community whose ideas and practices of consent did not align with mine.

”

Participants’ narratives demonstrated that overlapping experiences of lateral violence within queer and trans communities are fueled and expressed through: internalized and projected cisheteronormative beauty standards and fatphobia; gendered expectations; sexism and misogyny; racism; ableism; and classism. Although each of these will now be explored individually, it is important to note that participants’ lived experiences were shaped by multiple and intersecting forms of violence that cannot be reduced to a single factor. Rather, the separate emphasis on each factor in this report is intended to provide readers with specific illustrations that highlight the ways different forms of lateral violence occur.

3.2.1. Lateral Violence: Beauty Standards and Fatphobia

One of the ways that lateral violence occurs in queer communities is through judgment, rejection, and pressure to conform to fatphobic beauty standards that make it hard to feel good in one’s body (Taylor, 2022). As Kai (he/them) put it:

“

Whenever we talk about bodies, my first thing that comes to mind is just negative body image. And that happens to everybody, whether you're cis, whether you're trans, whether you're queer, no matter your identity, I just feel like everything is out there to tell us that our bodies are not perfect enough, or they're not good enough.

”

While body shaming occurs across cishetero groups and 2SLGBTQ+ communities, the latter experience particular forms of it that intersect with homophobia, transphobia, and femmephobia (Conte, 2018).

One way that fatphobic beauty standards get reproduced in queer communities is through narrow

representations of which bodies are desirable and sexy, which impacts bodily self-acceptance and self esteem (Taylor, 2022). As Naseem (name as pronouns) exclaimed, “*you grow up seeing skinny people and especially skinny gays—there are no fat people that are portrayed in a good way and are shown being happy and it's like what the fuck?*” Reflecting on the very limited representations of diverse body sizes of trans men in gay culture (see also Duggan & McCreary, 2004), Nox (he/him) also shared how this affected his bodily self esteem:

“ I'm not super thin, I'm not plus size, but I have a lot of internalized shame around that. When all the trans men or trans masc bodies that I see romanticized in any way in media are often very thin, it can be hard to have that same kind of acceptance and love for my own body. I think that's true for anyone, regardless of if they're trans or not. ”

Whereas Nox's reflection illustrates how fatphobic beauty standards impact internalized views of oneself, other participants also shared how those standards impacted their views of others. For example, Winter (they/

them) shared that “*I probably had some internalized fatphobia before that I didn't realize*” until beginning to date their current partner, who identifies as a fat person. Additionally, participants described seeing others express fatphobic comments in order to appeal to cisheteronormative patriarchal beauty standards. For instance, Frankie (they/ them) stated,

“ I'm a non-binary person, and I know so many non-binary trans folks who say really misogynistic things and are very much into machismo, in the gym, saying a lot of fatphobic or anti-bodyfat stuff. I think that's a desire to like be cis-perceived. You know, cis men are quote 'supposed' to act that way because men are incapable of self-control and animals who can't be sated. That's the rhetoric and narrative, so for somebody who so badly wants to be seen as a man, as masculine, I understand why people maybe make those choices or feel pressured into those choices. But it causes so much harm. There are lots of men who are not 'masculine,' who are not sexually dominant, who enjoy,

I don't know, bondage, you know, just making examples. And that doesn't make them any less of a man, but heteronormativity and patriarchy tells us that this is what men want, this is how men should behave. Trying to recreate those roles is what causes harm.

This quote illustrates that queer and trans people navigate the tension between rejecting cisheteronormative and patriarchal beauty standards and desires to fit into accepted social norms and gendered expectations in different ways, some leading to lateral violence and harm. Participants' stories affirmed previous research that links deeply ingrained beauty standards to cisheteronormative, patriarchal, and white supremacist expectations and norms (Taylor, 2022). Pearl (she/her) recalled how, despite having a commitment to rejecting heteronormative sexual scripts through dating as a queer woman, her journey to bodily self-acceptance was not always linear:

“ The pervasiveness of internalized heteronormativity is something that is just really hard to shake. No matter how much of an enlightened, feminist, queer woman I want to be, I feel like there's still elements that I'm constantly having to work through, like with beauty standards. I still have moments where I'll look at myself especially before a sexual encounter and be like, 'Oh, I wish I was skinny' or something. Even though I've done a lot of work to try and move past that, I feel like since I've been socialized to see myself in the male gaze, the heterosexual male gaze, it's just really, really hard to free yourself from those societal norms, even if you're constantly challenging them in your everyday life.

”

As the next section shows, gendered expectations to perform rigid identity categories, whether marked by a particular embodiment of femme or masc, informed lateral violence in the form of transphobia.

3.2.2. Lateral Violence: Gendered Expectations and Transphobia

Trans and gender non-conforming participants in our study described navigating gendered assumptions in sexually intimate contexts within queer and trans communities, highlighting how gender and sexuality intersect and influence feelings of sexual joy. This is consistent with recent research indicating that transphobia is one of the most common types of lateral violence in queer and trans communities (Tran et al., 2023). As Nox's and Sara's stories below illustrate, one way gendered assumptions impacted trans and gender

non-conforming participants was in intimate and sexual encounters with cisgender partners.

In the next few sections, we highlight individual stories of how people navigate lateral violence and which strategies they use to understand and address it. By offering these individual narratives instead of smaller quotes from a larger number of participants, we get a richer understanding of what barriers to queer sexual joy look like as well as how people are resisting these barriers.

Nox's Story

Nox (he/him) is an 18-year old white Canadian trans man. He described his coming out process this way:

“ Coming out as a bisexual man and experimenting more in gay male spaces has been difficult in many ways, because though there are wonderful gay men... I have experienced probably the most transphobia in those spaces, which is really hurtful. ”

Besides being outright discriminated against or sexually rejected because he is trans, lateral violence impacted Nox through inconsiderate gendered language use in gay male spaces. Nox described being constantly described in feminine gendered terms and how he was not taken seriously when he expressed that this felt like misgendering; his being misgendered by being referred to by feminine terms was played down with the suggestion that terms like “girl” are something that gay men

"call everyone". While Nox respected the affectionate use of terms like 'girl' in gay culture more broadly and reckoned that his own comfort with the term shifted over time, he explained that, in individual conversations when he did clearly state his boundaries around gendered language, he experienced a lack of respect for those boundaries and little desire to change behaviour. Nox described dismay in seeing other queer people *"shut off"* to the process of *"unlearn[ing] internalized transphobia"* while *"not having any awareness or respect or understanding"* about how this could still make someone feel misgendered and cause harm, regardless of the speaker's intentions. Nox described how this experience led him to *"spiral"* in a way that made it difficult for him to *"open myself up to people"* in those spaces.

Additionally, Nox encountered limited and non-affirming *"expectation[s] of one acceptable way to be a trans man"* which looked like being a *"very thin, pretty, white twink."* These expectations are those which Nox saw circulated in gay male spaces and in representations of trans men in porn (Duggan & McCreary, 2004). Moreover, Nox described navigating pressures of *"cisheteronormative toxic masculinity"* that tell men they ought to have sexual pleasure from having lots of sex, rather than *"having good gender-affirming sex."* While rejecting dominant gendered scripts, Nox noticed the overwhelming pressure to reestablish them in sexual intimacies, particularly with cisgender partners. For example, Nox described how *"internalized homophobia and transphobia"* used to inform his views of what kind of sex was acceptable:

“ I would not want to bottom or be a submissive partner in any capacity because I was like, that's for girls, that's for feminine people, and I'm a man. There is this internalized pressure to do so in order to overcompensate and be perceived as masculine because there is the assumption that I will not be just because I am trans. ”

Nox's descriptions of pressure to conform to sexual scripts to prove his masculinity corroborates research that has found that men feel pressure to prove their masculinity to others through their sexuality and engage in sex that they may not

desire to conform to cisheteronormative notions about masculine sexual pleasure (Ford, 2018; Murray, 2018).

Since then, Nox found community and sexual relationships with other trans and gender non-conforming people who understand and respect his gender identity and sexuality, and who are open and curious to exploring varied sexual desires and acts together. In doing so, Nox became more comfortable in finding “*a joyful kind of intimacy*” and realized the significance of “*fun T4T gender-affirming sex.*”

Trans participants described tensions and fears about feeling safe and comfortable to authentically express a full range of pleasure and play in intimate encounters with cisgender partners because of partners’ gendered expectations of sexual roles, language, or embodied feelings associated with cis-centered sex. These fears that sexual partners or others would invalidate their gender identity if they did not express themselves in sexual encounters in ways that aligned with dominant cisheteronormative gendered scripts challenged participants’ feelings of authenticity when expressing desires, connecting to their bodies, and exploring multiple sexual roles such as dominance and submission in sexual encounters. Ongoing experiences of transphobia in both intimate settings and in public, and seeing little or negative representation of trans sexual joy in mainstream or queer culture, media, or education also informed participant’s fears and sense that there was little knowledge or few models for gender-affirming sex. In turn, participants expressed keen and embodied awareness of dominant gendered and sexual scripts, which they described navigating both in their everyday lives and in intimate relationships. Achieving a sense of safety to fully express sexual joy and authentic embodiment typically occurred after experiencing gender-affirming sex with other trans and gender non-conforming people.

Sara's Story

Sara (they/them) is 25 years old, lives in Central Canada, and describes their gender using terms like trans woman, non-binary, and gender fluid. Like Nox's descriptions of navigating normative sexual expectations of masculinity, Sara described how societal pressures to meet normative gendered and sexual expectations of femininity took particular shape for them:

“ There's this idea at large that if you don't do all those [expected] things, you're not even a valid woman. That's something that definitely negatively affects me a lot, even in sexual contexts. For a long time, I was always having this issue of thinking like, 'Well, some of these things that I want sexually are not really aligned with this really normative idea of womanhood, so that makes me feel dysphoric and that makes me feel like the people that I'm having sex with are not seeing me as the gender that I am.' Or like, 'Am I even that gender?' That could be really disorienting and upsetting... especially early on in transition. ”

The tension, confusion, and shame that Sara felt from normative expectations constrained them from fully exploring sexual desires and feeling comfortable in experiencing embodied pleasure:

“ [I said if] I'm going to top, I'm not going to penetrate people, I'm not going to take this specific [masculinized] role in sex. Or, if I wanted to do those things, it would make me feel bad after. If I wanted to just have sex in a way that's maybe a little bit more, you know, it works for my body but it's not necessarily... it's something that I can do with my body but then it's not something that would be typically associated with whatever [feminine gender]. I want to do those things, but it also feels invalidating to my gender. It took me a long time to come to terms with that. ”

Sara also described how meeting trans and gender non-conforming partners who accepted *“the most honest version of myself... was very liberating.”* This helped Sara come to accept that gender-affirming sex could defy normative expectations of feminine sexual desires:

“ It's only been within the last like six months or so that I've really started to feel maybe my gender identity could be more expansive. I can be a certain gender in a certain context, I can take on different roles in different places and I can be a bunch of different genders and I could fluidly switch between them. And that doesn't mean that I'm not those other genders when I'm embodying a certain role. For instance, even if I am finding myself wanting to be in a masculine role during sex, I can enjoy that and feel gender affirmed from it—I can feel that but still know that I'm also a woman. It's not like they're incompatible or only one at a time. It's like, I'm all of these things, but in this context, I'm highlighting this particular thing. ”

Like Nox above, Sara found solace in refusing to conform to oppressive gendered expectations in sexual encounters. Notably, it was in T4T relationships that these and other trans and gender non-conforming participants described really being breaking free from both sexual and gender norms.

3.2.3. Lateral Violence: Sexism and Misogyny

Like transphobia, sexism and misogyny arises from patriarchal gendered expectations that reproduce harmful social norms and lateral violence in queer communities (Hale & Ojeda, 2018). Participants described experiencing unwanted sexualization, harassment,

and objectification both within and outside of queer spaces. These shaped participants' understandings of and fears about expressing their sexuality and desires for partners, creating barriers to sexual joy.

Aubrey's Story

Aubrey (she/they) describes themselves as a white, non-binary lesbian, living in a small town in Western Canada and currently in a relationship with a cis woman. Aubrey recalled many instances of seeing their partner get slapped on the ass in a gay club, and expressed frustration that this violence was played down or not acknowledged as unwanted touch that constitutes assault. This highlighted a troubling norm in queer spaces that, in Aubrey's words, *"it doesn't count [as assault] because it's a gay man."*

In turn, Aubrey described how awareness of sexism and misogyny against women shaped her fears in dating women: *"I'm always so scared of being predatory as a lesbian."* She worried about repeating the objectification and dehumanization women are often subjected to as recipients of the male gaze. This fear created barriers to expressing attraction for their cisgender female partner. As Aubrey described:

“ When men are interested in women, it's considered okay for them to sexualize and objectify women with their friends or generally in society. I never want to sexualize somebody without their consent, to the point that my partner is like, 'Do you like me like, do you find me attractive?' It feels very dirty sometimes to find women attractive. Things that sexualize women without their consent disturbs me. I think that's probably part of being a woman+ person –that you know what it's like to experience nonconsensual sexualization. I think that's where the [fear of] predatory-ness is, it feels like there's no kind of like middle ground between the two. ”

Aubrey's experience was echoed by many women+ participants, who described routinely being sexualized inside and outside of queer spaces, and sometimes by masculine-presenting partners.

Additionally, because Aubrey lives in a small town with few queer-accepting spaces, cisheteronormative social expectations often lead to public erasure of their relationship with their partner. For example, since both are "*female-presenting*", when they go out and dance together, they are often assumed to be friends. While Aubrey recognizes that this carries a degree of safety from homophobia, she must also constantly navigate fears of being discovered and judged for being partnered with a woman. This sometimes invokes nostalgia as Aubrey imagines how many other queer women danced in the same spaces, unrecognized:

“ Dancing in public and feeling like you're connected in that sense, it almost for me--and I'm a history nerd--but I feel connected with a lot of previous queer people who were in these same spaces, who were women living together in secret where they were just best friends and that was the perception. But I do kind of feel that connection with queer people with having this secret, and I guess that gives confidence, that gives clarity or structure of feeling valid. And then like leading to sex, it's so important to feel like you are valid, like this is real, like this isn't a phase, this is this is who you are. So I feel like those connections with previous historical people that don't exist as I can, I don't know who else was in that space, but yeah, I feel connected to them and like they help me feel more comfortable being in sexual joy with my girlfriend. ”

For this reason, Aubrey found that dancing together invoked sexual joy despite the fact that others do not recognize them as sexual partners:

“ When I'm with my partner who's a woman and we're able to dance together, that's kind of like the biggest sexual joy that I can think of. Because sex in and of itself can be messy and have a whole lot of things behind it, but public dancing or just that confidence in physical touch while dancing is probably one of the biggest sexual experiences. ”

Aubrey’s story reflects, a common experience of many queer women whose sexuality is only intelligible through, and assumed to align with, heterosexist norms (Rich, 1980). As Hoskin (2020) writes, feminine expression is policed and targeted in different ways: trans women’s expression of femininity may be invalidated and misunderstood as being compliant with traditional sexism; masculine-perceived people’s expression of femininity may be harassed and derogated; and femme-presenting women may be hypersexualized and unrecognized as queer subjects. Being unrecognized, invalidated, harassed, and hypersexualized is a consequence of patriarchal, sexist, and misogynist norms that circulate in queer life and in mainstream spaces. This creates barriers to queer sexual joy.

3.2.4. Lateral Violence: White Racial Norms and Racism

Participants’ experiences of sexual joy and embodied pleasure, as well as feelings of belonging in queer communities, were informed by race, ethnicity, and culture (also see Tran et al., 2023). For example, in a focus group, Jiva (she/her) described experiencing constraints at the intersection of race and sexuality in queer spaces:

“ Something that feels very limiting to queer sexual joy is when my identity is very watered down and feels very singular. So, when people either perceive me as only a queer woman, which is coded as a white queer woman, or when they only see me as a brown woman, and that kind of shows up the most when people

act as if anything I do that's queer, any queer encounters I have is inherently against my brownness or goes against my culture. That feels very much like [facing a perception of] ‘oh, this culture is inherently oppressive and you are doomed to suffer oppression by being queer’, and just doesn't make me feel like a whole person. Like, I can either be one side of this or the other side of this and these two ideas can't coexist and work toward each other. And yeah, that makes me not feel welcome in brown spaces or feel less welcomed in queer spaces, specifically white queer spaces, where I only feel like I'm half a person.

As such, Jiva described experiencing sexual joy and authenticity:

“ Kind of really only when I'm experiencing sexual encounters with non-white queer people, because I have this inherent belief

that brown people know what this experience is like and it's nice to be perceived as queer brown people without any sort of white people around.

This was echoed by other participants such as Naseem.

Naseem's Story

Describing the city in western Canada that Naseem (name as pronouns) grew up in, Naseem said it was *“a very white place and I was one of the only people of color that I saw outside of religious spaces.”* As a queer Muslim person of colour, Naseem described feeling *“a level of guardedness”* in queer communities because of little recognition of queer Muslim identities in white spaces (Kehl, 2020), as well as a more cautious approach to being ‘out’ that Naseem recognized is more understood by other queer Muslims. Acknowledging the tension between navigating acceptance in non-queer spaces and stereotypes in non-Muslim spaces, Naseem shared that finding other queer people of colour is *“like landing on a soft place together and like we're a soft place for each other.”* Naseem explained,

“ It's like, you know, what do you ask someone the first time you meet them? What's your coming out story or how did you figure out you were queer? And then that's usually not a light answer. It's not like, ‘Oh I saw Halle Berry, and I was like, oh!’ It's not usually that. There's usually a lot more to it. I find that with other people of colour it's easier to talk because of the shared experience or understanding, especially with other queer Muslims or queer South Asians. People who are understanding or have some knowledge of Islam that's not based on movies, because that's not good.

In addition to cultural stereotypes, Naseem described experiencing greater bodily comfort and confidence in sexual encounters with other queer people of colour because of racial norms and assumptions about the skin tone of erogenous zones. As recent research found, human sexuality textbooks overwhelmingly depict light and white-coded skin tones, suggesting a skin colour bias and lack of skin colour diversity in sexual educational materials (Gonzalez et al., 2022). This informs common beliefs and expectations in sexual experiences. Naseem described navigating continuing anxieties about Naseem's body compared to others:

“ My labia are not pink, they're brown. And same with my nipples. And like my nipples, I'm kind of like, 'Yeah, I love my brown nipples,' I honestly think I would be kind of shocked to see pink nipples because I haven't seen pink nipples in a long time and I think I would still go, 'Oh yeah, these can be pink.' But the labia, for sure, they're quite dark. And sometimes when I look at them, I'm like, 'Oh, this is pretty, like this is like a light pink on the inside and it kind of goes out to like a dark brown,' and that's a moment of queer sexual joy a little bit. But it's also something that I find difficult to carry with me in encounters with other people, even though the people I'm having sex with for the most part in the last five years have been brown and people of color as well and have similar labia. ”

Like Pearl's and Sara's process of navigating fatphobic and gendered bodily norms in sex, Naseem's story also highlights the enduring and felt impact of body policing on experience of sexual joy, in Naseem's case related to white racial norms.

Some participants strategically used white racial norms to navigate sexual experiences. As Aubrey, who was introduced in the previous section, described, racial assumptions that she and her Métis partner were both white allowed them to “*dance and appear both straight and white-passing in bars*”. Though Aubrey respectfully did not want to speak on the experience of their partner, research demonstrates that Indigenous queer women face some of the highest rates of discrimination and sexual violence (Government of Canada, 2019).

Additionally, many participants described how early relationships with non-queer people exposed them to racism and sexism. For example, Luciana described that she “used to get called a ‘spicy Latina’ by men in high school and university”, which created a strong boundary about the use of that adjective in her current relationship:

“ My girlfriend I think one time called me spicy, and I was just like, ‘Don't do that, please, I'm not going to answer to that, don't even try to bring that into the bedroom, because I'm just going to be turned off like immediately, it's going to be very serious.

Like Nox’s experience with gendered language in gay spaces, Luciana’s experience highlights that, often, harmful effect does not require harmful intent. In this case, Luciana’s girlfriend did not deny Luciana’s experience of harm, and instead they worked together on communication and greater mutual understanding around triggers. However, some participants like Naseem and Jiva described feeling safety to experience sexual joy and authenticity only in sexual encounters with other queer people of colour.

3.2.5. Lateral Violence: Ableism

Individuals with disabilities and/or neurodivergent identities experience multiple barriers in queer communities and broader society (Brown, 2017; Yergeau, 2018), something that reverberated in participants’ experiences of queer sexual joy. A large proportion of participants in this study identified as disabled or neurodivergent (82%—see Part 1.3 for more details), which is significantly higher than in the general population in Canada (22%) (Statistics

Canada, 2022), and many identified multiple disabilities.

Participants emphasized that barriers to sexual joy in queer sexual encounters and spaces were most tied to facing added burdens of navigating ableist norms and sexual expectations about physical needs, personal boundaries, and neurotypical communication styles. As Naseem, who identifies as neurodivergent, explained:

The world is kind of rough and I react very strongly to the world being rough. While that messes with my ability to experience pleasure sometimes, it enriches pleasurable experiences other times.

Participants thus described how others' ableist expectations impacted their sense of belonging, confidence, and social isolation.

Noshi's Story

Noshi (he/him), who described himself identified as a neurodiverse bisexual Latinx trans man with a mobility disability living in Eastern Canada, recalled how queer spaces were often places of sexual joy and barriers to access:

“ It's funny, [a queer bathhouse] was simultaneously both one of the first places where I got to experience queer sexual joy, but also one of the first places where I was made aware of the role of my disability in making it difficult to access spaces where I could feel queer sexual joy. ”

In addition to inaccessible spaces, Noshi described difficulty finding sexual partners who would adequately accommodate his physical needs:

“ One of the biggest barriers has been how much or whether or not my partners actually go far enough to accommodate my physical restrictions in sex in order for me to be able to experience queer sexual joy, alongside feeling safe in my gender. ”

These dating experiences impacted Noshi's feeling of belonging, social support, and mental health:

“

When I find someone who is able to really see me for both and help me with both, then it's a really liberating and really exciting experience. But it's very rare that I actually find someone who is able to provide that or able to help me access that... If there's a really long stretch of time between finding and being with someone who is willing to accommodate and provides a really safe gender space, it can set in this anxiety or fear of like, 'Oh I'll never find someone like that again.' Usually eventually I do, but sometimes it can be years between one really good experience in another. There's loneliness to it too. I'll see friends of mine who are queer but aren't disabled or friends of mine who are **disabled** but not queer who seem to have an easier time finding folks who validate them and bring them a significant amount of sexual joy.

”

Connecting with others who were either disabled or in tune with disabled participants' needs made a significant difference in their access to queer sexual joy.

Saabira's Story

Saabira (they/them), self-described as a queer South Asian non-binary person living in Canada, discussed navigating both chronic pain and communication barriers in dating as a neurodivergent person:

“

[Often partners want me to initiate] - I would love to, but that needs to be communicated to me, because I can't read between the lines, I can't pick up on subtle cues. Other times I'm hyper aware of it, but then when I point it out to other people, they're like, 'Oh actually no, like you're wrong,' and I'm like, 'Okay, then what is the right thing? Because clearly I'm picking up on this cue that you're not interested, are you interested in me, but you're telling me the exact opposite thing.' I just kind of take the word at face value and it's like, 'Okay, I'm just going to you know respect what you're saying.' So [communicating interest] needs to be more of a collaborative process.

”

Observing little meaningful connection on dating apps, Saabira expressed feeling “*more comfortable being in spaces where folks have some sort of similarities*”, whether in terms of neurodivergence or as racialized queer and trans folks. For Saabira, this strategy opened them to “*more affirming*” relationships, such that now they said that:

“ 90% of my friends are neurodivergent, the people that I connect with are also neurodivergent, and the rest of the 10-15% who aren’t increasingly tell me that they might have ADHD or be on the spectrum. Being in those spaces dating-wise might be helpful because you are aware of a lot of the barriers that might come up with dating neurotypical folks. ”

Saabira notes that she is surrounded predominantly by queer and trans people who are neurodivergent and that that is affirming for her.

The high representation of neurodiversity among queer and trans participants in the study reflects broader trends in society as well as emerging scholarly conversations about the overlap of neurodiversity, queerness, and transness (Brown, 2017; Yergeau, 2018). Disabled and/or neurodiverse queer and trans people, particularly who are BIPOC and poor or working class, face some of the highest rates of gender-based violence (Patterson, 2016). While 2SLGBTQ+ people with disabilities face overlapping discrimination, scholars and activists are attempting to create non-pathologizing understandings of queerness, transness, and neurodiversity that may highlight the innovation and strengths of these communities (Shapira & Granek, 2019). Participants in the study did find experiences of queer sexual joy despite societal and interpersonal barriers, though the pathologization of neurodiverse, queer, and trans people creates persistent challenges.

3.2.6. Lateral Violence: Classism

Participants additionally referred to class inequities in relationships as contributing to lateral violence within queer communities through acts like financial abuse. Financial abuse in relationships is often a symptom and cause of power inequities that can be exacerbated by class, age, and other factors (Harden et al., 2023). For example, Mickey (she/her), a working class Black lesbian cis woman from New York, recalled an experience of another queer female friend in her 20s who was made to move in order to extricate herself from a financially and emotionally abusive relationship with a cis woman in her 40s. Although hesitant to speak on behalf of her friend, Mickey's recollection highlighted how the relationship reproduced traditionally patriarchal power dynamics, where femmes are mistreated at the disposal of more masc people, especially when there is financial dependence. In Mickey's words,

“ My friend was definitely not experiencing real sexual joy most times. They had more traditional gender norms that I think were a part of the abuse. The abusive

woman was more masc and she dominated in terms of finances but also in terms of their feelings... [my friend's partner was] the one to dictate how [my friend] actually feels... She would access her anytime she wanted to... abusers feel like they can come to your house simply because they have paid for it, anytime, anywhere, without even informing you. That's how she would do it.

Another way class limited sexual joy was in creating material constraints for participants to access comfortable intimate spaces. As Naseem recounted,

“ I'm very much working class. I have like four jobs and I share an apartment with two other people and a cat. So finding space to be intimate sometimes is difficult. People that I see also have roommates usually and so it's kind of hard to have sex sometimes because people are around.

Though Naseem did not directly link this to lateral violence, Mickey’s story highlights how class pressures that place material constraints on people can exacerbate relational power inequities that increase the risk of financial and emotional abuse and sexual violence (Harden et al., 2023).

3.3. Sexual Harm, Trauma, and Disembodiment

Turning from the discussion of lateral violence in interactions within queer and trans communities, this subsection examines how harm, trauma, and disembodiment occurring as a result of experiences of sexual violence produces significant barriers to queer and trans sexual joy. Research overwhelmingly shows that 2SLGBTQ+ people experience disproportionately high rates of violence (Exner-Cortens, et al., 2021; Patterson, 2016; Wright et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2023), which was reflected in participants’ experiences. 75% of participants in the survey identified as sexual violence survivors. An additional 10% said they were ‘not sure’ if they had experienced sexual violence, which may reflect how dominant models for consent rely on a yes/no binary that obscures harm in the ‘grey area’ of consent thereby making it unintelligible (Wright, 2021; Wright, 2022) In the focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and cellphilmaking workshops, almost all participants spoke about surviving gender based-violence.

3.3.1. Roots of Sexual Violence

Participants’ experiences and understandings of sexual violence supports theorizing that suggests such violence occurs as a consequence of the broader socio-political system of cisheteropatriarchy, which positions cisgender and heterosexual men as dominant in society and impacts social power dynamics in multiple domains and social spheres, including in intimate

partner relations (Kessel, 2022). A systemic view of sexual violence posits that it occurs not solely as a product of individual intent to cause harm but through the reproduction of beliefs and taken-for-granted social scripts that normalize cisheteropatriarchal sexual roles and expectations, regardless of gender and sexual identity (Harvey et al., 2023). These sexual roles and

expectations entail scripts that normalize views of sex as being for the gratification of one partner's pleasure through the objectification of the other (ibid). As one participant, Winter, emphasized, perpetrating sexual violence is "*definitely not specific to cis men,*" though most participants reported experiencing violence in sexual encounters with men or masc people. Participant Wren also connected sexual violence within queer communities to the normalization of broader societal cultures of toxic masculinity that entail disregarding consent and mutual comfort in sexual interactions, stating:

“ I have really struggled with masc-ness just being so linked, in my lived experience, with lack of consent and sexual violation and unsafety that it has been really hard to, even though the roots of that were born like in hetero dynamics, in my past, coming into queer spaces I'm really hypervigilant for there to potentially be lack of safety with masc folks. Even if there isn't at times. I can't access as much ease and safety and joy for myself

because of this hypervigilance. It's like what the normative gendered shit has imposed everywhere. It can't not infiltrate queer spaces to an extent, even if it's just in terms of our own vigilance. But I do think it is beyond that too. I have struggled with actual lived experiences within the queer community too. I touched on this before with dating queer men and feeling less safe in those interactions, and part of it is, I'm more vigilant for like, 'Are they listening to me? Are they violating my consent?' But then some of it is that some of their behaviors have been less attuned and less consensual and it's frustrating. ”

Wren suggests that it is the sexual norms supporting cisheteropatriarchal power dynamics that result in sexual violence and harm, and these norms can be embodied by queer and trans people as well as heterosexual, cisgender people. Explaining how these sexual norms have a potential to cause harm, participant Wyatt further clarified that "*if hierarchical understandings of sex are the only thoughts you have about sex, like, you're way more likely to even*

accidentally cause someone harm.”

This is corroborated by Kessel’s (2022) understanding that sexual violence is socially produced as a way to reinforce hierarchical power dynamics, which is naturalized by rape culture to the point that it may function on an unconscious level.

The harm caused by cisheteropatriarchal sexual scripts did not always manifest as trauma for participants, but was often experienced on a spectrum of harm. This was most clearly articulated by participant Winter, who relayed the enduring process of understanding the impacts of trauma:

“ I have had sexual trauma. And then just like sexual experiences with men that are unpleasant, so like, the whole spectrum of unpleasant to traumatic... I'm attracted to all genders. When I came out as queer, I was continuing to sleep with men... I was having sex where I felt like I was in charge and doing what I wanted but...looking back on it, I didn't really get anything out of that. I was only sleeping with them because I wanted to be

connected to someone. It's only since being in a relationship with [my partner] that I understood there's a spectrum of unpleasant to traumatic and that I don't have to have anything on that spectrum on the side of feeling unpleasant. Now I choose not to sleep with people who are going to put me in those positions. And that's obviously easy to understand, but to understand how it's affected my relationship with my body has been a really slow process. ”

In this quote, Winter speaks to the ways in which even sexual experiences that are not necessarily traumatic can still be harmful. Grey area experiences of sexual harm are those that are not easily classified as consensual or criminal but can create significant harm (Wright, 2021; Wright, 2022; Wright & Greenberg, 2023). Gendered expectations rooted in the colonial gender binary reinforce rape myths about women’s ‘natural’ subservience and sexual servitude and obfuscate the harms of women+ people’s objectification and dehumanization (Gavey, 2018).

Several other participants reported this kind of non-violent but still harmful experience and connected this harm to cisheteropatriarchal sexual norms. For example, Aubrey spoke about how patriarchal scripts showed up in her previous sexual experiences with cisgender men in heterosexual contexts:

“ You're kind of always trying to catch up. You're like trying to put on this performance, you're trying to be the femme fantasy. I feel like it's similar to trying to be popular like you're doing everything that you can get on top but you're still not there. ”

Aubrey explained that being in a queer relationship has allowed them to move beyond patriarchal sexual scripts, which tell women+ people that men's pleasure should be centered in sex. These scripts imply that women+ have to “put on a performance,” effectively alienating them from their own sexual desires and sexual pleasure. This is echoed in the work of van Anders et al. (2022), who argue that the objectification of women within heteronormative sexual scripts can result in women focusing on their appearance and their partner's pleasure

rather than their own embodied experience during heterosexual sex.

Sexual violence can also occur in contexts outside of explicit sexual encounters. For example, as Sara described, being read by others as a ‘boy’ subjected them to harassment:

“ Before I transitioned, I worked at this kitchen. When I was presenting as a boy, people would always project their idea of me being a gay person or something onto me. And they would harass me or sexually harass me, but then they would hide it under the guise of like, ‘This is just men being men, we're just teasing each other or whatever in this space. ”

Sara's experience of harassment, homophobia, and personal boundary violations as a ‘boy’ reflects common practices among men to ‘prove’ their heterosexuality to others (Currier, 2013; Murray, 2018), which often results in hostility directed towards people who are perceived to be feminine or gay (Haywood et al., 2017). This corroborates decades of research finding that having a marginalized status or departing

from gendered expectations (i.e., what Connell (1987) coined as 'hegemonic masculinity') may increase risk of sexual harassment (McLaughlin et al., 2012; Settles et al., 2012). These harmful scripts also negatively impact and constrain men's understanding of pleasure and sexual connection. For example, Nox, a trans man, spoke to the ways in which his own internalization of cisheteropatriarchal sexual norms led to harmful sexual experiences. As Nox recounts:

“ I have internalized this idea, because I was having a lot of bad, not queer joyful sex before this. This idea of like, I would just tough it out and get through it and then move on which is not healthy or good...I'm supposed to like this, or it doesn't matter if I like it or not, right? Like it being, in a sense, like I don't have a better word than self-harm, but that it's not quite the right phrasing. But it's the closest thing I could come up with in terms of previous sexual encounters before this partnership and before recently in many ways. Doing it more so out of an idea of a man,

and men like sex and therefore I'm going to be promiscuous to try and affirm that, but not having good gender-affirming sex. ”

Here, Nox identifies that he engaged in harmful sexual experiences because of the patriarchal expectation that men always enjoy sex, and he was trying to affirm his gender by embodying this norm even though it did not actually feel affirming. This is consistent with evidence that men often pursue and engage in sex as a means to confirm their masculinity (Ford, 2018; Montemurro, 2022). Nox's experience shows how cisheteropatriarchal norms cause harm to people of all genders, as enacting them often requires detachment from one's own embodied desires.

3.3.2. Effects of Sexual Violence: Hypersexualization

In a cisheteropatriarchal society that encourages the performance of sexual scripts rather than the pursuit of embodied, creative, intuitively-guided sexual experiences, disembodiment becomes a norm (Bordo, 2004; Herman, 1997). In her book *Unbearable Weight* (2004), Susan Bordo discusses how, in the context of Western culture,

women have often been encouraged to dissociate from their physical bodies or to view their bodies as objects separate from themselves. Women and femmes' dissociation from themselves is thus socially mediated and deeply connected to a high prevalence of sexual violence. One of the ways that women and femmes (and others) cope with sexual trauma is through hypersexuality (Herman, 1997). Hypersexuality, a clinical term that some survivors identify with (Flint 2021; King, 2015), is the compulsive-like pursuit of sex to manage emotional dysregulation.

Nox characterized his compulsive pursuit of sex as a form of “self-harm” and highlighted that he noticed this pattern in others:

“ I can see just in people in my life actively seeking out unpleasant experiences out of an act of self-harm, in a way, because of past sexual trauma and then just like re-traumatizing themselves in many ways and seeing that pattern. ”

Nox's description of “self-harm” reflects hypersexualization. When using sex to cope with emotional dysregulation,

survivors may feel like they are not wholly participating in sex. This is not to say that they are not agentic when the choices they make to cope may appear counter to their best interest (see Bay-Cheng, 2019). For example, participant Scarlett identified her own experience of hypersexualization in response to sexual violence as a specific barrier to queer sexual joy. She recounted seeking casual sex that was not based in pleasure, before a conversation with a friend led her to realize that sex could be meaningful and pleasure-based even in a casual context. Through a trauma-informed lens (Wright, 2021; Wright, 2022), individuals can refuse the pathologization of hypersexuality and recognize it as a survival strategy in response to systems of oppression that create violence.

3.3.3. Effects of Sexual Violence: Disembodiment

A major barrier to queer sexual joy described by participants was experiences of disembodiment and dissociation. Dissociation is generally experienced as feeling alienated from the self and can appear in a variety of ways like being disconnected from time, one's environment, and/or one's body (see Boon et al., 2011

and van der Hart et al., 2006 for more detailed descriptions). As Wright's (2021; 2022) research has explored, being dissociated can complicate consent processes and create risk for sexual (re)victimization. Many participants described experiencing dissociation as a result of sexual trauma, which served as a block to queer sexual joy for each of them. For these participants, dissociation was experienced during sex as not feeling present in the moment, feeling disconnected from their bodies, and finding it challenging to identify what felt pleasurable to them. As articulated by Willow:

Blocks came for me from experiencing sexual violence and the trauma actually delayed my coming out process because I was navigating body dissociation where I couldn't be present with myself. It was hard to know what pleasure was.

For Willow, dissociation resulting from sexual violence acted as a barrier to queer sexual joy by alienating them from their own sense of self even outside of sexual contexts. This is consistent with the literature on dissociation, as alienation from self is a common dissociative response to trauma (Brison, 2002; Herman, 1997). The experience of dissociation in a sexual context was

poignantly articulated by Darby, who shared:

“

After I was sexually assaulted, there was a period of like a couple years that felt just like a total dissociation. I didn't feel like I was totally in my body in sexual experiences. And then I started my first relationship with someone and the first time we had sex when she moved on top of me it was like a full-blown, frozen paralysis. Never felt anything like it in my life. I don't blame her whatsoever, but I don't think she knew what to do. I didn't know what to do. It was like, 'I don't know what's happening, but I can't feel my limbs, everything feels frozen and cold.' We were in a relationship for like five years and made it through that, but I never really knew what that was or what happened. In the pandemic I started another relationship with somebody and when we started having sex, the same thing would start happening, but it would happen every time and it was really weird and shocking. I ended up seeking out and finding a therapist

who'd specialize in this. I guess, starting sex therapy. It was a really profound moment because this person said to me, 'this is coming up because your body feels like you're in a safe enough place or relationship to unpack what happened,' and it has been like years since that happened.

”

Darby articulates both a more generalized dissociation when they said *“I didn't feel like I was totally in my body,”* and a particularly acute experience of dissociation, *“I can't feel my limbs, everything feels frozen and cold.”* Though there is a gap in the literature on the relationship between dissociation as a result of sexual trauma and the ways it creates risk for sexual harm, some research shows that trauma-related dissociation makes women more likely to be sexually re-victimized (i.e., Snyder, 2018; Zurbriggen & Freyd, 2004). More research is needed on 2SLGBTQ+ people's experiences. For Darby, working through dissociation in therapy and developing specific grounding techniques has been necessary in moving towards queer sexual joy.

3.3.4. Effects of Sexual Violence: Shame

Sexual trauma and harm from cisheteropatriarchal sexual norms also resulted in feelings of shame for participants. Speaking directly to the connection between sexual violence and shame, Jiva articulated:

“

Blocks came from sexual assault at a young age that resulted in not understanding sex as a thing of pleasure later on in life and rather something I could only connect to as a thing of shame, pain, and confusion.

”

For Jiva, her experience of sexual assault caused her to conceptualize sex as painful and shameful, which challenged her ability to seek out and experience sexual pleasure.

For Dallas, feelings of shame related to the compounded trauma of sexual violence and being raised in religious communities that were highly patriarchal and homophobic. In a conversation about blocks to queer sexual joy, Dallas contributed:

“

The word that comes up for me is ‘shame.’ I can't emphasize enough the context that I was raised in...I was raised in a very religious household...I have experienced sexual violence and that shame piece that I was educated with, I was taught to be shameful about sexual pleasure and sexual joy. I've struggled in my life to identify that something was wrong in what I was feeling in sexual experiences because I had so much shame about experiencing joy at all that it didn't resonate.

”

In this quote, Dallas identifies that the sexual scripts she was raised with prevented her both from identifying harmful sexual experiences and from connecting with sexual pleasure and joy. Likewise, for Aubrey, patriarchal sexual norms about female sexuality were passed down from family, school, and faith communities. As she described fears of religious rejection and homophobic teachings and experiences,

Aubrey said:

“

That would impact sex a lot just in the sense of it being sex, and then also being queer sex. I still sometimes cry after sex. There's a lot of taboo in just being a ‘woman’ (Aubrey uses air quotes), give or take, who's experiencing sex, let alone with other women. I was taught a lot about no sex till marriage, and I think queer sex is just another layer to work through besides being a woman experiencing pleasure and joy in sex.

”

Aubrey's experience reflects the widespread weaponization of shame as a tool used in certain faith communities to maintain the sexual subordination of women (Clough, 2017).

In sum, participants' experiences illustrate how sexual trauma and harm caused by cisheterpatriarchal sexual norms serves as a significant barrier to queer sexual joy through hypersexualization, dissociation, and shame.

3.4. Representation in Popular Discourse

Compounding the above-mentioned barriers to queer sexual joy, this study found a lack of positive, diverse, and nuanced representations of queer and trans people, relationships, and sex in both general media and sexual education as a barrier to queer sexual joy for participants.

3.4.1. Representation in Media

Many participants noted how the dearth of queer and trans representation in media and the lack of visibly queer and trans people in their day-to-day lives limited their own sexuality and gender identity development and self-acceptance. This reflects data that highlights the importance of media representation for identity development, self-esteem, and resilience in queer and trans youth and adults (Craig et al., 2015; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). The central role of representation in queer and trans sexuality and gender identity development was clearly identified by Sara, who shared the following story about a pivotal moment in accepting their own trans identity:

“ I grew up in a time where there was almost no trans representation, right? Or very little real trans representation...I literally did not ever meet a trans

woman in my entire life up until I was 21 years old. And then I remember clear as day like what happened. My friend invited me to this house party, and I went. And I was like, ‘Oh, these are trans women. There's trans women at this party.’ And there was this trans woman who was not the idea of somebody in my mind of what I would have to do with my transition, which is that I would have to go all the way and do everything I could just to be read as a cis woman. There was a trans woman who's living out as a trans woman and she was there with her partner and clearly her partner loved her. And in that moment, it clicked for me. I was like, ‘Oh, I could be trans and just be actually trans and not like a cis woman, and people would still love me.’ Because I think that was what was holding me back the whole time.

For Sara, a lack of trans representation during their childhood led them to feel that they would not be lovable—as a romantic and sexual partner—as a trans person, and it was not until they found relatable representation that they could accept themselves. Similarly, Winter noted the lack of representation of happy queer people as a limiting factor in their pursuit of queer sexual joy. For Winter:

“ Not having models of what [queer sexual joy] looks like is a huge limit...And it can be hard to be like, ‘Well, can we be happy doing this?’ Because we don't see any [queer] elders or on TV or anything, people doing this and being happy. ”

Here, Winter pointed to the ways in which lack of representation of queer elders caused them to question the possibility of finding happiness in queer relationships. Similarly, Luciana recounted:

“ When I was fitting that heterosexual mold in high school,

I would describe myself as being very sex-forward. But as soon as I discovered I really liked girls, it's not a phase, I was like, ‘Oh, I could really see myself marrying a girl.’ I became very shy, sexually. I was like, ‘I have no experience, all the girls are so pretty, I don't know how to approach somebody.’ And I kissed a girl here and there and I was like ‘wow,’ I was like heart racing, ‘that's crazy.’ But it took me a long time to be confident in my queerness with the sexual component because, I don't know, I guess it really is kind of like an unconscious level of being like, ‘Oh, don't even think about this, like grown-ups have sex, but nobody has gay sex. ”

For Luciana, lack of representation of queer sex impacted her confidence and engagement in joyful sexual experiences even after she had accepted her queer sexuality.

Besides an absence of representation, many participants suggested that stereotyped or harmful representations of queer and trans people served as a barrier to their own identity

development. For instance, Nox and Sara explicitly discussed how both negative and normative (that is, essentializing) representations of trans people that they encountered online and in the media were damaging to their unique self-concept and acceptance of trans identity. Additionally, Scarlett identified the ways in which stereotyped representations of queerness limit her visibility as a queer person. As Scarlett articulated:

“ I struggle a lot with feeling closeted because I'm like a cisgender woman who's very femme-presenting. But I'm also like queer as fuck. And so like, there's kind of this sense of feeling ignored or diminished in some ways, or like fetishized in non-queer circles. ”

For Scarlett, the lack of representation of feminine, cisgender queer women led her to feel simultaneously invisible in her queer identity and fetishized for it. Her experience reflects scholarship that has theorized about how femmephobia results in femmes being treated as inferior, inauthentic, and thus easier to victimize, whereas masculinity is understood as privileged, protected,

and the norm (Hoskin, 2020). Similarly, Aubrey discussed the ways in which they feel invalidated by hypersexualized representations of queer people that don't resonate with her experience of being queer in a conservative city. Other participants, such as Naseem and Kai, further identified the lack of representation of fat and BIPOC queer people as both harmful to their body image and self-esteem as well as a barrier to feeling a sense of belonging within queer communities. This highlights how limited diverse representations of queer lives and experiences creates psychosocial stressors and barriers to sexual wellbeing (Duggan & McCreary, 2004; Malatino, 2022).

The danger of stereotyped representations of queerness and transness was further reiterated by participants in terms of the harm caused by their exposure to very limited representations of queer sex in the media and online. For Naseem, the limited and sexualized representation of queer people that Naseem saw online as a teen led Naseem to engage in sexual relationships that did not feel good to Naseem. Naseem recounted:

“

When I was in high school and I was dating, ‘dating’ (air quotes) these like two white [girls] it was like, ‘I’m gay, and this is what I’m supposed to do because that’s what Tumblr says.’ It says, ‘You are gay you have sex with other gay people. This is what you do.’ And that was not good.

”

Naseem relayed that Naseem may not have been ready for sexual relationships at that time, but because Naseem’s only understanding of queerness came from sexualized messaging online, Naseem thought sex was the only way to express Naseem’s queer identity. Similarly, Nox identified the ways in which he was encouraged to engage in harmful sex by the limited and often transphobic representations of trans people he saw in porn. These participants’ experiences challenge fearmongering homophobic and transphobic political discourses that claim that queer and trans youth are harmed by more diverse and non-pathologizing representation of gender and sexual identities in age-appropriate sexuality education. Instead, participants’ experiences

highlight how harms can arise as individuals desperately seek out sexual resources to understand themselves yet largely find negative representations and an absence of age-appropriate interventions (Patlamazoglou & Pentaris, 2022). The next section expands on this issue.

3.4.2. Representation in Sexuality Education

In addition to the general lack of representation cited by participants, the failure of sexuality education to address and affirm queer and trans identities was frequently referenced by participants as harmful to their identity development and sexual lives. This reflects the large body of research that suggests school-based sexuality education (SBSE) provides only surface-level inclusion of queer and trans identities at best, and in many cases is actively discriminatory against queer and trans students (Narushima et al., 2020; Rabbitte, 2020; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018; Warwick et al., 2022). Approximately 70% of participant discussions about sexuality education across the focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and cellphilmaking workshops centered on the cisheteronormativity of their education, and several directly

linked this cisheteronormativity to discrimination. As Deva articulated:

“ The lack of sex education is why there's still so much ‘othering’ happening, not only when we're talking about sexual health education, but in the classroom in general. I wish that we were talking about it as ‘everyone in this room has the potential to be queer.’ And why are we not talking about that instead of like ‘oh yeah, everyone here is probably cishet and then there will be like these outliers, maybe, and like they can figure it out. ”

Here, Deva directly linked the cisheteronormative assumptions underlying sexuality education to the marginalization of queer and trans students in schools. This is consistent with literature on the history and function of sexuality education in North America, which suggests that its purpose is largely to (re)produce normative (cisgender and heterosexual) subjects (Keenan, 2017; McMinn, 2016; Woolley, 2015). Deva also pointed to the ways in which the exclusive focus of sexuality education on cisgender bodies and heterosexual sex

has the potential to put queer and trans people at greater risk of sexual harm and ill-health. This was most clearly articulated by Nox, who stated:

“ There is the aspect of education and just not knowing how to really have safe sex, especially being trans and queer. It's just like there are no resources whatsoever. I feel like such education for straight people is pretty lacking as is, so then you add anything else onto it, and I'm just... lots of my friends are just kind of figuring it out as they go. Which isn't great when it's your medical safety kind of on the line. ”

As Nox's experiences have illuminated, lack of queer and trans representation in sexuality education does not only perpetuate discrimination, but also has the potential to cause physical harm. When queer and trans identities were included in sexuality education, their inclusion was cursory and largely ineffective. As Teddy put it:

“ One lesson on like, here's what LGBTQ means, now we're going to talk about relationships isn't

enough, especially if you grew up in a community where, you know, being gay is a sin, like that isn't going to solve anything, it's not enough to help someone actually unpack bigoted ideas. ”

Teddy's comment reflects some prominent critiques of surface-level queer and trans inclusion in sexuality education, as this inclusion often serves to obscure, rather than combat, the underlying cisheteronormativity of the curriculum (Neary, 2018; Taylor et al., 2016).

Several participants specifically identified that cisheteronormative and misogynist conceptions of sex which they learned in SBSE produced barriers to experiencing queer sexual joy, as these conceptions offered very little (if any) information about how to practice safe and pleasurable queer and trans sex. Participants' sexuality education overwhelmingly focused on heterosexual, penetrative sex between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman as the paradigm of sexual experience, and in some cases presented reproductive sex within the context of marriage as the only appropriate

context for sex. These descriptions reflect abstinence-only-until-marriage-based (AOUM) sexuality education, which remains ubiquitous across North America (Action Canada, 2020; SIECUS, 2019).

Participants felt alienated and invisibilized by this approach, as can be seen by Teddy's remark that *"we only teach about sex as a penis going in a vagina and like that just isn't applicable to my experience."* Many participants talked about the challenges of figuring out how to have sex in queer relationships, as they simply hadn't received any education on non-reproductive sex. As Dallas, who grew up in a conservative and religious community, articulated:

“ When I reflect on my childhood upbringing, I think I would have been so much more empowered had someone taught me what joy, what good sex feels like, what that looks like in queer spaces. Because all I got was man, woman, baby, marriage, that's it. Marriage first, obviously from where I was. I didn't learn what queer sex is and that it's good

and normal to feel joy in sex, so I've been left to teach myself that through my 20s.

”

Contrary to claims that sexuality education that includes queer sexualities is too much of a risk or inappropriate (Owen, 2017), Dallas suggests that AOUM sexuality education was disempowering, shame-inducing, and limiting to her psychosexual development.

Additionally, Dallas was one of multiple participants who noted the misogynistic invisibilization and stigmatization of women+ people's sexual pleasure in their sexuality education, which reflects broader trends in sexuality education (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Kendall, 2013). For instance, women+ participants, such as Aubrey, articulated how cisheteronormative, abstinence-only sexuality education caused them to feel shame not only for being queer, but for being a woman+ who experiences sexual pleasure (see above, [Part 3.3.4](#)). Similarly, Winter clearly identified how the restrictive and insufficient sex education they received negatively impacted their understanding of their own bodily autonomy.

Winter stated:

“

I think the sex education that we got in school was pitiful and I didn't get it from anywhere else. I think we can teach children about how their body belongs to them even before we're giving them sex education. I feel like I've only really understood that through a huge long process - I'm 30 now and only in the past five or six years I'm really starting to understand how much my body is mine and how much it was not taught to be and how much this affected me negatively. It makes me kind of mad, that no one thought to teach us this.

”

Here, Winter identifies the failure of sexuality education to teach bodily autonomy as a cause of harm, and they articulate the extensive long-term labor involved in undoing that harm. The negative impacts of inadequate sexuality education shared by Winter, Aubrey, Dallas, and others reflect the harmful gender norms underlying most AOUM curricula which position women as desireless gatekeepers of men's

voracious sexual appetites (Kendall, 2013). This understanding of sexuality explicitly negates the existence of queer and trans people as sexual subjects while simultaneously denying women's sexual subjecthood and normalizing men's predatory sexual behaviors (ibid). In this context, it is unsurprising that our participants found their sexuality education to be insufficient, alienating, and harmful.

For all of our participants, lack of representation, negative representation, or stereotyped representation of queer and trans people and relationships negatively affected their identity development, self-acceptance, and pursuit of queer sexual joy. This was particularly true of participants' experiences with school-based sexuality education, which is a critical point of intervention for improving sexual violence prevention on a large scale. Luckily, along with noting the failures of sexuality education, many participants also shared invaluable insights into how sexuality education for young adults could be improved to better support queer and trans people moving forward. See the supplementary resource to this report, *Developing Queer Joy-Centered Gender-based Violence Prevention*

Education: 2SLGBTQ+ Youth-led Recommendations (2023), for more.



Part 4:

Finding Sexual Joy



4.1. Introduction: Safety

Having described the barriers to queer and trans sexual joy, part 4 of the report turns to reporting on ways participants overcame barriers and found and sustained sexual joy. Underpinning these efforts, the data revealed that a sense of safety was a foundational condition to experiencing sexual joy, corroborating with research on the importance of psychological and emotional safety in sexual encounters (Bourne & Robson, 2009). In this context, safety does not mean the complete elimination of spontaneity, surprise, or a degree of pleasurable risk that sustains creativity, play, and exploration of erotic desires (Perel, 2006). Rather, safety is connected to the baseline conditions that allow such sexual risks and new explorations to feel joyful and pleasurable, rather than harmful and threatening (see above, [Part 3.3](#)). Highlighting the importance of this distinction, Mickey described “*feeling happiness*” despite nervousness about her first date with another queer person, because “*it didn't feel like I was forced, it felt like it was actually something easy. Thinking about it, you would think I was meeting this person for a third or fourth time.*” Like Mickey, many participants described how new experiences and sexual encounters with other queer and trans people produced a similar sense of safety that was missing in previous, non-queer sexual or relational contexts.

Whether a physical, environmental, or relational dynamic, safety can be understood as a container that creates favourable conditions to foster greater connection and communication with and between oneself and sexual partners. In turn, greater connection and communication can be seen to grow a sense of safety needed to experience queer sexual joy. For instance, for many participants, establishing sexual safety required both a sense of respect for their own and a partner's boundaries

through consent, and a sense of a safe environment in which queer intimacy can take place. As Aubrey explained:

“ I've been with my partner for about three years now. We kind of know each other in public, of how much touch until you get 'touched-out', that kind of thing. Just being sure that touch will be comforting, like holding someone's hand, you know, you won't get rejected. Like you know this is a space where

you can just reach out and hold hands not only with consent on their part, but also knowing that you won't be getting harassed, or like knowing that it's a safe space that you're in.

”

Aubrey's familiarity with her partner's boundaries, and vice versa, allows them to navigate intimacy with greater ease in unfamiliar settings where they may be more vigilant about homophobic attention.

Safety was often discussed in terms of the potential for queer communities to generate greater awareness of relational harms. For example, Kit suggested that:

”

Being queer and having to understand who you are in a world that says you don't make sense makes a person introspective. To have to deal with forms of oppression that's trying to erase you from existence or eliminate you, you have to think about how you look and how you act. It's kind of a double-edged sword where you have to be really conscious of what could happen to

you, for example, in public space, but you're also thinking about what you're doing when you're in a space where you could have an impact on someone. Maybe that means you don't hurt someone because you're more connected to people's struggles.

”

Though Kit and others acknowledged lateral violence and harms within queer spaces (see above, [Part 3.2](#)), Kit suggests that experiences of exclusion and oppression for being queer may generate greater commitments to care and respectful connections in queer spaces.

Although each person's boundaries and conditions for establishing safety are different and unique to their needs and desires, many participants' connection to finding and sustaining queer and trans sexual joy underlined its significance. As one participant put it, finding queer and trans sexual joy is *“a combination of this intimacy and safety you get with somebody that you really trust, and it's also being seen genuinely for who you are.”* The remainder of this section examines these conditions in greater depth, focusing on how

participants found queer sexual joy by prioritizing an ethic of care in sexual intimacy, using embodied knowledge to determine desires and boundaries, sharing knowledge of needs and queer sexual cultures, and rejecting harmful

cisheteronormative scripts about what sex should be like or how one should act in sexual contexts. Part 4 then ends on describing ways that participants found queer sexual joy to be healing and transformational.

4.2. Ethic of Care

As participant Wren recalled explaining to their eight-year-old child, *“sex is care between people. Sex is expressing care with our bodies.”* This quote reflects one of the overarching findings on how participants created and sustained queer and trans sexual joy: through an ethic of care. Participants discussed how individual acts of care allowed them to experience sexual joy, and identified how approaching sex with an ethic of care was a key part of creating the conditions of safety necessary for them to have joyful and affirming sexual experiences. Participants articulated how care functioned to produce safety and sexual joy on multiple levels, most notably through care for self, care for sexual partners, and care for community.

4.2.1. Care for Self

One of the primary ways that participants talked about care for self as an essential component of queer and trans sexual joy was the practice of identifying and setting boundaries. As participant Saabira noted:

“ I have all these boundaries that I have set for myself because I know it'll protect me and my mental health in the future. Going through that phase of casually hooking up

with folks, yes, I enjoyed being in that phase, but it's not something that I enjoy anymore. So I think that's where the idea of self-love came in. ”

For Saabira, caring for themselves in sexual contexts looked like identifying that they no longer enjoyed casual hookups, and creating boundaries for themselves to ensure that they engaged in sexual experiences that felt aligned with their needs and desires moving forward.

Participant Frankie discussed how being in a caring relationship helped them develop more care for themselves, which, in turn, helped them identify their standards and boundaries for sexual relationships in the future. Frankie reflected:

“ This is the bottom bar now, there can only be improvements from here. I think sometimes that can be lonely because it means naturally you're going to be eliminating more people from the pool if your standards are that high, but we deserve to have those high standards. People who are going to have access to my body need to have earned it in a respectful way. This is not how I felt about myself years ago, and it's a real sign that I recognize now, like no, this is important, this is necessary, and there's no negotiation when it comes to my consent and my needs, you know? ”

Here, Frankie exemplifies how setting standards and boundaries for sexual partners is an expression of care for self that can have a significant impact on one's sexual experiences. For

Saabira, Frankie, and other participants, expressing care for self by identifying and centering their boundaries was an essential part of creating the conditions of safety necessary for queer and trans sexual joy.

4.2.2. Care for Partners

In addition to self-care, participants identified a practicing ethic of care in their romantic and sexual relationships as a key component of queer and trans sexual joy. A key way this relational ethic of care was practiced was through intentional communication with sexual partners before, during, and after sexual encounters. Several participants identified clear communication about boundaries, desires, expectations, and needs as central to their experiences of queer and trans sexual joy. Noshi explained:

“ I would say that one of the first times that I experienced really profound queer sexual joy was because someone sat down with me and we talked through the limits of what we were planning on doing, all of the expectations, what we hope to get out of it, what we needed in order to feel cared—

not only in terms of ‘what are we preventing’, but ‘what do we need in this space to feel support and joy and to really feel in our own body for these experiences’?

”

Noshi’s sexual partner approached their encounter by tending to the mutual experience of both people and they used communication to put that care into practice, which fostered a joyful sexual experience for him. Frankie also described how they came to understand the importance of centering care in sexual encounters, after the first time they disclosed that they had diabetes to a potential sexual partner. In response, this partner immediately checked that she had candy on hand in case of a diabetic emergency, before they started having sex. Similarly, participant Luciana described how she and her partner care for one another in their sex life by clearly communicating about their desires, needs, boundaries, and anxieties before bringing any new toys or practices into their sexual encounters.

Participants also emphasized the importance of aftercare for creating and maintaining queer sexual joy. Emerging out of BDSM communities, aftercare is

defined as debriefing and various forms of support that occurs between partners after a sexual encounter (Bauer, 2021). For participants, aftercare involved activities like cuddling, reflecting on the experience, checking in, grounding in the present, and laughing together. As participant Nox explained:

“

Aftercare is super important, especially for trans people or queer people where sex might be quite emotionally charged, more so than it might be for cishet people because there is internalized homophobia and internalized transphobia. After, being able to cuddle and say like, ‘What was good, what was bad, what did you like, what did you not like, how did you feel about this specific thing,’ is super important and a great way to debrief, giggle a little bit, figure out what’s good and what’s bad. And also build connection with a partner.

”

For Nox, aftercare is an essential part of navigating some of the barriers he faces to queer sexual joy and helps him feel more connected to his partner. Likewise,

for Luciana, engaging in aftercare with her partner *“helps a lot for building confidence in being comfortable with each other, especially when you're not always 100% comfortable in your own skin by yourself.”* These quotes demonstrate the importance of aftercare for helping overcome potential barriers to queer sexual joy by building confidence, connection, trust, and safety.

Additionally, participants like Nox and Frankie, both of whom described experiencing gender dysphoria, highlighted the significance of care that their partners showed in working to understand and account for their gender dysphoria during sex. Both Frankie and Nox emphasized the mutual care their trans partners and them shared in being intentional about gendered terms, language around body parts, and specific areas of dysphoria, which all contributed to feelings of sexual safety and trust. This highlighted the role of an ethic of care in fostering trans sexual joy and its integral part of positive sexual experiences.

Another way participants highlighted the importance of practicing an ethic of care in sexual encounters was in relation to trauma and gender dysphoria. For Naseem, who is a survivor of sexual

violence, having Naseem's triggers and consent needs accounted for during sex was essential to the experience of queer sexual joy. As Naseem explained:

“

Talking about those things makes it easier to have sex and consent. With that understanding, people are generally very careful about what specific triggers might be, they can go even slower, or be even more careful. That's been something that's very joyful, when I enter that space of vulnerability and fear. I'm scared at first but then realize I'm safe. There's so much release, joy, and relief in that.

”

Here, Naseem describes the ways in which partners who practice an ethic of care around Naseem's consent and triggers facilitate safety that allows Naseem to be more vulnerable and experience sexual joy. In this example as in others, participants articulated an ethic of care between sexual partners as an integral part of cultivating queer sexual joy.

4.2.3 Care for Community

In addition to care for self and sexual partners, participants identified community standards of care that also contributed to their experiences of queer sexual joy. As participant Kai explained:

“ When I started to explore the polyamorous community, I just found that it’s almost an expectation to have communication skills, especially when you feel discomfort, or you feel you want to set a boundary. We have to share discomfort with someone and work through things, instead of things coming up more like defensively or in a harmful way. Not to say that harm doesn't happen in the poly community. But in my own experience, if harm does come up, I feel I have more support, and I have more willingness to understand and work through feelings of harm or any kind of physical harm. This is especially the case because the kink community really overlaps into the ethical, non-monogamous community, and a big part of kink is consent and safety. It’s understanding where someone's

at, what they're open to, what they want from the relationship. Just kind of setting expectations so there's transparency. ”

The expectations around communication and boundary setting in polyamorous and kink communities that Kai identified can be understood as community standards of care that create the conditions necessary for safety, even when harm occurs or sexual acts include some element of risk. Similarly, Darby identified “*safety planning*” and “*harm reduction*,” two models that emerge out of community-based care practices, as essential for creating safety in sexual encounters (Bauer, 2021).

Participants Sara and Wyatt both spoke to the importance of having queer and trans communities of care in their lives, not only for creating sexual joy but also for healing their traumas and relationships to themselves while supporting their material survival. As Sara remarked:

“ The trans community that I've built and that I participate in and exists around me, that's the kind

of support, like the literal material support, helping people out with money and making sure people eat dinner. That's something I didn't have before. And that's very important to me. That's more meaningful than a lot of other things in terms of literally surviving.”

For Sara, as for many queer and trans people, the care they receive from her trans community is materially life-sustaining. As identified by several participants, community standards and practices of care are central to creating the conditions for queer sexual joy.

Participant Wyatt beautifully illustrated the relationship between care for self, care for others, care for community, and queer sexual joy when they shared:

“ I think a big theme in my life right now has been centering my positive relationship to myself. What my needs are to trust myself to show up in the ways that I can, and knowing when to say no to things or to go home when I'm out with people. A lot of this is empowering me to connect with the people that I want to in

positive ways, and to show up in the ways that I want to. A lot of community accountability is about being in relation to the way that I show up, as an individual of a community. If I'm showing up and unable to take care of myself, that reflects values and, you know, not necessarily being able to take care of others and take accountability... I want to trust that people will set boundaries with me or that when I set boundaries that other people will follow those, and setting boundaries comes from being in connection with myself. So trying to be open and honest with where we are as individuals so that we can facilitate the most positive or safe experiences that we can with each other.”

As Wyatt describes, creating a caring relationship with themselves means that they can show up in a more caring way with others, which in turn means that he can be more accountable to their community in ways that produce safer and more positive sexual experiences for him and his partners. For Wyatt, as for other participants, centering care for self, for partners, and for community is needed to foster queer sexual joy.

4.3. Embodied Knowledge

Practicing an ethic of care as a prerequisite to queer sexual joy recognizes that each person's boundaries and conditions for establishing safety are different and unique to their needs and desires, which highlights another important condition to finding and sustaining queer and trans sexual joy that was identified by participants: embodied knowledge. As one survey participant wrote,

“ It feels so good to not have anything about sex to be assumed – that because I have certain body parts, I will like certain kinds of touch or sex acts. This feels very affirming especially as my feelings about my body and what I like have changed as I gain a greater understanding of my gender. ”

Developing self-knowledge and connection to one's own body is crucial to experience emotion such as pleasure and joy (Lorde, 1978/1984). As Wyatt described, sexual joy involves *“a soft agreement with yourself and the space around you, whether it's people or things that you're interacting with, that is grounded in self-acceptance and self-trust”*. By referencing self-acceptance and self-trust as central to one's relationship to self and environment, Wyatt emphasizes how finding joy involves connecting with and listening to their embodied needs and desires.

One method participants used to connect to embodied knowledge involved drawing on personally-

meaningful sources and rituals that facilitated more intentional, grounded, and mutually affirming sexual experiences. For many survivors, like Frankie, this was crucial to reducing dissociation in sex:

“ As someone who has utilized dissociation as a survival tactic for much of my life, it takes a lot for me to feel embodied. That's my whole healing journey right now, just getting used to being able to be connected to my body. My current partner is very spiritual and I've learned a lot from them and they help. When we were starting to have sex,

they were talking about how they understood sex as a sacred ritual or as a ceremony where we're creating energy between us, we're connecting. I mean obviously it doesn't have to be to be like that, but with my partner it is. We're creating very special intimacy and so part of that is making sure that I'm able to actually be present within that ceremony. For example, just because I'm maybe in more of like a 'bottom role', it doesn't mean that I don't have a responsibility to the space. If I'm not in touch with my body and my needs then a lot can go wrong within a scene or within relating. Usually, now we take a lot of time to do a lot of cuddling and touching and just really getting physically grounded with each other. Putting each of our hands on the other person's chest, taking deep breaths, holding hands. I really like physical touch and physical sensations and I'm a lot in my head all the time and overthinking, so I really appreciate my partner who has a lot of experience and knows a lot about trauma being so patient and loving and kind with me. As

I'm getting older, my discernment is getting better, at least I hope so anyways (laughs).

”

By connecting to sex as a form of ceremony that requires intention, Frankie developed a physical presence and attention to what feels good and authentic in their body. This allowed Frankie to better understand what is pleasurable to them and to identify their needs and boundaries connected to sex. For Frankie, understanding sex as a ceremony not only created a pleasurable space but also helped them find healing and navigate barriers shaped by experiences of lateral violence, trauma, and dissociation.

Moreover, Frankie and their partner's ritualization of intimacy drew on and made meaningful connections to cultural and social histories shaped by their social locations as non-binary trans people of colour, helping to counter sexual traumas shaped by patriarchy, racism, and transphobia. As Frankie described:

”

A particular type of West African spirituality refers to queer trans people as gatekeepers. In any

type of ceremony, if you're taking on a role within that ceremony, then it's very serious. At least to me, that's something that you don't do lightly. [My partner and I are] both non-binary, both trans, both people of color, and for so long we both had to endure these horrible relationships or living in this like rape culture world where people have broken our boundaries or are not interested in engaging with us respectfully. So taking the time to really be like, 'What feels good for us in terms of our gender today? What kind of gender terms do you prefer?' feels really important. Thinking about it in advance: what is safe for us? Are either of us having dysphoria today? How do we want to navigate this dysphoria? Maybe if you're not into having my head on your chest today, maybe we can just be sitting beside each other directly or we can try something different and being open to that and recognize that sex can look so many different ways.

”

In Tiongson's (2022) words, Frankie and their partner's commitment to creating a ritual that centers BIPOC trans sexual joy "speaks to the indispensability of creating and sustaining spaces of joy as a way to counter ongoing threats against Black existence" (p. 170).

In addition, participants talked about the importance of their own self-knowledge for understanding a partner's needs and practicing consent. As Winter stated, "*if you're not in touch with your own body, you're certainly not going to recognize when someone else isn't in touch.*" For Winter, self-knowledge was necessary to practice the care and consent needed for mutually pleasurable sexual encounters, which they learned in their sexual partnership.

Sal, a cellfilming workshop participant, created a film which spoke to the way that they have learned to love and get in touch with their body. By fostering a connection to their embodiment, they were also more connected to others through experiences of mutual queer and trans sexual joy.



Figure 2: Stills from Sal's cellfilm. The image on the left includes an old phone with a digital sketch of an outline of a person sitting in a relaxed position. The image on the right is the same phone with the message "From this body to forever with love."

In some cases, participants noted that they gained self-knowledge through experiences of queer and trans joy with sexual partners. The significance of trans sexual joy was especially articulated by Sara, who recounted:

I've dated people who are more recently out, or people who have been out, but they haven't had very many T4T relationships. A lot of people don't have that in their life. A lot of people have never been literally just validated about their gender, truly, deeply, and intimately, or felt like, 'Oh, this person, someone actually sees it and actually respects that.' I feel in a position where I can freely exchange that with somebody,

and that can be really meaningful for other people. It's really meaningful for me, but also, I have a lot of people who validate me too, right? That kind of bond is something that if, especially if you have not had that before, if this is your first time having a T4T relationship, it's literally life-changing. I've seen people grow so much, and I'm not saying it's because of me, but just having that little bit of intimacy, acceptance and vulnerability produces self-fulfillment. And I know this because at a certain point in my life, that happened to me as well.

Here, Sara highlights the importance of relating self-affirmations among T4T partners as a way to counter the overwhelming negative representations of trans identities and people in broader society, and support one another in developing greater self-acceptance. Echoing Sara above, Nox described how self-knowledge and authenticity can be elevated and affirmed through witnessing partners' authentic joy and pleasure:

“ I recently started testosterone... So to have a trans partner who's just excited about [my physical changes] and is like, 'Hell, yeah,

butt hair and bottom growth,' and really taking the time to learn what language feels good, makes me feel like I don't need to change myself—that kind of acceptance of me and my body, I don't think I've really experienced anywhere else in my life.

”

For Nox, having another trans partner affectively mirror his experience of joy about bodily changes as a result of testosterone was incredibly affirming because transition is rarely treated as a positive or joyful experience in broader society.

These stories highlight the important role that positive affect and shared joy play in personal and social transformation (Braidotti, 2008). They also emphasize the important role that queer and trans partners played in their own development of an embodied sense of self-acceptance and trust.

4.4. Knowledge Sharing

Shifting from embodied knowledge, this section describes how sharing knowledge between partners also fosters care and positive conditions that facilitate queer and trans sexual joy. Participants recounted many stories of knowledge sharing between their sexual partners and themselves, primarily focusing on what they had learned in these exchanges. For some participants, such as Mickey, they did not know much

As Willow expressed:

“

Queer partners helped me in showing up as my authentic self in my body in those experiences. In my experience with queer partners, there is a lot more room to be present with myself as I'm feeling that day... I can show up authentically and explore what do I actually get pleasure from, what leads me to orgasm, and talking about sexual violence in a queer lens.

”

Contrary to the popular adage that one cannot love another until they love themselves, then, this data suggests that self-acceptance and trust through sex is strengthened intersubjectively with the support of others, and in turn, queer sexual joy fosters self-knowledge (Lorde, 1978/1984).

about queer sex at all before learning about it from their first queer sexual partners. Learning about the basic practicalities of queer sex from sexual partners themselves may be quite common in queer and trans communities, as queer and trans sexual practices are often invisibilized (as in the case of most sexuality education curricula) or presented in highly fetishized and inaccurate ways (as in the case of most mainstream pornography) (Harvey, 2020). Along with learning more about queer sexual practices, some participants gained greater understanding and acceptance of their own queerness and gender through knowledge sharing and modeling from sexual partners. Speaking about the ways their understanding of their own gender was impacted by that of their partner, Sara stated:

“ I was always feeling like in order to feel okay, I have to just push down every masculine trait that I could possibly have. And I'm saying that in big air quotes. But I think through, like especially seeing her process and her kind of like realizing more about gender... I realized I could be a much more androgynous version of myself. I could be a much more like masculine version of myself even. And if I do that, my femininity is still there. ”

Sara's partner's gender expression and identity challenged Sara to expand their ideas about gender, which helped them to find greater understanding and acceptance of their own gender.

The model-based learning that Sara experienced with their partner was also echoed by Darby, who recounted the following experience.

“ [An experience] I had at a sex club was entering a threesome and it was with a cis woman and her partner who was a trans man. She had a conversation with me before anything intimate were to happen between us and it was kind of like her list of questions and the way that conversation went actually taught me so much about the consideration that she had for her partner, for myself, and for her. These are things that I've never learned anywhere else. ”

The way this sexual partner modeled care and consideration for herself, her partner, and Darby in navigating a potential sexual encounter taught Darby about how to show that care and consideration moving forward.

Participant Winter shared yet another illustrative story about the power of knowledge sharing between partners for creating sexual boundaries and navigating sexual harm. As Winter recounted:

“ I mean, yeah when me and my partner were newly dating, there was once or twice where I like wanted to stop having sex and they were like, ‘Oh like do you mind if I like just masturbate next to you?’ And I did mind, but I said it was fine. And then afterwards, I felt really icky about it. And, yeah we talked about it. But it happened once, and we didn't talk about it, but then it happened again, and I was like, ‘Okay, like I really do have to talk about this with them, because maybe they just think this is fine.’ And yeah, I think they didn't really get it at first, but I was like to me, someone doing

that next to me is like the same thing as having sex. And so if I say I don't want to have sex, there's no world in which, if I'm wanting to stop, that doesn't include all the activities. And then when they had a kind of unpleasant experience with someone else that I had referred to before, it was the exact same thing, where the person was like do you mind if I do this next to you? And my partner really didn't like it, and they were like, ‘Oh, I really get how that was uncomfortable for you and how it made you feel like you were still having sex.’ And so this experience they had was in the past few months, but the one that I had with them was maybe three years ago. So, you know, we talked about it at the time and they eventually got it, but then I feel like now, they've really gotten it. It's not just empathizing, it's like they've actually experienced a really similar thing. And so yeah, I think it's like cool to be like yeah, that saying what didn't work for you can actually have ripple effects and help the person understand

what didn't work for them in the future.

”

Here, Winter identifies how explaining their discomfort and setting boundaries with their partner around sex allowed their partner to better understand and apply those boundaries for themselves in the future. Winter's story illustrates the importance of sexual boundary setting as a kind of knowledge sharing that occurs between partners, and also highlights the kind of repair that can happen between partners when there is open communication about sex.

Participants also spoke to the importance of knowledge sharing in their platonic relationships for cultivating sexual joy. For Scarlett, part of queer sexual joy is *“removing the taboo of talking about sex with our friends – the messy bits, the funny bits, and the really good bits!”* The benefits of talking with friends about sex were emphasized by Naseem, who shared multiple stories of sexual knowledge sharing between friends.

”

I think one of my friends was like, 'You haven't done this ever? Dude,'

and they literally wrote down instructions for me, it was called 'S's sex tips' and then it was in a purple glitter pen and I was like, 'This is fantastic.'

”

In this example, Naseem shows how friends have taught Naseem about new sexual practices and skills. Naseem also talked about how knowledge sharing with friends has helped Naseem navigate blocks to sexual pleasure. As Naseem shared:

”

I think that's something that I'm trying to think about more as I try to enjoy being gone down on. I think some of the things that I struggle with is just where the person is because I can't see them, or I can see just the top of their head and holding hands is nice or that helps, but I think I want the eye contact, I want more with them. So I have been thinking about this and talking about this with friends and we're like, 'Oh, yeah, okay, you can try sitting up but like being against the pillow,' or like, just thinking about logistics of this. And that also is very joyful

and queer and sexual I think because it's like, 'Oh, well yeah what has worked for you? What has worked for me? What does not work for me? How can we do this together?' Because we all just care about everyone else or each other experiencing pleasure.

”

Here, Naseem identifies the joy in knowledge sharing between queer friends that are mutually invested in one another's sexual pleasure, which Naseem identifies as a key element of queer sexual joy.

Similarly, Winter discussed the importance of knowledge sharing between friends with shared identities. Winter explained:

”

My two closest friends are trans and non-binary and also date like other queer and trans, non-binary people. But they're also you know my age-ish and so they're figuring these things out at the same time. And so you know we'll have conversations where we're like, 'Oh, I just figured this thing out, have you thought about this in this

way?' and then someone might be like, 'Oh I haven't,' or it'll be like, 'Oh yeah, I was also thinking about that this week.' And so I feel like a lot of conversations are figuring it out with other people.

”

For Winter, sharing experiences and insights with friends with shared identities was an integral part of working towards queer sexual joy with their partners. Additionally, Saabira shared that they learned communication practices and skills that they used with sexual partners from friends who modeled those practices in their friendship.

Saabira also discussed the value of sexual knowledge sharing in queer and trans community spaces, and particularly highlighted the role of queer and trans content creators in shaping their understandings of queer sexual joy. Saabira shared:

”

On my social media platforms, for example, I follow a lot of queer and trans sex educators, for example, who kind of talk about what it means to basically

redefine what sexual joy looks for queer and trans folks. One of the content creators I can think of right now it's, I forget their name, but the content is, 'What's my body doing?' And they talk a lot about unpacking these heteronormative practices that we pick up on throughout our lifetimes and really learning how to unlearn that as well as kind of exploring things, exploring experiences with an open mind and curiosity.

”

joy and I got a little emotional thinking about that. Because I was like, well, I'm saying 'this is how sex should ideally go' but like, I haven't even been practicing it, or I haven't had that in, in reality. So I think that's something I'm going to take away from this experience today for sure. I'm definitely going to be thinking about that a little bit more for myself, and sort of what I want to do going forward because I need to actually work at finding queer joy and not being stifled by cis heteronorms.

”

Here, Saabira shows how communal knowledge sharing by queer and trans content creators online has the potential to improve sexual experiences for many queer and trans people. At the end of one of the cellphilmaking workshops for the Queer Sexual Joy project, Kit reflected:

”

I am most often perceived as a woman. I, you know, identified that way for a really long time. Sure, whatever. I have had sex with many cis hetero men. I was thinking about the interactions that I have had with cis hetero straight men. I was thinking about the fact that I wasn't focusing on my own

Kit's reflection highlights the role of communal knowledge sharing in creating the conditions for queer sexual joy. For Kit, the cellphilmaking workshop provided a communal space for queer and trans knowledge sharing that encouraged them to critically reflect on their own sexual practices and their desire to move beyond heteronormative sexual scripts.

4.5. Breaking Free from Scripts: Queer and Trans Sexual Joy as Resistance

Cisheteronormativity institutes identities, desires, and ways of relating to others that discursively produce being cis, straight, white, and able-bodied as that which registers as ‘good’ and ‘normal’ (McRuer, 2022). As a result of this, being embodied in ways that go against these norms can feel wrong or is read by others as wrong.

Queer and trans people often work hard to unpack the harmful norms associated with cisheterosexuality to find something genuine to them, and, in doing so, can develop other, less oppressive ways of relating. As Jude said:

“ I feel like in queer spaces you are able to free yourself from the look that the straight world kind of looks at you with, and I feel like that's kind of what engenders this, like, freedom...Queer and trans embodiment disrupts the status quo. ”

Jude found joy—as all participants did—by finding a sense of freedom to be embodied as queer and trans people. Jude also said:

“ I feel like as queer people the cisheteronormative status quo is something that's extremely ingrained in us. So, when queerness is represented as something that can be wholly joyful, it's that sort of disruption, which gives it its liberatory aspects. ”

A major part of the freedom participants felt related to queer sexual joy was in their ability to break the binary inherent to compulsory cisheteronormativity. Gendered sexual scripts expect that sex will take place between a cis man and woman in a monogamous setting where the sex will follow a prescribed order of events, usually modeled after mainstream porn. The events involve oral sex (which is not required to be reciprocal), penis-in-vagina penetrative sex, and sex being finished when the cis

male ejaculates. As Wren explains *"...in cisheteronormativity, the scripts are that the woman's job is to generate the man's sexual energy and if she's depleted in the process, that's normal, that's fine."*

These scripts reinforce rape culture as they objectify women+ people for the pleasure of cis men and masc people. Participants in the Queer Sexual Joy project described a sense of liberation when breaking free from these scripts to find sexual joy in sexual experiences as queer and trans people. Darby explains: *"I think it really is such a liberating experience when you're entering a space with a partner to be experimental because the script doesn't really exist for you."* As reflected above in Nox, Sara, and other trans participants' narratives, there was a freedom they expressed in exploring their sexuality with other trans people who they felt understood their gender.

Wren felt especially seen when they could break out of the gender binary during sex, and they described it this way:

“ One of my partners who is trans non-binary, they and I connect on gender so well and they are

perceived in the world very clearly as a non-cis person and I am perceived in the world often as a cis-person but the two of us have a really aligned gender-lens and so I feel so seen by them. I never feel like I'm seen as a cis-person with them and that has allowed me a deep sexual connection, there's a definite link between being seen and our sexual connection. I feel so much more free, such that I can play with gender roles in sex with them because I'm not feeling at risk of being invisible, whereas in some sexual situations I feel like, 'Oh I don't feel kind comfortable playing with more feminine aspects of myself because I'll just kind of be erased as a result.' ”

When Chidi found acceptance of their shifting comfort with how their body parts were gendered during sex, it was deeply validating and pleasurable:

“ Within a queer relationship that I can show up as who I am authentically without having this script or assumptions placed on

me has been like the most joyful experience, like specifically in my own gender fluidity. My parts change sometimes, like sometimes I want breasts, sometimes I want a chest. And my partners have been very open to that or like toys that I'm using that provide gender affirmation for me at certain times. That openness that happens in queer sex versus when I have had sex with cishet men, there's just a level of openness that makes me so comfortable with who I am and is profoundly joyful. ... Entering queer spaces and seeing queer examples, I've been able to really step into this authentic joyful sexual version of myself and that has just enhanced my sexual experience so much.

”

Rejecting the gendered scripts ingrained in the gender binary allowed some participants to experience euphoria and a deep sense of empowerment. Aubrey said:

“

You know I feel a lot more gender euphoria with the partner I'm with because there's no label of femme,

butch, masc, it can be changing. It's very fluid, and I don't feel rigidity where it's like well because my partner is masc, I have to be femme, because my partner's femme, I have to be masc.

JJ: That's lovely. That sounds freeing.

Aubrey: Yeah...Something I've realized recently with the help of my partner is that I don't need male validation at all. And I think that's something that's very empowering for me...I can hold men up to equal standards as women. Because I don't need to please, I don't need to cater to all these inherently societal heteronormative ideals of, 'You have to please men first.' I don't really feel that.

”

Like other participants, Aubrey was not met with misery when breaking away from cishetero structures but, rather, found deep embodied pleasure, joy, and a sense of personal empowerment.

For participants, moving away from gendered expectations meant being in a process of finding a more genuine sense of self with which to move through the world. Saabira explained:

“ So for me, the focus has really been how do I show up as my authentic self? And knowing that I still deserve love and intimacy and all of those things as I continue to kind of unlearn some of the things that I might have internalized. [That] I don't need to be this perfect person or I don't need to embody this specific stereotype in the queer and trans community in order to be deserving of receiving sexual intimacy, if that makes sense. ”

Sara found trans joy in refusing ideas about trans people having to pass. They said:

“ I have no interest in passing. I mean, theoretically I could, probably if I wanted to put a lot of effort into it and be thinking about it constantly. But I would actually

rather not. I'd rather be seen as a very queer person and a very trans person because I don't think that I should hide myself. I don't think that helps anybody and I don't even think it's going to be good for me either. ”

By shifting away from gender binaries inherent to cisheteronormative sexual scripts, including prescribed masc and femme dynamics in queer and trans communities, participants found a path to greater authenticity.

For some this involved navigating complexities related to their ethnicity. Luciana spoke about unpacking gendered messages she got growing up. She said:

“ I am Latina, specifically I come from Peru. And in my family, queerness is kind of taboo, not really talked about. Like, from a child, I'm told, 'You're going to have such a nice husband, you're such a pretty girl, you're going to get a good husband.' ”

In Luciana’s journey to embracing her queerness through queer relationships she rejected messages which presumed she would be straight and found something more authentic to her. Not being constrained by needing to please men and show up in the world in a particular gendered and sexualized way, in queer relationships she discovered a version of herself that allowed her to love herself and others more. She said:

“ [In queer relationships] You’re not looking at each other through the male gaze. You’re looking at each

other through this loving queer gaze where you’re allowed to be whatever you are, you know? You don’t have to have long hair if you’re a girl, you don’t have to wear dresses with high heels. You can like what you like and you can be the way you are...You’re just allowed to be. And I think that’s something beautiful that being queer has given me.

The “loving queer gaze” is what many participants described in different terms, and this alternative gaze helped them embody sexual joy.

4.5.1. Clear and Open Communication as Key to Relationships that Foster Queer Sexual Joy

The kinds of interactions that fostered queer sexual joy were elucidated in relation to clear and open communication. In the queer and trans relationships spoken about in the study, there was an emphasis on communication that was not present in interactions that participants had with cishetero people. Darby noticed a marked difference in their relationships and sexual encounters with cis men compared to queer and trans partners:

“ Even if I’m having an intimate experience or sexual experience with someone who’s never had a queer relationship or a queer sexual experience before, there’s a lot more attention paid to like, ‘I don’t know what I don’t know, but let’s try and see and let’s talk about things a lot more.’ Conversation is much more part of it, and I think that’s where care becomes really visible.

In the study, relationships were discussed in ways that challenge cisheteronormative conceptions of kinship and provide the basis for increased communication and platonic intimacy. Many participants were in some form of open or fluid relationship which were labelless or considered polyamorous. These non-normative relationship formations resulted in, as Kit put it, *“thinking about love and relationships differently.”* Another participant, Kai, explained how they were in a kinship dynamic where they were sexual with some people in the group but not others, and the shape of each relationship shifted based on what each needed. Platonic intimacy was a big part of their relationship to their community.

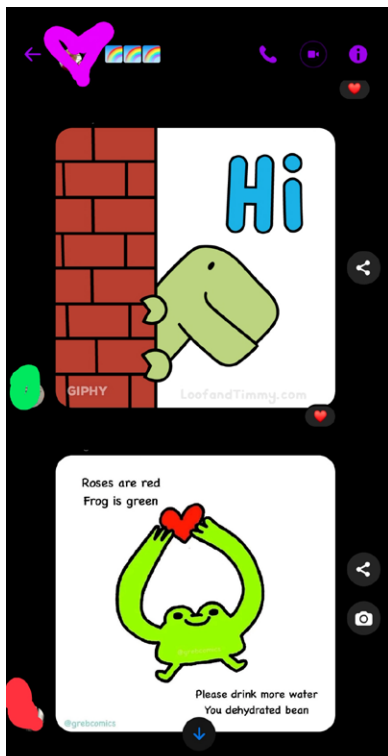


Figure 3: An image from Kai’s group chat with their polycule.

[Image description: there are two messages in the chat. The first is of a green cartoon dinosaur peeking out from around a red brick wall saying “Hi.” The next is of a green frog holding a red heart above it’s head accompanied by the poem: “Roses are red, frog is green, please drink more water, you dehydrated bean.”]

“Queer platonic relationships” can be considered those on the asexuality spectrum but also more broadly as those that challenge relationship normativity (Lavendar-Stott, 2023). Queer and trans communities have a long lineage of finding solace from societal discrimination and biological family rejection in chosen families (ibid). Chosen family kinship formations disrupt the cisheteronormative nuclear family model, as the former may exist primarily for the purpose of mutual support rather than achieving traditional markers of ‘success’ through marriage and reproduction (ibid). Queer platonic relationships may involve the merging of financial assets or communal child rearing but are not necessarily accompanied by romantic or sexual relationships (Lavendar-Stott, 2023).

Kai's cellphilm featured a group chat of their "polycule," or kinship group, and when asked what they hoped people would understand after viewing their film, they said:

“ I hope that people can see resistance in these excerpts of my group chat... polyamory goes beyond purely sexual/romantic connections and can be queer platonic. My "polycule" is chosen family and it includes partners that I have romantic/sexual connections with, as well as their partners (my metamours) who I may not be "dating", but they are still very involved and included in my polycule. And this is only what polyamory looks like to me - it may look similar or quite different for other folks. There's no "one way" to do polyamory or be polyamorous...Just like sex can look so many different ways to different folks, sexual joy can too. For my ace metamours, sexual joy comes from hearing about the sexual joy experienced by partners. You don't have to participate in sex acts to experience sexual joy!

”

For Kai and others in the study, while they were not always sexual with all members of their kinship group, their relationships all relied upon a deep sense of care and accountability to each other. Communication was key. Kai explained:

“ For polyamory to work, I guess, there are no rules, you have to make your own rules, but there is very much like the one golden rule, which is just to communicate, like, everything has to be on the table...It was something that I'd never experienced before I started practicing polyamory. It was really uncomfortable at first to talk about these things and actually have a concrete discussion of like, how do you like to be touched, or what do you like, what brings you joy in bed kind of things, and I was like, no one's ever asked me that. I don't know how to answer that question. And then the more I had those conversations with partners, and even with multiple partners together having those conversations, I was like, this is amazing... I love that we're open to just learning about what works

”

for you, what doesn't work for you. We can try new things together and in terms of consent, it's very based around communication and just keeping that good flow of communication going and checking in with people along the way. Yeah.

”

Non-normative relationships described in the study were tied to clear and ongoing communication as well as a rejection of dominant scripts dictating what relationships—both romantic and sexual—should look like. Participants found joy and authenticity in breaking the mold and having relationships that resist, in Wyatt’s words, *“sneaky, internalized understandings of relationship hierarchies, and binary roles in relationships.”* For many in the study, the possibility for queer sexual joy was tied up in their non-monogamous identity and they experienced the queering of traditional kinship models as an extension of how their queer sexuality was pleasurable.

Wyatt highlighted how settler colonialism and neoliberal capitalism insist on a cisheteronormative nuclear family model to sustain the status quo (Tallbear et al.,

2018), but said that *“non-monogamous people are communicating in ways that bring to the surface how some systems in society keep us apart.”* They said *“I think we all want to be held and be in community but Western ideas of relationships make that difficult to actually do.”* Wyatt asserts that the process of being ‘othered’ when coming to identify as non-monogamous and queer provides a path for some to see how, for example, racism, sexism, and ableism are perpetuated in North America through normative family models that insist upon two white able-bodied, monogamous people who marry, reproduce, and intentionally or unintentionally help maintain the future of the white nationalist state. The Western model of “success” demands traditional family formations, and some have argued that the legalization of gay marriage comes with it the expectation to comply with state demands to become a self-contained family unit that does not challenge the way these family formations alienate us from broader care networks and solidarity-building for positive social change (Winter, 2020).

Wyatt suggests that lateral gendered violence within 2SLGBTQ+ communities can in part be explained by the way that

some queer and trans people access privilege in relationship to the normative expectations for success in Western society (e.g., being affluent, able-bodied, thin, white, married, monogamous, vanilla, having children). They stated that *“people who are well off, don’t face racism, or who aren’t really marginalized in other ways outside their sexuality or gender don’t necessarily see the sexual harm they’re perpetuating.”*

This builds on the [Lateral Violence section](#) above and is an important point as queer and trans communities are not homogenous; while there is much to learn from these communities for ethical, non-harmful sex, we also must be attentive to differences within groups and the ways that queer sexual joy may not be accessible to BIPOC, disabled, Mad, or poor or working class queer and trans people due to lateral violence. Diverse queer and trans people in the study did describe many different kinds of experiences of queer sexual joy, however, and there were some strategies that participants enlisted to avoid lateral violence, like trans people preferring sex with other trans people, and BIPOC people preferring sex with other BIPOC people. Disability justice thinker Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) has written

about how she prefers sex with other brown and crip people as a form of being recognized and “coming home.” Perhaps these interactions of crip joy, brown joy, and other forms of joy that intersect with queer and trans joy, permit a kind of care and attentiveness that avoids discrimination and more deeply facilitates mutual pleasure.

4.5.2. The Joy of Queer Casual Sex

The last theme that appeared in the study related to rejecting scripts, or queer sexual joy as resistance, was the way in which queer and trans communities rewrite dominant public discourses about casual sex as dangerous. On the path to queer sexual joy some participants discovered new affective geographies, or ways of engaging with others, that allowed them to explore these casual sexual interactions in deeply pleasurable ways. Scarlett noted *“sometimes it’s okay to fall in love with someone for a night. It can be a casual encounter without it being emotionally disconnected.”* Moral panic around “hookup culture” has ensued in recent decades with the rise of more liberal sexual attitudes and the internet, yet within queer and trans sexual cultures there are ways that care and interdependence are being

articulated differently than in cishetero cultures (Buggs & Hoppe, 2023). Whereas mainstream discourse suggests hookups are based on disposability, participants followed a lineage of care from the HIV/AIDS crisis as well as BDSM communities to connect as human beings beyond pre-packaged scripts, have great consensual sex, and ensure there is no harm done to one another. Participants discussed having one-day or short-term sexual relationships, even with friends, that did not end in violence or conflict but, rather, enriched their lives, brought them embodied pleasure, and even enhanced their relationship with the sexual partner (however temporary it may be). Scarlett explained that she came to realize she could emotionally connect and care for a sexual partner even in a casual situation:

“ I was like, ‘Oh, I can go and have dinner and we can have a conversation and feel like emotionally safe even if I'm not planning on like being with you or having any like long term relationship.’ That allows me to feel safe in my body and in like the way that I'm expressing myself

and my ability to ask for what I want, so that when we do have the casual sex, it's still pleasurable and it's not just casual sex for the sake of like saying you have sex, if that makes sense. ”

Hunter asserted that dominant discourses surrounding casual sex use a cisheteronormative framework which queer sex rejects, thus providing the basis for intensely pleasurable interactions. Speaking about their experience, they said:

“ I think an important part of it was also rejecting a lot of heteronormative scripts about what casual sex looks like and that, like, oh a hookup is someone who just comes over. You don't talk, you have sex, and they leave, and that's it. Queering even the ideas of what casual sex can look like with queer sexual partners is important. I had one night stands with people who I really cared about as individuals for those few hours that we were together and then like I never thought about them again, but it was still like that emotional kind of queerness

where there was safety and care even in casual sex, that I think I think I only would have been able to find with queer partners. ”

In this section on rejecting scripts and queer sexual joy as resistance, we have seen how finding an authentic sense of self has for participants been a journey of coming to disrupt the cisheteronormative model for gender and sexuality. Participants discovered queer sexual joy in relation to others who challenge the status quo and sought spaces where they have sexual interactions that are marked by sexual and gender fluidity, openness, and

clear communication. As queer forms of kinship, participants' non-monogamous or labelless sexual and romantic relationships were inextricably bound with their queerness and transness and, thus, their experiences of queer sexual joy. Lastly, demonstrating the lineage of care and interdependence woven throughout queer and trans communities, participants queered dominant understandings of casual sex and found safety and care in casual sex which is popularly understood as risky, objectifying, and characterized by disposability. Queer sexual joy allowed participants safety, care, and freedom of expression that allowed for healing, which we now turn to explore.

4.6. The Healing Power of Queer & Trans Sexual Joy

This report began with a discussion of the barriers to accessing queer sexual joy, and it specifically started with narratives of lateral violence. Unfortunately, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, and racism perpetuate cultural norms that lead to gender-based violence against *and* within 2SLGBTQ+ communities. Queer and trans people are not living in a utopia where rejecting cisheteronormative scripts creates freedom from sexual and gender-based violence (Patterson, 2016; Wright et al., 2023). Despite this violence, participants in the study spoke of how, in different ways for different participants, experiencing queer sexual joy helped them heal from sexual trauma and/or the violence of social systems of oppression that intersect with rape culture.

Part of this healing had to do with the fact that participants were not necessarily following cisheteropatriarchal sexual scripts and could just be ‘messy’ and human during sex, which included navigating triggers from previous sexual trauma. Nox said *“we have this immense pressure that sex should be sexy all the time and so perfect and polished and glamorous but intense emotion, crying—these things that we stigmatize in sex— happen.”*

While the performance of sex in mainstream porn or depicted in popular media does not reflect lived experiences of sex, for some survivors, particularly those dealing with dissociation, finding alternatives to dominant models in queer and trans communities can forge space for healing. Darby identified as a survivor of sexual violence and their journey involved noticing when they were struggling with sex, reaching out for help, and eventually finding sex that felt authentically pleasurable for them with the help of queer and trans partners:

“ I think blocks [to queer sexual joy and pleasure] came from experiencing sexual violence....And

so obviously there were a lot of steps to that in terms of personal therapy and somatic therapies. But I think where queer partners helped me was in being able to show up as my authentic self in my body during sex. There was a lot of room to be present with myself as I'm feeling that day. I haven't experienced that in a cishet relationship, unfortunately. I didn't feel that I could show up as myself. Showing up authentically in queer sex was really healing for me. I was focused on penetration for a long time and like, that's not actually what I enjoy at all. Having space to check in with myself was really healing for me just in terms of exploration. What do I actually get pleasure from? What leads me to orgasm? It really shifted a lot. I had to do healing in different areas. And, you know, being able to talk about sexual violence in a queer lens has been really healing too... I think, absolutely, having a queer and trans –and my partner is non-binary and disabled-- has really helped me navigate my triggers and feel safe in my body again.

With so much gender-based violence prevention work focusing on cishetero people and employing a framework underscored by cisheteronormativity (Beres, 2022; Wright & Greenberg, 2023), it is important to talk about what lateral violence looks like in 2SLGBTQ+ relationships. This violence is often invisibilized, which means that paths to healing are as well.

One survey participant who was a survivor of sexual violence discussed how navigating triggers with queer and trans partners was very different than with cishetero partners:

“ I have had one cishet partner who has been as easily understanding as my queer and trans partners have been. For the most part, queer and trans people in my life share some kind of trauma background and immediately recognize what is happening-- they know what it is, and have often experienced it themselves, and do not need a full explanation. With the one exception, my cishet partners have mostly needed me to "educate" them on what trauma is and how trauma responses look,

which is honestly exhausting--a few tried to make some effort to learn more about it during our relationships, but most of them basically required me to be a teachable moment while I was living it.

”

This participant speaks to something echoed by others in the study, which is that survivors tend to be accommodating of other survivors and that the high prevalence of survivors in queer and trans communities may resultantly mean that these communities are better equipped to support survivors' needs during sex. Another participant, also a survivor of sexual violence, explained:

“ I think part of what made that pleasure and comfort so possible with queer and trans partners is unfortunately that most of us have had our consent violated before, and we've had to work to make consent clear and repeatable and pleasurable again. I think queerness and transness both allow us to dissolve the "scripts" society dictates for what consent

is supposed to look like, and especially after traumatic events, queerness is what enables us to make consent look however it needs to, as many times as it needs to happen in one encounter. I think queerness is what gets us through trauma and allows us to rebuild pleasure and consent however we can, often in unexpected ways.

While shared experiences of trauma in cishetero communities may result in greater empathy and accommodation related to navigating triggers during sex, in queer and trans communities it is not just empathy that facilitates this process but also a shifting of scripts that can in itself be healing. Queer and trans survivors in the study were aware not just of the harms of consent violation; they also perceived dominant understandings of sex and consent themselves to be perpetuating the harmful cishetero sexual norms of rape culture.

Aubrey described healing from the sexual violence they encountered in society by finding joy with their partner and being understood by her through their shared experiences:

“

JJ: You talked about catcalling, harassment, the way that women+ people are objectified– have you found that queer sexual joy for you has been healing at all?

Aubrey: Yeah, I've done a lot of work with my current partner to find joy together, and part of it is being a support to one another, in knowing more deeply than I think like a heterosexual couple could of knowing each other deeply... Like knowing each other in a way that people who are women+ can only experience, can only know the same feelings, the same experiences.

”

The shared experiences Aubrey had with their partner created mutual understanding that strengthened their bond and facilitated a safety within which they could find healing through joyful connection.

Nox spoke of how the survivors he encountered helped him heal from the sexual shame and transphobia he experienced by creating space to both speak about the uncomfortable aspects

of sex and negotiate boundaries to reclaim embodied pleasure. He also noted how queer and trans communities' BDSM practices can facilitate queer sexual joy by supporting people in becoming more familiar with their sexual agency.

“ I see people often get involved in kink communities and find a lot of um joy and pleasure from that because it's taking agency over their own pleasure in many ways. And though I'm not a survivor, I have recently come to the realization that I was seeking out unpleasant sexual relationships or encounters because of internalized shame and transphobia and have had people who are survivors be incredibly patient and kind and communicative with me. And finding the places where our experiences overlap to help me explore my sexuality and reclaim the pleasure for myself and I can't speak for them, but for me, just having someone to talk to who's open about it has been massively important in ending that that stigma and shame is so important

and a big part of why I really wanted to be a part of this study in any capacity is awareness, understanding, education, and knowing you're not alone is incredibly important. ”

Winter, a survivor of sexual violence, described how queer sex calls on one to be who they are in each moment and to not perform a preconceived script, which can create a relation of care and be healing. Winter describes it this way:

“ I think enjoying sex has to... you can't hide anything. And so you have to be exactly who you are and do the exact things you want and not do the things that you really don't want. And so I think queer and transness and non-monogamy are like such big parts of who I am... [My partner is] so good at reminding me that I can ask for what I want and try to find out what I want. And so that's just, yeah, been like huge. And me being like, 'Oh I can also do that with other people, I don't have to wait until people ask what I want, they might just care,' and then I

can just offer that up. I think my relationship with [my partner] has been super healing and really positive for my mental health and self-love.

”

Participants spoke about the development of self love through queer sexual joy and it was often directly related to being seen by others who understand the experience of being “othered” by homophobia, transphobia, racism, and other systems of oppression. Winter said:

“

I love being in a relationship with another trans person and it's really freeing to... when we talk about sex, we don't have the exact same experience, we don't have the exact same feelings but our bodies, there's just a baseline understanding. And so yeah, I think exploring sex with them, we've been dating for three and a half years, so now it's kind of in a long-term way, it feels like something subversive to be like, ‘We can be so happy together.’ And with so many cis people like they wouldn't want it, or they think it's deviant,

but we're like, ‘Well, we're actually really happy.’ I feel subversive. I guess what comes to mind is we had a threesome with another trans person in September, and that was so fun and just felt like this is wild, like this is like not what we're supposed to be doing. And yeah, to just be with another person who also understood it and yeah. So just generally building that like aspect of our relationship together has felt really powerful.

”

Becoming more confident existing in, as Winter put it, “subversive” spaces helped participants navigate towards people and experiences that felt authentic or as Jiva put it, “raw”:

“

I agree with a lot of things that folks were saying earlier about feeling a sense of safety [in relationships with queer and trans partners]. I also feel like there's an aspect of, like, rawness that I haven't been able to experience in a lot of my relationships with cis het men. I think a lot of it is because, as someone who is not only queer and non-binary, but also

someone who's brown, I'm a very hairy person, for example, and I've known that like queer people just get it, whether or not they are going to be perfect around it, they understand that it's just a part of my identity, it's just like one of the experiences of being brown and queer of not wanting to like shave my legs because it doesn't cause me any comfort. Queer sexual joy for me is having partners appreciate my body in its entirety, truly accepting it and loving it as it is, and not wanting to maybe create an image of what they think that I could look like if I were more sexually appealing to them. I feel like that rawness is what separates my queer experiences from sex with, like, cis het men, where there's always an element of like, kink, or the fact that I'm just non-binary. So it's already a queer experience, but I know that they're not reading that as that kind of situation. I know that they're still reading me as a woman and so it's not the same type of level of comfort. Yeah, like just being able to settle in with the partner that you feel seen with feels so good.

”

Jiva speaks of colonial beauty norms that discursively produce understandings that being hairy is disgusting, shameful, and ugly for people read as women (Herzig, 2015). They also talk about the ways that the performance of sexual and gender norms with cis hetero men detract from the “raw” experience of sex, or being wholly accepted, which they found with queer and trans partners. Sex with cis hetero men is described as “kink” by Jiva since they felt they were queering the experience with their ‘non-binaryness.’ However, they regretted how they felt they were perceived as a cis woman in these sexual relationships, which echoes Wren and others’ experiences discussed above. It was with queer and trans partners that Jiva experienced acceptance of their body and the rawness of authentic sex.

Being vulnerable to be “raw”, to be one’s self during sex, was facilitated by T4T relationships for many participants and resulted in healing the wounds of the shame that is perpetuated and instilled in queer and trans people. T4T relationships were discussed by participants as something that created feelings of deep acceptance and liberating sexual experiences. T4T can be understood this way:

“

In Hil Malatino's framing, t4t is a form of strategic separatism through which trans people might practice love, solidarity, and mutual aid between ourselves while actively decentering cis subjectivities, perceptions, and erotic economies, refusing assimilationist attempts at fixing the trans subject. At times this looks like creating networks of care or kinship, and sometimes this might look like erotics or sex. While the term separatism might denote a separation from other political categories, t4t as a rallying cry or watchword seems to erupt in spaces that are anything but separate from other political movements, a reminder that trans as mutual aid is not external from (for example) blackness, feminism, disability justice, or historical materialism but often proceeds from, precedes, and emerges alongside those tendencies. In all forms, t4t offers a place in which intimacy may be a route to political praxis or love across the frictions of difference (Aizura et al., 2020, p. 129).

”

Confirming the transformative power of T4T articulated by Aizura et al. (2020), Sara describes their T4T relationships as follows:

“

Like to be a feminine person, to be vulnerable, to take on a submissive role or something, not that those are all like you know tied together innately, but all of those things are something that I don't think I would ever really have been able to genuinely experience had I not experienced the love and openness of a T4T relationship. And yeah, I mean, I guess being with trans people made me be able to be vulnerable in like the way that I really truly am, right? And it allowed me to feel confident in that and think that actually [being trans and queer] is a really good thing, a positive thing. And I feel that's not something that would have been validated in other contexts. I hadn't had a lot of experiences with like T4T trans intimacy, I just don't think that there's really very many other sources out there in the world that validates somebody like me being feminine.

”

They speak about how their T4T relationships were validating through the recognition of mutual struggles against oppressive social norms. Feeling accepted and understood was key to healing the trauma of homophobia, transphobia, racism, and other systems of oppression, and this healing allowed some participants to access vulnerability with which to build deeper intimacy with others. The importance of this cannot be understated as alienation has serious consequences for mental health (Salerno et al., 2020). Sara found deep comfort in the vulnerability of being herself in T4T relationships:

“ I feel like that kind of bond is something that if, especially if you have not had that before, if this is your first time having a T4T relationship, it's literally life-changing. Just having that little bit of intimacy, that little bit of acceptance and vulnerability, it's like it breaks the dam or whatever, and then someone's able to be fulfilled in themselves. And I know this because at a certain point in my life, that happened to me as well. There was a certain

point where I started having T4T relationships and it was like, 'Okay, I actually feel genuinely valid in myself' and I feel like it's weird but that is something that is not always present for people. ”

Physical changes that trans people go through on hormone replacement therapy are sometimes things trans people face discrimination for by sexual partners. Nox explains how these changes were not only accepted but embraced by his trans partners:

“ I've had really wonderful experiences with other trans people. I'm a trans man, and I've recently started dating another trans person, a trans masculine person. And I've had a lot of bottom dysphoria and just dysphoria in general in the past, and it's been amazing to see another trans person comfortable in their body and their trans masculine body and also enjoying mine, not having any judgment or preconceived notions and just being excited about it. I recently started testosterone, and when

I first started, I was having sex mostly with cis men. And looking back now, now that I am in a really wonderful healthy sexual relationship, I can see that that wasn't something I wanted to do and was more a form of self-harm in a way. I was like 'Men are so promiscuous and this makes me feel like a man.' But they [cis men] would be kind of grossed out, I guess, by the changes that were happening to me on testosterone. And to have a trans partner who's just excited about it and is like, 'Hell, yeah, butt hair and uh bottom growth,' and really taking the time to learn what language feels good and not feeling like I need to change myself in any way. And that kind of acceptance of me and my body I don't think I've really experienced anywhere else in my life. Now I think that sex can be very wholesome in a sense and caring.

Saabira also came to a place of greater self love via queer sexual joy with queer and trans partners. They said:

“

Engaging in queer and trans sexual joy means a lot in terms of my own self-esteem as well as my relationship with my body. I think engaging in this practice of unlearning and rediscovering things and trying new things and basically approaching these experiences with an open mind and curiosity has led me to develop a better self-esteem. It has led me to develop a better relationship with my own body. I feel excited to connect, happy.

”

This section has discussed how queer sexual joy is an experience that supports participants' healing from interpersonal violence and the systems of oppression that cause this violence to continue. Queer sexual joy helped create the possibility for embodiment and a reclamation of not just one's body but deeply embodied pleasure and intimacy. Shared identities helped facilitate this joy and pleasure. T4T relationships, in particular, were described as “subversive” and “raw” and offered authentic experiences involving being seen and genuinely respected. The process of finding and embodying

queer sexual joy created space for participants to acquire self-knowledge that supported their self-esteem, bodily confidence, understanding of what is pleasurable for them and what is not, and their self care regimes. Queer sexual joy thus offered profound learnings and was a protective factor in that it no doubt dulled the impact of future encounters with homophobia and transphobia.

As the caption on the still image from Kit's cellphilm (Figure 4, see image to the right) reads, "our growth is an act of resistance." By finding community that accepts and celebrates them, participants grew and healed in ways that brought them joy and that simultaneously disrupted the systems of oppression that perpetuate gender-based violence.

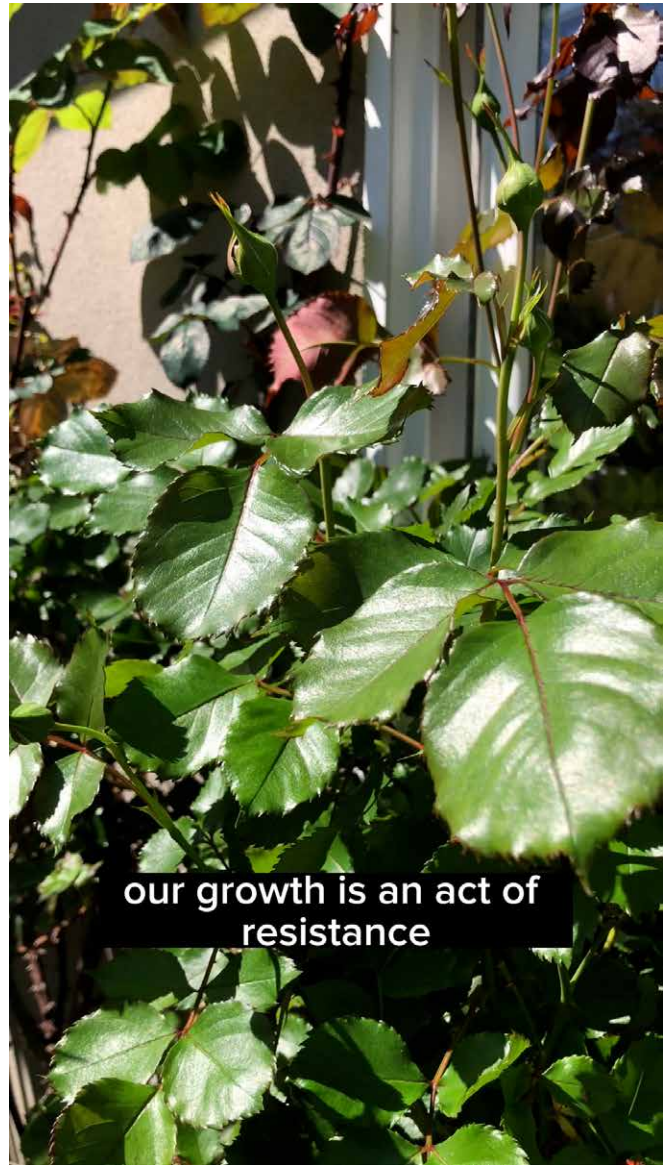
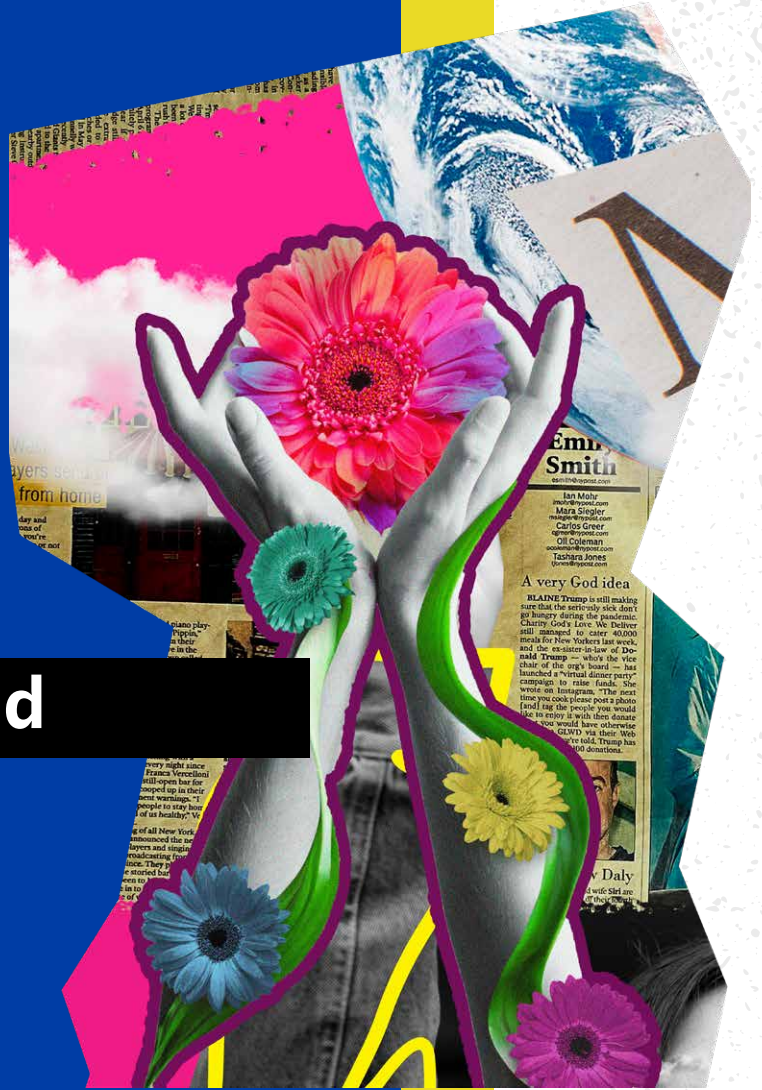


Figure 4. Still from Kit's cellphilm. [Image description: a green plant shining in the sun. The caption reads "Our growth is an act of resistance."]

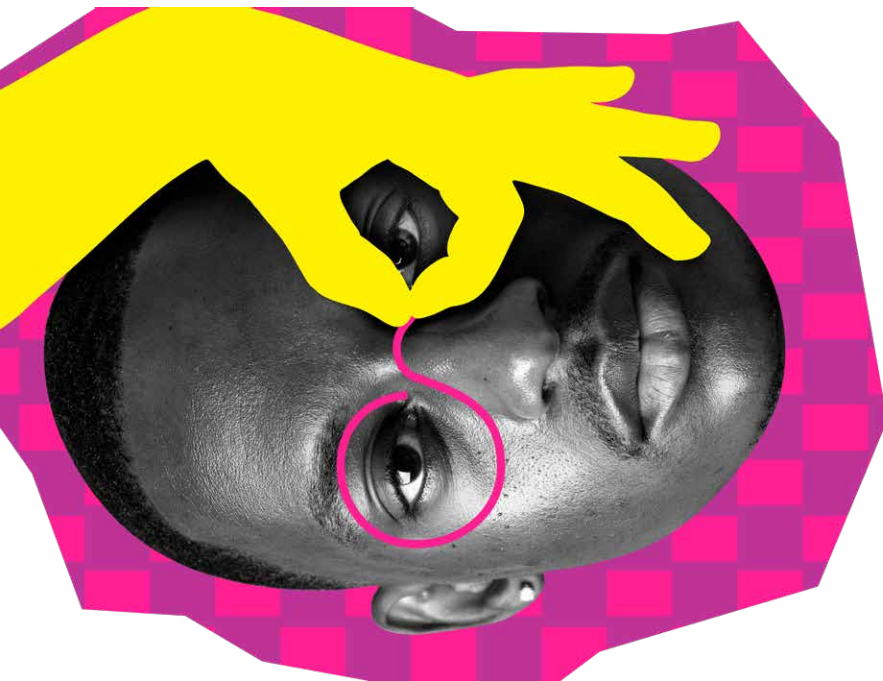
Looking Forward



Looking Forward

In conclusion, queer joy-centered gender-based violence prevention education would recognize that queer and trans joy represent a disruption to rape culture which offers possibilities for sexual cultures that are more just, caring, and mutually pleasurable. The lessons queer and trans communities offer for a more nuanced model of consensual sex are instructive and, as this report has discussed, are based in: creating containers for safety and enacting an ethic of care for one another; sharing embodied sexual knowledges particularly where lack of representation exists, and; breaking free from cisheteronormative scripts to find creative, embodied, reciprocal pleasures.

For more, please see the supplementary publication accompanying this report titled “Developing Queer Joy-Centered Gender-based Violence Prevention Education: 2SLGBTQ+ Youth-led Recommendations” at egale.ca/qsj. It offers suggestions from participants, including specific and illustrative examples, that support the development of gender-based violence prevention education, namely consent education, that centers queer and trans sexual joy.



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