

Reconceptualizing Bodies and Pleasure: Considerations by and for Sex-Positive Service  
Workers

by

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## **Abstract**

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Human sexuality has been overrun with narratives that limit the possibilities of pleasure. Sex-positive workers have the potential to challenge the ways in which these limitations become embodied. In this research I explore narratives of sex education and youth, pleasure as prevention, and the medicalization of sexuality. I engage in collective biography as a way to identify how these narratives shape the way bodies and pleasure get taken up in specific places. Drawing from poststructural feminist theory I propose three ways of reconceptualizing bodies and pleasure as emergent sites of change and potential. Through an analysis of the experiences of sex-positive service workers in Canada, I consider what else, and for whom, bodies, pleasure, and sex education might look like.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### **The workshop becomes fun and playful**

I have passed around an array of somewhat obscure sex toys to the groups. Each group has been asked to attempt to guess what a sexual use of the toy might be as well as to make up a non-sexual use. One group volunteers to go first, someone in the group is holding a small blue vibrating toy. They say the toy could be an anal vibrator, I agree. We talk about the flared base of the toy, and the curved shape that for some people might stimulate the prostate. Then I ask what non-sexual use they imagined it might serve. There is a collective giggle from the group. Finally someone says: “we thought it looked kind of like a nose-picker!” Now everybody in the room laughs. It is a much-needed release of group tension. I begin to breathe more deeply, the group relaxes, and the workshop becomes fun and playful.

Prior to attending graduate school in 2010 I worked in various capacities doing outreach and education relating to sexuality. I founded a peer sexual health outreach program at York University, was the education and outreach coordinator for a co-operative sex store with an educational mandate Come As You Are (CAYA), and was a volunteer moderator on a site providing support and information regarding Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV) and Human Papillomavirus (HPV). Whether I was talking about promoting pleasure or preventing infections I found that the most persistent concerns I encountered were about clearly defining what was normal. Often times my attempts to expand what might be conceived of as normal desires or body functioning, or to dissolve

the very idea that anything related to sexuality could be seen as normal, were met, at least initially, with hostility. People tried to impress upon me that there was something wrong with their bodies ("it does not do what it is supposed to do") or their desires ("I know I'm supposed to want to, but ..."). Faced with labels of infection, and dysfunction, people felt certain their sex lives were over forever. In these cases I found that most often what was being asked of me was either a way to help them achieve normality, or to commiserate at that impossibility. While people were generally receptive to my suggestion that the experiences which they deemed abnormal were actually quite common, they were not always as encouraged by my suggestion that their idea of normal sex or sexuality might be a restriction of pleasure and possibility and thus, perhaps not an ideal goal. This was not always true, the sexual innovation I witnessed often amazed me. I was exposed to a diversity of interests, and approaches that seemed infinite. For some, sex was a source of play, inspiration, pleasure, community, and empowerment. But for many more it seemed it was a source of pain and suffering.

Without a doubt the mechanisms responsible for this type of self-regulation are numerous. From schools to workplaces, and the media to medicine, conceptions of normative sexuality proliferate in North American institutions. In this thesis I do not seek to explore how normative sexuality is constructed on a macro level looking at large institutional influences. Instead I wish to situate my research at the level of experience; not to examine individual experiences, but to explore how the macro-level influences play out on the level of service provision. As a service provider working in a sex-positive context I struggle to become more aware of how I might be implicated in reconstructing visions of normative sexuality. I also struggle to find ways to help myself, and others, see

the limitations of such constructions and find ways to move beyond those limits and explore sexuality as a space of pleasure and possibility.

I thus designed this research to look at sex-positive service workers' stories of experiencing pleasure, talking about pleasure, and imagining what else pleasure might be. Throughout the research I use the term sex-positivity with the intent to convey Queen and Cormella's (2008) definition of sex-positivity: "It's the cultural philosophy that understands sexuality as a potentially positive force in one's life, and it can, of course, be contrasted with sex-negativity, which sees sex as problematic, disruptive, dangerous. Sex-positivity allows for and in fact celebrates sexual diversity, differing desires and relationships structures, and individual choices based on consent." (p. 278). Through the research, I seek to make visible and accessible the ways in which normative constructions of bodies and pleasure become implicated in the embodiment of experiences of pleasure. I examine how these constructions are taken up in sex-positive spaces by sex-positive service workers. I theoretically explore how bodies and pleasure might be re-conceptualized in order to expand pleasure possibilities. Lastly, I try to reflexively examine my own experiences as well as those shared with me through the research process to consider where that theory might intersect with our collective practice positively to challenge normative discourses and open up approaches that generate new potential.

In Chapter 2, I begin my thesis with a brief review of academic literature that engages with pleasure in an empirical setting. I identify three frameworks that dominated the ways in which bodies and pleasure were talked about in the literature: Sex Education and Youth, Pleasure as Prevention, and the Medicalization of Sexuality. I examine

literature that critically engages how pleasure is taken up in these spheres, while also trying to consider what may be left of this critical analysis. In doing so, I begin to identify dominant narratives about sex and sexuality (as well as bodies and pleasure) that I seek to make visible in the thesis data. In Chapter 3, I lay out the theoretical framework for the thesis. I explain why I gravitated towards poststructuralist theory. I then outline the key concepts that will create the foundation for how I conceptualize the body and pleasure throughout the work. In Chapter 4 is devoted to an exploration of the thesis methodology. I begin by detailing what I was looking for in a methodology and how I came to find my framework. I describe the process and intent of collective biography as designed by Davies & Gannon (2006). I then briefly describe how I imagined altering that process for my own research.

As an interlude between Chapters 4 and 5, I look at how stories influence subject formation, and what they offer when exploring how dominant narratives become embodied. In Chapter 5, I describe my research design and process, outlining first how I enacted collective biography, and second how I developed a second phase of research. The primary purpose of this chapter is to make visible how I enacted my methodological framework, and the ways in which I shifted collective biography practice to allow it to be enacted in a new setting. In Chapter 6, I present the data from both phases of the research alongside my analysis. In the analysis I draw together the dominant frameworks from my literature review, with the key concepts from my theoretical framework in order to make visible the ways that sex-positive service workers are both taking up and subverting dominant narratives about sex and pleasure. I also consider what shifts in practice might result in the opening up of new possibilities. In Chapter 7, the concluding chapter, I

review my findings, outlining what I learned conceptually, methodologically, and empirically from the research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In this chapter I explore peer-reviewed academic literature pertaining to pleasure in an empirical setting. Because I am interested in looking at how pleasure is embodied and how else it might be embodied I have sought out literature that focuses on exploring some element of pleasure in relation to sexuality in an empirical setting. I was looking not merely for literature that discussed pleasure theoretically, which I will address later, but also for research that explored an idea of sexual pleasure in practice. What I discovered is that in academic literature engaging with sexual pleasure in an empirical setting a few central themes seem to prevail: sex education for youth, pleasure as a tool to promote safer sex practices, and the pathologization or medicalization of sexuality. Here I briefly outline some of the key findings of these literatures, while also noting what has yet to be explored.

### **Sex Education and Youth**

One of the literatures framing this research is that of sex education and youth. Within this body of literature some authors have examined how sexuality is constructed in sex education and why what is left out of these constructions is important. Almost thirty years ago now, Fine (1988) examined sex education models in the US and identified a missing discourse: desire. She argued that her exploration revealed three discourses dominating the approach: sexuality as violence, sexuality as victimization, and sexuality as individual morality. A discourse of desire, she wrote, “remains a whisper” (p. 33). This seems perhaps, unsurprising given the time and location, however, almost twenty years later Connell (2005) published a piece examining sex education in Ontario

and found that Fine's discourses of victimization and individual morality continued to dominate the approach, and that desire continued to be left out of the discussion.

Fine (2006) re-examined her arguments in the current environment and found that although a discourse of adolescent desire now abounds in the media, there remains little voice for young women to discuss their desire for pleasure, particularly for young women who are of colour, who are LGBTQQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer or questioning), who are immigrants, and who have disabilities (p. 300). Although the ways in which youth receive messages about sexuality may be complex and diverse, Fine (1988, 2006) and Connell's (2005) writings help to illustrate a concrete way in which sexuality is intentionally and explicitly being constructed as frightening and harmful. Additionally Fine's (2006) work draws attention to the ways in which the recent boom in teen sexuality in popular culture has left out the voices of diverse youth.

Harris (2005) examines teen sexuality and argues that although discourses of desire have emerged from young women, the parameters of the discourse ensure a form of social control. As sex becomes increasingly commodified through fashion, music, television, and books, sexual desire becomes constructed as something that is purchased rather than embodied. This ultimately does not create possibilities for embodied pleasure, but rather a market-driven desire that has the power to influence consumers' choices towards the markets' ends.

This discussion is particularly relevant in the current Ontarian context. In early 2010 a new sex education curriculum was released by the Ontario Liberal Government with the intension of being implemented in Sept. 2010. The new curriculum, designed to

begin in Grade 1 and go through to Grade 8, incorporated more explicit namings of body parts (including genitalia), discussions of sexual difference (gender, orientation, and family models), and differentiated between oral, anal and vaginal sex (Retracted “2010 curriculum”). The Government promptly withdrew the curriculum prior to implementation when it met vocal opposition from members of far right organizations (CBC News, 2010). However, with a shift in power in the leadership of the Liberal party, the new Ontario premier Kathleen Wynne decided to implement a slightly revised version of the new curriculum in 2015 despite continued protests from parents who responded by withdrawing their children from school – resulting in 29,000 children out of class on the first days of the curriculum’s implementation (Smith, 2015).

There are two seemingly opposing lessons from this event. The first is that there continues to be a significant fear, and opposition to frank discussions of sex education in schools, by some parents. However, the creation of the new curriculum also suggests a growing recognition of the importance of providing information about sexuality in a manner that is perhaps less dismissive of the possibility of pleasure, though continues to avoid discussing it openly. The current Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education, put out by the Public Health Agency of Canada (which is a component of the Ministry of Health) go a step further than the Ontario health curriculum explicitly remarking on the role of eroticism and pleasure in defining sexuality, and noting that sexual health includes “opportunities for pleasure” (Canada, 2008, p. 5). This event and literature seem to indicate a growing acceptance of sexuality as a component of wellness and a growing intention within government agencies to incorporate this knowledge into their services.

Youth's desire for the inclusion of pleasure in sex education curriculums is definitively backed up by the findings of a study by Planned Parenthood Toronto in 2009 (Flicker et al., 2009). "The Toronto Teen Survey" (TTS) examined the experiences of youth, particularly racialized youth in accessing sexual health services, and asked them what they wanted and needed in regards to information and services. The study utilized a peer-driven participatory research approach providing peer-led workshops, and surveys. The study also conducted focus groups with service providers. The final report relates the findings from the 1216 completed surveys. The results indicate that the top three topics the youth wanted to know more about were healthy relationships, HIV/AIDS, and sexual pleasure. These results contrasted starkly with their reality: No youth reported sexual pleasure in the top three topics they had learned about and only 30% reported having learned about healthy relationships at all.

The literature indicates that there is a long-standing absence of discussions of pleasure and desire in sex education in North America. Although the TTS found that HIV/AIDS, healthy relationships and sexual pleasure were the three topics that diverse youth in Toronto were most in need of information regarding, the current Ontario curriculum (from gr. 1-12) only addresses the first two issues, once again avoiding discussions of pleasure (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). The vocal opposition to the curriculum indicates that there continues to be a discomfort with children accessing open, accurate, information about sexuality by many parents. Finally, the findings by Fine (2006) and Harris (2005) caution against being quick to assume that the proliferation of sex in the media will translate into access to information on embodied pleasure for youth, particularly for those whose sexual identities are often marginalized.

This body of writing critically examines the absence of discussions of pleasure in sex education curriculums for youth, and notes the uneven impact of this on marginalized youth. Combined with recent studies that illustrate a desire for an expansion of these curriculums among youth, and some indications by local governments of a recognition of the value of quality sex education as part of health and wellness, there seems to be some potential for implementing positive policy changes in this arena. Particularly, if a greater number of parents can be convinced of the value of a more robust sex education curriculum.

However, it is interesting to note that in the literature, sex education is deeply connected to youth, with little consideration of the possibility of arenas for adult education. As an outreach worker for Come As You Are (CAYA), a co-operatively run sex store with an educational mandate, I provided adult sex-education workshops for diverse community organizations upon their request. I particularly enjoyed workshops with a more mature audience (for example 50+, compared to adults in their late teens/early twenties) as they tended to engage readily, and respond to one another's questions appreciatively, allowing me to facilitate a thoughtful discussion guided by the participants rather than put on a performance, as I often do for younger adult audiences. The notion that older adult populations are still interested in accessing sex education is supported by a study conducted by Planned Parenthood Toronto and The Sherbourne Health Centre (2008) which looked at the experiences of women who have sex with women (WSW) in accessing sexual and reproductive health services. Some of their report findings mirrored those of The Toronto Teen Survey findings, in that the women involved expressed a desire for sexual health to be seen more holistically, in order to

include more information and discussion around healthy relationships and pleasure. The participants also expressed a desire for more social community events, where sex education information might be available but was not the entire focus of the event.

There is value in critically analyzing how sexuality is being constructed in sex education for youth, and positive potential in creating new curriculums that are driven by wellness, rather than shame. Early messaging around sexuality certainly plays a major part in embedding normative ideas and ideals. However, the focus of sex education as primarily for youth is perhaps enmeshed in its own normative assumptions – that adults should know all that they need to about sex, that adults do not desire or seek out opportunities for sex education, that adults can not continue to learn and change their understandings, opinions, and explorations of sex, and that sex is an end goal and not a lifelong process. In my own data analysis, I will consider whether sex positive service providers engage with normative assumptions about when sex education should take place.

### **Pleasure as Prevention**

Most sexual health organizations seek and receive funding because they promote a model of prevention – they seek to promote safer sex practices and in doing so prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies. Sadly, pleasure is rarely a focal point in their services, perhaps because it is harder to market its financial benefits to a government or funding agency. When pleasure does appear in sexual health literature it is often as a tool for this form of safer sex promotion. As a number of authors have illustrated, traditional sexual health prevention-based policies, including the

promotion of safer sex practices, not only ignore pleasure but have created discourses of risk that often target and attempt to control the behaviours of specific populations (e.g. Mitchell, 2000; Manning, 2010; Gosine, 2009). These populations include for example gay men, men who have sex with men (MSM) and women who have sex with women (WSW), sex workers, and women, in particular racialized, poor, and young women. As Manning (2010) illustrates often times behaviours among these groups are *assumed* to be risky without foundation, where the same behaviours would not be deemed risky among people with normative sexualities (pp. 130-131).

Philpott, Knerr and Boydell (2006) attempt to replace the discourse of risk with one of pleasure. Their research set out to create a “Global Mapping of Pleasure,” resulting in a document of organizations engaged in HIV prevention and sexual health promotion that prioritized pleasure in their outreach. They then examined the approaches of these organizations. One of their most important findings is the importance of creating cultural appropriate “erotic ways of sexing up male and female condoms for penetrative sex” (p. 24). Their work also emphasizes that outreach workers need to be comfortable talking about pleasure themselves, and notes how some different organizations approached this learning. They do not hide the fact that pleasure is included in the curriculum, not because it is seen as valuable in and of itself, but because it can be used as a tool to more successfully promote condom use. The narrative of risk is not truly replaced with one of pleasure then, but rather is masked – the end goal remains prevention rather than the expansion of pleasurable possibilities.

The continued emphasis on risk is made visible throughout the article as “high risk” populations continue to be the target of these pleasure inclusive prevention strategies, with MSM and female sex workers as the two most noted groups (Philpott, Knerr, & Boydell, 2006). Also, by limiting discussions of pleasure to condoms, penetrative sex is reified as the central pleasure act, while other pleasure possibilities are ignored. Furthermore, some of the strategies around eroticizing condoms highlighted in the article reiterate troubling narratives around sexuality. For example, they illustrate that one sex worker told a client complaining of the noise of the female condom that it “only makes noise when men are good” (Philpott, Knerr, & Boydell, 2006, p. 29). This may be a successful tactic for a sex worker who wants to ensure that a condom is used, but it does so at the cost of reinforcing notions of good and bad sex, which, it can be seen in this example, is not actually about pleasure at all.

Thus, while pleasure inclusive prevention strategies are an example of how pleasure is being taken up in an empirical setting what they leave out is perhaps as noteworthy as what they include. This literature illustrates how mainstream constructions of pleasure can be consciously or unconsciously reproduced in sex-positive settings. Throughout my research I seek to consider how these narratives of risk may be being enacted, overtly or subtly, and whether pleasure is being engaged for purposes other than pleasure itself in sex-positive work.

### **The Medicalization of Sexuality**

The third body of literature framing this research is the medicalization of sexuality. This literature helps to frame how bodies are understood in medical fields as

being sexually successful or dysfunctional. Additionally, this literature illustrates what the medical field values in sexuality, and indeed what it constitutes as sex.

Within this body of literature there are a wide array of concerns. Tiefer (Hartley and Tiefer, 2003; Tiefer, 2010) claims that women's sexuality is becoming medicalized through a pathologization of sexual behaviours (e.g. the creation of medical categories such as female sexual dysfunction). Tiefer (2010) maintains that this is troubling because the narrow, "function-oriented" medical field is ill equipped to consider the "socially constructed domain of sexuality" (p. 189). Interestingly, she writes that she was "comfortable with a narrative of 'sexual health' so long as it related explicitly to issues of genital health" (p. 190) but concerned that this could slide into a medicalization of desire and sexual preferences. This perspective seems somewhat in contrast to her claim that engaging in a mind-body dualism results in an over simplified understanding of sexuality that does not fully recognize the wider psychosocial context (p. 189). Understanding the genitals as an acceptable focal point for sexual health seems to engage with a mind-body dualism, and seems also to assert that, at least on a medical level, only genitals are engaged in sex. However, her concerns that this trend would lead towards a greater pathologization of sexuality have been realized. She notes that this shift was an intentional and political process, outlining the ways that pharmaceutical companies influenced, both directly and indirectly, the creation of a market for their products treating various sexual dysfunctions (p. 190). By illustrating that an industry is constructing sexual pleasure in specific ways for their own political and profit driven gain, Tiefer is underscoring my argument that how pleasure is constructed has material effects on how it becomes embodied.

Potts (2004, 2008) explores the medicalization of sexuality at an embodied level, drawing from some of Tiefer's work in her exploration of the impact of the use of Viagra on heterosexual relationships. In doing so she is able both to make visible and to challenge some of the assumptions that frame the discourse of dysfunction. For example, by examining the experiences of heterosexual couples where the male partner is labeled with erectile dysfunction (ED) and then begins taking Viagra, Potts (2008) is able to make visible the assumption of the treatment plan that an increase in penetrative sexual activity constitutes an improved sex life for all parties and also to take note of the many ways that this is not true for a number of the women in her study. Potts (2004) also illustrates a variety of different ways that her research participants conceived of pleasure, challenging the parameters of what constitutes sexual pleasure. Her works begin to make visible some of the dominant discourses around sexual pleasure, and how certain types of pleasure are prioritized and for whom. Thus, she is illustrating, in an empirical setting, how the medicalization of sexuality is impacting the embodied experience of pleasure.

The medicalization of sexuality is not limited to pathologizing sexual pleasure, as it also includes pathologizing sexual orientations and gender identities. A 2006 online themed publication of the *Journal of Psychological and Human Sexuality* was dedicated exclusively to the discussion of re-evaluating 'disorders' related to gender and sexuality as they are described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) (Dresher & Karasic, 2006, 17:3-4). Several of the contributing authors challenge the value of the Gender Identity Disorder diagnoses, questioning what damage it may do to gender variant or non-conforming adults and children (Coleman, 2006, xxi-xxii; Hill, Rozanski, Carfagnini, and Willoughby, 2006, pp. 7-34; Lev, 2006, pp. 36-49; Winters, 2006, pp.

71-89). Other authors, such as Fausto-Sterling (2000) and Tuana (1997) argue that these dichotomies of sex and gender binaries do not reflect the complexity of people's embodied experiences. They conceptualize bodies in a way that presents new possibilities, and for this reason I will return to their work as a theoretical foundation for this research.



The discussion of these frameworks illustrate three predominate ways of thinking about bodies and pleasure. First, approaches to sex education are typically youth-focused and tend to neglect discussions of pleasure, despite evidence that this is a topic of particular importance to youth and adults. Second, when pleasure is included in sexual health approaches it is often used as a tool to promote safer sex practices, and is often accompanied by discussions of risk. Third, when sexual health is considered from a medical perspective pleasure becomes a component of sexual function, and becomes determined by measurable outcomes rather than the quality of an experience. In the rest of this thesis, I explore how these types of thinking are taken up in practice, and I also show how they are challenged. In order to open up other ways of thinking about pleasure I will now consider how else bodies and pleasure might be conceptualized.

### **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter I lay out the goals of my research and what they require from a theoretical framework. I then explore different ways of thinking about bodies and pleasure. I identify three key conceptualizations, and explore what they offer the research.

My own experiences in the field of sexuality are framed by a desire to participate in communities of growth, reflexivity, change, and potential. In seeking a theoretical framework I found that poststructuralist theories resonated with that desire to participate in generative contemplation. Because much of my own work is so corporeal in nature I sought a theoretical framework that would allow me to conceptualize the body as a site of potential. Poststructuralist theories of the body understand it to be materially and discursively constructed which allowed me to conceptualize the body as a site of possibility while still critically engaging with the dominant narratives that I experienced as so damaging. With the relatively small scope of this project, and the immense collection of post-structuralist literature examining bodies and sexuality, I made the choice to focus on specific theoretical concepts. These key concepts allowed me to reconceptualize the body and pleasure such that I could re-engage with my work from a critical perspective. I then sought a methodology that would allow me to explore how these concepts could be applied in the analysis of experiences of sex-positive work. The result is that I focus primarily on concepts from Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, and other authors' interpretations of their work. Rather than emphasizing areas of theoretical divergence in their conceptual constructions, I engage the possibility each concept presents me with. Though the result may not be as theoretically cohesive as

writing a Foucauldian genealogy, it does allow for a rich, empirically-grounded analysis that relies heavily on respecting the intent of the concepts suggested by the authors.

### **Key Concepts**

I have organized my thinking about bodies and pleasure into three theoretical clusters for exploration: The body dismantled, the body becoming, and the body in pleasure. In The body dismantled I consider how limits are transgressed. I explore Foucault's (1994) notion of a limit-experience and compare it to Deleuze & Guattari's (1987) idea of making the Body without Organs (BwO). I come to the position that both concepts offer possibilities to my research project. In the body becoming, I explore the work of the Fausto-Sterling (2000, 2005), Tuana (1997), and Bray and Colebrook (1998) who have challenged binary constructions of the body. By conceptualizing the body as constructed both materially and discursively I see these works as presenting an opportunity to step away from seeing the body as limited, and towards seeing the body as always full of new possibilities. In the body in pleasure, I build on the concept of the understanding the body as active in its own becoming and explore pleasure as an emergent bodily event. Pleasure then becomes an event that can transcend limits and open up new possibilities.

**The body dismantled.** At the onset of my research I knew that I wanted to examine critically dominant narratives about sex and sexuality and to figure out how I was implicated in their reproduction. I hoped undertaking this research might provide me with some insight into how I could engage with my own sex-positive work in new ways

that felt less limiting, and that allowed others to experience sex and sexuality as less limiting. My goal was not to create policy recommendations as much as it was to engage in a process that helped shift the thinking of everyone involved enough to make the whole endeavor feel worthwhile.

Theoretically I found two concepts that helped me conceptualize my process. The first was Foucault's (1994) limit experience: "experiences aimed at pulling myself free from myself, at preventing me from being the same" (p. 242). The second was Deleuze & Guattari's (1987) notion of making a Body without Organs (BwO) (pp. 149-166), which Holland (2013) describes as not a body that lacks organs but more of a "body-without-organization," that enables "experimentation with multiplicities and intensities" (p. 96, 97). I studied these concepts not only with the material body and sex in mind, but also more generally as speaking to a process of transgressing limits in a way that might result in new understandings of both bodies and pleasure.

Moss (2014) engages in a practice of writing about her own limit experiences in academia as part of what she calls an "affirmative politics – a collective project valuing potential and possibilities" (p. 803). She describes a process of 'coming undone' in her graduate work as one example of a limit experience – a desubjectivation where after "hovering near the threshold of self-destruction" (p. 804) she emerged changed in a way that could not be undone. She uses Foucault's (1994) notion of a limit experience – which he describes in the context of the experience of writing his books "I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before" (p. 241). But Moss also describes the material coming undone, "limit experiences are terrifying and painful" (p. 805), "so little sleep, so many tears" (p.804), and later: "My ears began to itch; my neck

felt hot. I tried to listen. My heart was racing. When it came my turn to speak again, I could not speak. I had lost my voice. I was having an anaphylactic reaction to chalk dust” (p. 808). When the body reaches its threshold, the effects are shockingly apparent. Though frightening, Moss’s writing does not emphasize the embodiment of the limit experience to create fear; rather she examines its positive potential. Though she acknowledges that limit experiences can result in moving into unsustainability, she also notes that a limit experience is a shift in power and that that can bring possibilities into view. Through my research I sought to explore the positive potential of such power shifts.

A similar concept arises in Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*. The writing of Deleuze and Guattari is deeply conceptual, reading it becomes almost like reading in a second language. This makes it difficult to extract a single concept and understand its potential application outside of the context of their conceptual understanding of the world. However, the ideas in their chapter “How do you make yourself into a Body without Organs?”, share some theoretical ground with Foucault’s (1994) limit experience. They both try to capture the limits of the body and experience. Yet Deleuze and Guattari (1987) offer something distinctly different. They describe an embodied practice of becoming a Body without Organs (BwO), giving examples of the hypochondriac body, the paranoid body, the schizo body, the drugged body, and the masochist body as examples of the BwO. They describe these as “emptied bodies... what remains when you take everything away” (p. 150-151).

In their descriptions, Deleuze and Guattari seem to write as if a BwO is a literal body, one that can become unstable when pushed too far. But it becomes clear this is not the case, that they actually are talking about limits. Moss (2008) gives the following

description: “A BwO can be contrasted to an organized body, one that is structured, disciplined, and regulated into conformity, orthodoxy, and normativity. A BwO is one that is non-stratified, fuelled by desire, and unruly in such a way as to be self-destructive without being suicidal, meaningless without being nihilistic, and undifferentiated without being formless. A BwO is, in effect, a limit, a limit of dismantling that which holds an organism together” (p. 163).

Both Foucault’s (1994) limit experience and Deleuze & Guattari’s (1987) BwO describe an experience that engages with a limit in order to open up new possibilities, but they accomplish it in different ways. Deleuze (1997) sees Foucault’s transgression of the limits as framed by resistance, a contestation of the *dispositifs* (apparatuses) of power. Foucault defines *dipositif* as a type of disciplinary apparatus: “a thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements” (Foucault 1977, p. 194). In contrast Deleuze’s lines of flight are “primary determinations” (p. 188) that “are objective lines that cut across a society” (p. 189). For Foucault a limit experience is a process that creates change; for Deleuze the change seems to come about by shedding an imposed organization and accessing a different possibility that was already there.

Davies (2010) discusses this difference in their approaches by considering where each locates agency. For Foucault, she argues that agency – in the sense of the capacity to act – is in critique, which in teaching and writing could be shared between him and

others. For Deleuze, she notes that agency is located in what she calls “the radical openness of the not-yet-known” (pp. 57-58). Borrowing from Massey (2005) she considers Deleuze’s understanding of difference as “continuous difference,” not a difference created by seeing oneself as on the less common side of a binary, but as a process of “always becoming different from itself” (as cited in Davies, 2010, p. 59). The notion of becoming is important here for Deleuze is focused on emergent possibilities.

Though these two conceptualizations of transgressing limits are different, I do not think they are entirely incompatible. Applying them can be useful to show how limits pose challenges that can be transformative. In my research I work to conceptualize bodies and pleasure both through a process of critique and by engaging with questions of what else they might be.

**The body becoming.** In my own work on sexuality, I often found the body being described as a site of disappointment. It often seemed as though an idealized body, one that looked and worked in a certain pre-determined way, acted as the template upon which each and every other body was judged and, subsequently, found lacking. People frequently described bodies, their own and others’, as abnormal, as burdened by infection and ill health, as dysfunctional when they were inorgasmic or could not sustain erections, and as undesirable if they looked or acted different than the template. My research in this thesis seeks to build on the work of a number of authors who have explored how the material body and the socially constructed/discursive body connect in order to reexamine how bodies become limited.

Fausto-Sterling (2005) makes use of her interdisciplinary background to make the connections between the biological and the cultural visible. She illustrates how gender

and sex become co-implicated in the development of bones. Bones, she argues, are clearly influenced by culture – their density is dependent on socio-cultural phenomena such as daily physical activities and diet. Yet, when discussing osteoporosis in post-menopausal women, she notes, the disease is almost always attributed to biologically-determined hormonal changes. Fausto-Sterling is thus challenging the concept of a sex (material body)/ gender (socially constructed body) divide by illustrating that our lived realities cannot be understood without examining how the biological and the cultural are connected.

Fausto-Sterling has similar goals in *Sexing the Body* (2000) where she engages more deeply with the idea of the sex/gender divide illustrating the lack of biological grounding in a two-sex system. She illustrates that there are no clear and well-defined criteria for determining the sex of a baby by outlining examples of the many children born with genitalia, reproductive organs, and chromosomes that do not match up with current North American constructs of sex (that boys will have XY chromosomes, a phallus, and testes at birth, that girls will have XX chromosomes, a vagina, uterus clitoris, and ovaries at birth). She notes that while there is not a clear way for doctors to determine the sex of a baby whose biology comprises elements from both lists, doctors have a tendency to make a determination based on reproductive potential and then encourage immediate surgical procedures to make the rest of the body appear to match that sex determination. The choice to alter a body in order to impose one of two sexes upon it, and the decision to do so immediately or soon after birth, is socially- and culturally-driven. She argues that these surgeries are not medically necessary and are not in fact deemed

helpful by many of the adults who had these decisions made for them as infants. Sex thus becomes a cultural construction that is made material through medical technology.

Fausto-Sterling (2000) maintains that the imposition of a two-sex system has dire consequences for those people whose bodies are medically altered in order to be rid of evidence of sexual ambiguity. The surgeries themselves often leave painful scarring, and limit genital sensation, sometimes resulting in an inability to orgasm. The social consequences are perhaps even more dire, she notes, with adults expressing that the process of gender assignment, which was often not truthfully shared with them, left them with life-long battles with depression and ongoing thoughts of suicide.

Reading Fausto-Sterling (2000) today, some of her language choices and conceptions of gender make it clear that she was writing from a place of relative gender privilege. While she argues for a limitless expansion of gender variability she also states: “Ultimately, perhaps, concepts of masculinity and femininity might overlap so completely as to render the very notion of gender difference irrelevant” (p. 101). The problem I have with this conceptualization of gender is made visible in her brief discussion of transsexualism vs. transgenderism. In this discussion she argues that transgenderism represents “a more radical re-visioning of sex and gender” and goes on to seemingly support the idea that transsexuals should adopt an identity that is neither male nor female “in the traditional sense” (p. 107). I do not take issue with the desire to applaud people most visibly challenging the sex/gender divide, as they make visible the possibilities beyond the binary, for themselves but also for others. However, the conflict arises in asking people, in this case transsexuals, to adopt a gender that does not feel true to them. This thinking does not represent a radical revisioning of gender; rather, it once

again inscribes a gender onto certain bodies. While this may work towards having concepts of masculinity and femininity overlap, by ascribing gender categories of any kind, it is clear that an ascription does not make gender difference irrelevant. Nor does ascribing a gender category contribute to a limitless expansion of gender variability. However, by illustrating that sex is not binary, and that its connection to gender is not fixed, Fausto-Sterling is moving towards a much more compelling argument for the dissolution of a sex/gender divide and towards a complex understanding of genders as infinite.

Tuana (1997) explores the dissolution of the sex/gender divide more fully than Fausto-Sterling (2000) by illustrating how an array of biological and cultural factors can take on a dynamic form. She argues that: “in talking about male bodies or female bodies we refer neither to biological entity nor to meaning, nor even to a combination of the two” (p. 57). Tuana illustrates this point by examining how body builders use a combination of methods – extreme workout routines and routine use of steroids – to grow the bodies they desire. Eventually the body changes/will change its response to the steroids and the very drug that helped create the “perfect form of masculinity” will enable the body to begin to grow a more “feminized” set of physical characteristics – bulbous swellings under nipples, atrophied testicles, loss of erections, an enlarged butt and hips (p. 60). Tuana uses this example to help conceptualize a process of metaphysics that would allow the distinctions between the material and the discursive to be visible but to reject that these are fixed, or that they constitute “natural boundaries,” and instead see them as dynamic and emergent (pp. 61-62). She explains that these conceptual distinctions acknowledge, for example, that genetic factors might offer a fixed set of

possibilities, but that as genes interact with their internal and external environments the boundaries shift, and thus new possibilities are always emerging (p. 61). This conceptualization captures the material-discursive interplay. That there are material limits is not denied. Instead, the emphasis is on exploring how those limits might shift and create new opportunities.

Bray & Colebrook (1998) make use of the Deleuzian concept of a positive ethics in order to envision bodies as becoming, and to see “thought, discourse and reason as themselves bodily events” (p. 37). This re-conceptualization of the body allows them to explore eating disorders not as framed by bodies that are “the limit, negation, or other of representation” but by bodies that are active and dynamic (p. 39). The controlling of what food will be absorbed by this body is not happening to the body; it is a bodily event. Their use of a positive ethics of the body thus moves away from a pathology of the body, where some ill health of the mind results in an unhealthy body. Instead, their work opens up endless possibilities, where the dynamism of the body is recognized such that the body is never stuck in, out of, or against representation, but in a state of process and always becoming.

A positive ethics thus seeks to engage the materiality of the body. The material body is not being constructed, but is engaging in its own construction. This phenomenon is described by Barad (2003) as intra-action, that is, the “inseparability of objects and agents of observation.” Hekman (2010) notes “intra-action, unlike interaction, does not presuppose the prior existence of independent entities” (p. 75). From this perspective individualism begins to dissolve into a much more complicated state of interconnectedness. Davies (2010) describes the dissolution of this construction of the

individual as an understanding of being and thought as inseparable, and as located in a multiplicity of subjects: “the rower, the boat and the stream are co-implicated in each other” (p. 56). This helps re-conceptualize binaries – mind/body, nature/nurture, material/discursive – not as opposites, others, or negations of each other, but as intra-acting forces that are not distinct from each other. In understanding the material as active, the body can be the *body becoming*, and new possibilities emerge.

**The body in pleasure.** Understanding the material as active is not a way to dismiss the power of the discursive, but rather to recognize power as diffuse. Butler (2004) notes that for Foucault “the body emerges here as a way of taking over the theory of agency previously ascribed to the subject” (p. 185). And, she continues, we “cannot discern, even upon a close reading of Foucault’s texts, whether “they” refers to person or to relations of power (p. 185). The body is not merely material, and yet the materiality of the body is not negated. It cannot be untangled from the webs of power from which it has both been molded and been molding.

By understanding bodies as becoming through a process of intra-action between the material and the discursive the body emerges as a site of possibility. A body experiencing pain is no longer a once-healthy body now limited by pain, but instead a body engaged in constructing its pain. This opens up the possibility of asking what else can this body do? If this body can experience pain can it also experience pleasure, and how? How can pleasure be conceptualized such that it becomes a possibility for all bodies?

Oksala (2004) interprets Foucault’s writing on bodies and pleasures. Her work conceptualizes the body in a way that is consistent with some of the authors I have

already reviewed here, but considers how the body as experiencing opens up ways of resisting normative constructions of sexuality. She writes:

We must leave behind the conception of the body as a mere material object, the body as an object of natural sciences and disciplinary technologies. If we conceive of the body as a passive object, it is possible to discipline it, but equally impossible to theorize about its resistance to normalizing power. The question of resistance arises if we take the experiential body – the body as experiencing in every day practices of living – as the starting point. (p. 109)

Looking at how the experiential body connects to deconstructing sexuality, Oksala (2004) draws on Foucault's conceptualization of pleasure as an "event outside the subject, or at the limit of the subject" taking place in something that is neither "of the body or the soul" (p. 111). Oksala suggests that Foucault is engaging with the *dispositif* (apparatus), which in being comprised of both discursive and non-discursive elements, opens up the possibility that "not all experiences are discursively constituted, even though their intelligibility is" (p. 112). She thus argues that Foucault sees pleasures as opportunities for bodies to contest limits and transgress into experiences as events that evade intelligibility.

Various authors have explored Foucault's own interest in practicing limit experiences resulting from bodily pleasures (Halperin 1995, Miller 1993, McWhorter 1999, Sawicki 2004). Sadomasochism (S/M) is one example, Foucault sees S/M not as a practice related to violence but as a means to reimagine pleasure, "The idea that S/M is related to deep violence, that S/M practice is a way of liberating this violence, this aggression, is stupid. We know very well that what all these people are doing is not

aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body – through the eroticization of the body” (Foucault as cited in McWhorter, 1999, pp. 185-186). McWhorter (1999) claims that Foucault sees this process of “desexualization” (p. 186) as a means to reinvent the very notion of sex, by taking contexts and experiences of pleasure typically associated with sex and shifting them – in particular away from the genitals – in order to create something that is not recognizably sex at all. Sawicki (2004) also builds on this notion of desexualization, suggesting that Foucault’s goal is not to secure the right to one’s sexuality, but to explore and expand the nature of it. By taking that which is understood to be focal, in the case of sex, the genitals, and making them no longer the essence of the experience you expand the potential for what sex can be. Sawicki argues that this too is important in examining queer politics, by making the focus not merely that we are queer, but rather examining what else that queerness is - what “new forms of relationship, of erotic and intimate association that we have already created as well as the connection we form with non-homosexual groups to resist oppression.” (p. 171).



Poststructuralist theory offers the opportunity to critically examine dominant narratives about sexuality, and to consider how they become embodied without focusing on, or negating the individual. The conceptualizations of bodies and pleasure presented here offer an approach to these topics that focuses on possibilities instead of limitations. The body dismantled presents the possibility of change. The body becoming sees the body as engaged with that agency, and the body in pleasure sees pleasure as an opportunity to embody change. Exploring these conceptualizations through a

methodology grounded in experience I am able to ask what else sex-positive service provision might look like.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

As I began to conceptualize my research project I struggled to find a method or set of methods that I felt were compatible with the theoretical underpinnings of the project. As well, I wanted an approach that resonated with my own understanding of ethics and the desired outcomes I imagined for myself and participants of the research. I observed that many of the critical research methods I encountered were still committed to a set of rules of practice that I thought were more compatible with a positivist paradigm than with a poststructuralist paradigm. Systems of coding, in particular, felt incongruous with the fluid and experimental approach I hoped to employ. There seemed in these methods to be an unwillingness to articulate a re-conceptualized vision of validity that did not stem from positivist understandings of objectivity and quantifiable results.

In this chapter I explore what I was looking for from a methodology, and what I found. I outline the methodological framework that became the foundation for my research approach. I go on to describe Collective Biography, as enacted by Davies and Gannon (2006), and also describe the ways in which I envisioned adjusting their methodology to meet my needs. Finally in an interlude between chapters I consider my relationship to stories, how they are entangled in subject formation, and how I envisioned taking them up in my own research.

### **Finding my Framework: What I Look for in Poststructural Research**

Davies (2008), in a lecture she gave at UBC entitled “Legitimation: Neo-liberal imperatives and post-structural challenges,” not only helped me to better understand why positivist methodologies have become so embedded in the academy, but was also the first

person I encountered who presented a methodology that was not a response to positivism but an entirely different way of approaching the problem. After listening and re-listening to the forty-five minute lecture, I felt thoroughly invigorated! Her approach is grounded in a complex understanding of power and ethics as unavoidably alive throughout the research process. As someone whose work depends on understanding consent as an ongoing, never-ending process, applying this understanding to my research process was deeply important to me. She also sees the value of the research as located in the process and not only in the outcomes. This again reflects my experience of sex-positive services where the emphasis is often on the sexual outcome, and the experience of sex becomes that of a production line. When the emphasis is put back on the process a multiplicity of positive outcomes become possible. I finally saw the values I had developed through my work reflected in her approach to research.

Davies (2008) begins her lecture by clearly laying out a critique of how positivist research has been supported by neoliberal governments in order to ensure that only certain research is deemed legitimate, thereby being funded, and thus positioning certain types of research in the academy. She argues that by reinforcing a narrow understanding of what constitutes truth, neoliberalism constrains explorative research by ensuring that both institutions and researchers themselves feel obligated to frame their work as either within or in response to this imposed, and perhaps incongruent, paradigm. This resonated with my own experience of graduate school, where the classes I took focusing on qualitative research methods and policy both seemed at times preoccupied with illustrating more progressive methods of ensuring validity. Discussions of ethics similarly seemed to emphasize predetermined sets of rules and practices. The practices being

outlined created more space than those that came before them, but failed to truly reframe what constituted truth, validity, or legitimacy, still clinging to objectivity as a central tenet of truth. Certainly there is room in research for all of these methods and practices to be useful, but for me, it seemed that substantive and complex debates and discussions were being hindered by a focus on conventional qualitative concerns of triangulation and ethics review boards' practices. In light of Davies' lecture it now occurs to me that we were being given key information about how to succeed at research in the current environment; our professors, our readings, and even our own research all having been caught up in this tangle of funded and unfunded truths.

What struck me most about the lecture was that Davies (2008) went on to articulate a number of ways in which she determines the value of poststructural research. Though not a set of methods, the list of what she *looks for* began to help me set some goals and parameters for my own research. Though the list is a bit long, I have chosen to present it in its entirety here because I feel each point was invaluable to me in beginning to imagine how I would craft my research project. I have numbered each point so that I might refer back to them later in the research.

1. The standpoint or positioning of researcher does not take up the god perspective, but positions the researcher's self as also taken up in discourse, and context, and relational positioning of self and other.
2. And it explores and acknowledges, and ethically engages with, the relations of power between self and all involved and invested in the research endeavor. As well as considering and articulating the possible influence of these dimensions on frames of enquiry, interpretation and representation.

3. I also look to see whether the theoretical, epistemological and language practices are reflexive in the following ways: They make visible taken-for-granted assumptions and practices, such as the performative relations between the body and the social or the body and place.
4. They explore how language is at work on and through researchers and research participants.
5. They open up spaces that were previously closed, that closure being due to language, to habits of research, or writing practice, to invisible practices of normalization and categorization.
6. They move beyond description and repetition, recognizing the ways subjects are caught up in discourse, in social relations, in history.
7. They make clear links between conceptual framework and mode of data generation and interpretation.
8. They cross disciplinary boundaries so that the conceptual work and insights from one can enliven and inspire the other, generating conceptual slides and escapes from usual ways of thinking.
9. They explore the philosophical foundations of the theoretical approach chosen, and its relationship to the area of research being undertaken, and also make visible the process of engagement with theoretical discourses and how they inform the research project.
10. They consider how the theoretical discourse can be informed, extended, deconstructed by the research experience. And in emergent, experimental and arts informed research are open to the development of new conceptual

possibilities that exceed current theoretical programs.

11. I also look at the politics of research practice, and hope to find one that makes visible relations among individual human subjects, discourses, and social practice. As these are lived out in those every day practices through which the real world is constituted.

12. I look for a politics of research practice that unmoor habituated beliefs and practices through detailed attention to and rethinking of ethics of research practice. Including mindfulness of the power relations between the researcher and others involved in the research project, requiring ongoing relational responsibility rather than adherence to a set of rules dictated by ethics committees.

13. I look for a politics of research practice that understands truth as provisional and situated and at the same time powerful in the ways in which that which is taken to be true operates on individual, institutional and cultural perceptions and practices.

14. And I look for a politics of research practice that recognizes and deconstructs the normalized structures and practices in thought that have through habituation or imposition become conceptual or ethical straight jackets.

15. In looking at the technologies of research practice I look for technologies that work to ensure that the research explores new and changing research contexts by judiciously selecting and using methods from a wide variety of research technologies. Both those already established and also experimental forms of inquiry, that makes generalizations from data only from careful and detailed analysis of the recognizable and repeatable statements in unsay, through which particular social orders are accomplished and does not overstate

claims about what is knowable on the basis of such analysis. And that induces evidence from a close study of how discourse works to accomplish relations of power positionality and orders of meaning including truth and falsity.

This list of what to look for became the framework for my research. Having built this foundation I sought a method that would allow me to try to enact these practices to the best of my ability. Unsurprisingly, this too came from Davies' work.

### **Collective Biography**

While the theoretical focus of my research is on bodies and pleasure the methodological focus emerged as collectivity and stories. Encouraged by Davies (2008) lecture I began looking through her works, which led to me to *Doing Collective Biography* (Davies & Gannon, 2006). This text would become the foundation of my research proposal as I devised how I would approach and design my research.

Davies and Gannon's (2006) approach to collective biography is grounded in feminist and poststructuralist theory. It invites the researcher into the research, by having her participate alongside the other participants in a process of remembering and retelling memories. By focusing on the embodied experience, and by attempting to avoid clichés and tropes the participants try to recreate "the moment as it was lived." (p. 3). The memories produced by the group become the text for collective analysis. Davies and Gannon's version of collective biography departs from interpretive approaches to narratives, which focus on understanding an individual's experience. Instead they pay attention to the everyday events of interacting subjects and seek to uncover how dominant discourses are at work within them.

There are a number of ways in which I feel this collective methodology opened up important opportunities for my own research. First, it is compatible with the framework I had set out, allowing me to aim to enact my research in new and innovative ways. Second, it reflects the interconnectivity that underpins the theoretical foundations of my research, and encourages an analysis of how everyday experiences are framed by hegemonic discourses and in doing so opens up space for the possibility of something else. Third, the collaborative process upholds my vision of promoting greater inclusivity in sex-positive spaces not merely as an end goal, but as a process in practice.

In *Doing Collective Biography* (2006), Davies and Gannon outline what they describe as an ideal structure for running a collective biography workshop. Though they acknowledge the process can take place in a half day, their “strong preference” is to work with a group of six or seven people and head off to an isolated place to live and work together on the project for a full week (p. 8). After choosing a group of participants primarily based on the participant’s interest, dedication, and availability, they have participants read a selection of relevant material to help ground the discussion. Before the workshop begins they select a topic, and collectively discuss and decide on appropriate memory questions for the topic, such as “what is your first memory of ...” (p. 9). On the first day, after introductions and revisiting the topic, one of the memory questions is selected and participants first tell each other their stories related to the question, and provide each other with feedback on their stories. Particular attention is spent on helping each other avoid clichés and encouraging each other to recall how they felt in the moment they are retelling in order to have the stories reflect the embodied experience of that memory. After the memory-telling session, participants separate and write up the

memory they have just told considering the feedback received from the group. When all participants are ready the group reconvenes and each person reads the memory as they have written it. Once again group members listen carefully and provide any further insight they might have. Finally participants split up again and if they feel it is useful, they edit their story once more.

The stories that emerge from this process are generally short and focus on the embodiment of the experience. When presented together certain similarities or themes may emerge. The group may decide to look at these themes together, or to have one or two representatives of the group consider these themes and write a complimentary analysis that presents the stories and the analysis side by side, or in an interwoven chapter.

Davies has trained a number of students in the practice of collective biography. The focus in many of these groups has been to explore childhood memories in order to help understand the formation of subjectivities. For example in “Becoming schoolgirls: the ambivalent practice of subjectification” the group examines memories of early school experiences and each of their attempts to achieve self-regulation (Davies & Gannon, 2006, pp. 16-34). However, the memories to be explored need not always come from childhood. For example, Zabrodska, Linnell, Laws, and Davies (2011) engage in a collective biography process in order to explore the experience of bullying in the context of the neo-liberal university. Through this collective process of discussing and writing about their experiences of being bullied in the academy they are able to make visible a shared sense of being pressured or coerced into actions they would not have otherwise engaged in. However, breaking away from a traditional narrative of a bully/victim

dichotomy, the authors connect these experiences to larger neoliberal discourses and explore how this hegemonic framework values certain ideas and approaches to research over others, as well as what is deemed an acceptable workload, and how one enacts the mastering of these new constructs. They are also able to identify how they themselves take up these constructs in relation to themselves and against their own interests, as well as how they subvert, contest, or overtly challenge them.

### **Considerations for Enacting Collective Biography in my own Research**

It was clear from the onset that elements of the methodology described by Davies and Gannon (2006) would not be achievable in the context of my research. Several elements of their design seemed inaccessible to the participant group I imagined for my research. My central concerns were: the time consuming nature of their process, the level of academic training of their participants, and the language choices when writing up the memories. However, I felt that the method could be adapted to meet my needs.

In order to consider enacting a collective biography I knew my first consideration would need to be time. Though Davies and Gannon (2006) describe spending a week together for the workshop, they acknowledge that the process can be done in half a day (p. 8). Because I could not ask participants to take a week off of work to head off to an isolated place I knew my process would have to be considerably more compact, and the setting less intimate and relaxed. Unfortunately, the length of the workshop is only one component of the process. Davies and Gannon also describe a hefty amount of preparatory work, including reading about collective biography and about a chosen topic (p. 9). And finally, they ask their participants to commit to the “long and complex haul”

of collective work. (p. 9). The nature of doing my research as a component of my master's thesis meant that I could not engage the project with the same commitment to collectivity. My participants would be peers in my work life, but not in my academic life, meaning they did not stand to gain as much as I did from the process. As a result I could not ask them to make the kind of time commitments Davies and Gannon outline.

My relationship to my participants is also noteworthy in terms of the content of the workshop. In Davies and Gannon's (2006) research their participants are to some degree their academic peers – though some participants were former students, so perhaps would not be perceived within academia as peers, to someone outside of the academic world they all held considerable academic experience. This clearly influenced their ability to engage the theoretical underpinnings of the research and their comfort level with the materials. In designing my own process I recognized that I would need to be responsible for explaining the theories I had chosen to work with. Furthermore I would be crafting the analysis and writing up my insights with little feedback from the participants.

Beyond some of the unavoidable differences between how Davies and Gannon (2006) approached their research and how I would need to approach mine, there were also some elements of their approach whose usefulness I questioned in my own research. For example, Gonick, Walsh, and Brown (2011) found that in enacting Davies and Gannon's (2006) approach to doing collective biography, the differences in participants' experiences became more evident than their similarities. When a holiday meal was chosen as the topic to write memories from one participant recalled an idyllic Christmas dinner: memories of delicious food, loving family, and the enjoyment of tradition. Other

participants reacted to this with an array of feelings “from discomfort and uneasiness, envy and longing, to anger and disbelief.” (p. 745). In order to express these feelings participants began to *write back* to one another’s stories. In their responses their own holiday meal memories became enmeshed with their feelings having heard the Christmas story. Their writing draws attention to the differences between their experiences and the one they have just heard, and begins to analyze why the Christmas story makes them feel the way they do. In *writing back* to one another’s stories they have shifted the memory telling structure that Davies and Gannon (2006) describe. They are no longer writing only from past memory, but also using their writing as a way to express and analyze their current feelings.

The group reaction to the holiday meal memories makes evident the assumption of Davies and Gannon’s (2006) work that memories on a specific topic will elicit some elements of sameness from all participants. If this is not the case, then the process of having group members give feedback on the stories seems potentially fraught. Having the group inquire about experiences from a place of not understanding forces the author into a position of explanation and potential defensiveness. This is antithetical to the form of writing Davies and Gannon suggest – a writing that is *from* the body, avoiding “clichés and explanations.” (p. 10). Gonick, Walsh, and Brown’s (2011) inclusion of the embodied memories and the process of writing back to the memories illustrates one path to making difference visible.

In my own research I felt that I needed to approach the workshop with an expectation of difference. I felt that creating an environment of trust to express that difference would be challenging given the considerably shortened workshop length I anticipated. As a result I

made a decision not to focus on having participants write in the embodied form Davies and Gannon (2006) describe, but rather to write from whatever voice and style they were most comfortable with. I hoped that through the discussion surrounding the writing I would be able to ask questions, and relay my own experiences in a way that still emphasized embodied experiences, but that also created space for discussions of difference.



As I put my plan into action I uncovered further areas where things did not play out as I had imagined. As a result I chose to make changes to my research design, some quite spontaneous and others carefully reworked. In the following chapter I will describe in more detail the ways that I altered the collective biography process in order to enact it my research context. Before I begin that, I will insert myself into the research by exploring my own experience of stories and their relationship to truth and possibility.

### **An interlude: Stories and subject formation**

One of the greatest gifts ever bestowed upon me was the decision my mother made to put me to sleep each night as a child with songs, poetry and stories. I believe that this instilled in me a joy of music, a playful approach to language, and a critical and creative capacity to re-imagine truth. I consider these stories a great privilege in my life; from a carefully selected library of incredible children's books, to the Jataka tales (Buddhist stories) told to me by my dad, or his stories of growing up in Ceylon or later of living in the bush in northern BC, to my mother's mystical folklore, where a small humble man turned out to be a fantastical dragon, and a woman braved terrible magic to free her love from its traps. Indeed, as a young child I wove innumerable stories. Sometimes I enacted these stories with my brothers or friends, and other times I shared them, with an air of great seriousness I am told, with my parents or other adult company. At home my audience was generous: engaging, playing, listening, asking questions, the truthfulness of the story was never a focal point – I was neither pressured to assure my audience of the truth of the story nor forced to acknowledge it as fiction.

When I entered school the division between 'truths' and 'lies' became fixed. Though there continued to be space for make-believe play, it became paramount that the distinction between what was pretend and real be clearly articulated to everyone. I found my peers were often outraged by my fabricated stories about things I owned or places I visited, told no doubt, with the intention to deceive and to make myself look better, more interesting, more desirable, etc. and yet, I feel sure that there was more to the stories than malice and self-interest. They also represent a child's ability to transcend the social boundaries that will become increasingly fixed throughout their life.

When I reflect on these experiences now, I struggle with their complexity. I question how and why truth is policed to allow space for certain stories, but not others, which may tell us so much about our desires and how we are interacting with the social forces that surround us. Not, in the psychoanalytical sense of deconstructing individual desires, but more broadly as a means to explore social and organizational limits. Laurel Richardson (2005) represents this tension by telling a story where she is a child surrounded by cousins whose working class upbringing clashes with her own privileged experiences. She discovers that showing off her vocabulary leads to judgment and mockery instead of the congratulations she is accustomed to. Reading the story I feel her discomfort and desperation to excuse her inability to be accepted by the group. Rather than back down and try and hide her difference she accentuates it – telling her cousins that her lawyer father has just purchased a new Studebaker, while knowing that this is an impossible feat in the postwar era. Her cousins call her bluff and taunt her with chants “liar, liar, liar.” That evening, to her own surprise her father drives up to the house in none other than a new Studebaker. Laurel is overwhelmed with gratitude towards her father for vindicating her from her humiliation, but also it seems for affirming her exclusion from her cousins world as a matter of her own class-based superiority.

Richardson’s (2005) story is reminiscent of one read to me as a child entitled “The Hundred Dresses” (1945). In this story a young, a poor, Polish girl named Wanda arrives at a new school and is immediately ostracized by the other children. Teased by her classmates she tells some of the other girls that at home she has a hundred beautiful dresses lined up in her closet. The children laugh at her, and call her a liar. At the end of the book the girl moves away just before she is declared the winner of an art contest and

the teacher unveils the girl's artwork is one hundred beautifully drawn dresses. Realizing these were her hundred dresses has a profound impact on the remaining children.

Overcome with guilt they try to get in touch with her to tell her she has won the contest, but only have her old address, so send the letter and hope it will be redirected to her.

As child, and today, I find many elements of this story striking. It unveils the complicated nature of stories, and how they are intertwined with social positioning. It also complicates the narrative around the power of victims and bullies; the uncovering of Wanda's artistic talent seems to elevate her from her status as a victim, while the unkindness of the other children weighs heavily on them. The consequence of their cruelty is a stomach churning inability to resolve the situation or undo their actions. I recall, as a child, that it was these children and not Wanda who I was left worrying about in the end.

It is interesting to compare "The Hundred Dresses" (1954) with Richardson's (2005) more recent work. Though the latter lacks some of the artistic subtleties of the former, the reversal of the class positioning presents an interesting new analysis. While both girls are alienated by their sense of difference, Laurel does not make an attempt to mold herself to the class expectations of her cousins but rather asserts and reasserts her own class narrative, with a sense of certainty that it will save her, and in the end it does. Though it is perhaps only a fluke that her father shows up that night with the car, it solidifies for her the reliability of her class privilege. Though other experiences and learning later in her life may challenge her to re-evaluate her class judgments, nothing is able to erode the sense of safety derived from that class difference.

These two stories are wonderful illustrations of how both what is real and imagined is determined by the complex interwoven elements of our social existences. The lies told by each young girl tell us about their understanding of social structures of class, and position within them, and also exemplify the complicated intermingling of truth and falseness in all stories. Stories present themselves as a lens through which we can explore and analyze our experiences outside of a framework of objectivity. My question in examining a story is thus not “is this true?” but rather “what is this telling me?”

I questioned whether it was important for participants to clarify whether the story they submitted was driven by memory or imagination and decided it was not. This thesis is not a science, but an exploration. Sawicki (2004) reminds her readers that Foucault encouraged his readers to see art not only in objects but also in individuals and life (p. 166). He wrote “The work is more than the work: the subject who is writing is part of the work.” (p. 166). All writing is creative in nature, and whether drawing from memory or imagination, the creation of the work is a complicated mixture of experience and process. If the focus of my research was to understand the research participants as individuals perhaps the distinction would be valuable, but the aim of my research is to look at how we become constituted as subjects.

In sexuality, certain stories have been so widely reproduced that they have become normative discourses. Stories contend that there are only two sexes, that heterosexuality is the norm, that genders are binary, that men desire sex more than women, that sex is putting a penis in a vagina, that monogamy is natural, etc. For many people these are understood to be truths, perhaps even facts. Stories that challenge these

truths are often met with anger. Women assigned male at birth grow up and may be accused of tricking those around them by not wearing a sign that declares what is, or once was, between their legs. When patients identify as being in same-sex relationships doctors may label them MSM (men who have sex with men) or WSW (women who have sex with women) and without further inquiries assume they are at higher risk for STIs (Manning, 2010). Creating space to survive and thrive for those who find that something about their lives challenges these normative discourses requires the bravery and imagination to tell another story.

A few years ago I helped organize a queer swim night at a local community aquatic center, and was joyfully struck by how playful the group was in the water. In the pool people turned cartwheels, practiced water tricks, and scrambled to get as many people standing on a floating board as possible; in the 'lazy river' pool a group worked together to get a ball to balance just right in the water feature so that it would appear to be suspended in the air; folks in the hot tub watched, giggled, and chatted. Surrounded by a beautiful array of bodies and personalities that transgressed norms of gender, beauty, health, sexual orientation, and more, I watched the play and wondered if there was a connection between our collective playfulness and our queerness.

In designing this research I wanted the process to be reflective of the possibility I felt in that playfulness. I wanted to create a process that was generative, being both flexible and grounded in a positive and inclusive foundation. I wanted to create a process whereby the participants and I would be open to hearing and creating new stories about sexuality, as well as articulating and reflecting on the stories we have absorbed or created and tell to others through our work. In exploring these stories I wanted to uncover places

where our collective subjectivities connected and diverged, and to consider how these entanglements are connected to our social positioning.

## Chapter 5: Description of the Research

In this chapter I describe how I enacted collective biography, drawing particular attention to how my methodological framework influenced my process, and to the areas where my process shifted away from the process devised by Davies and Gannon (2006). I describe the experience of the collective workshops, with the intention of conveying the feeling of the experience as well the content. I then describe what inspired me to create a second phase of research, and how that was enacted. Lastly, I describe how I approached analyzing the submissions created through the two phases of research.

### Phase I

**Selection of participants.** Going into the research I knew that I wanted to work with my peers in sex-positive services in Toronto. For the purposes of my research, I defined sex-positive service providers as people who self-identify as actively engaging in the promotion of sex-positivity as defined by Dr. Carol Queen (2008), “It’s the cultural philosophy that understands sexuality as a potentially positive force in one’s life, and it can, of course, be contrasted with sex-negativity, which sees sex as problematic, disruptive, dangerous. Sex- positivity allows for and in fact celebrates sexual diversity, differing desires and relationships structures, and individual choices based on consent” (p. 278).

I limited participants to those 19 years of age or older, but was open to the nature of their work being quite varied: from the unpaid creation of a zine about gender, or volunteer sexuality workshop facilitator at a community event, to someone working in a community clinic providing services related to sex, sexuality and/or reproduction; or

someone working in a community organization whose mandate includes providing sex-positive services such as an LGBT support group.

**Recruitment.** I endeavoured to work with 5-10 participants. I would build the group of participants one at a time by asking each newly committed participant if they knew of someone else in the community who they wished to work with. In this way I could build a group based on a consensual model where each participant had agreed to work with each other participant, and where each participant knew they had been welcomed to participate by all the others. Concerns arose during the ethics review that this would result in potential non-participants being discussed through the research process. Although that had not been my intention, I decided to restructure the recruitment.

The first group of potential participants I contacted were my former colleagues at Come As You Are, a co-operatively run sex-store in Toronto. I chose this group both because of their experiences and knowledge, as well as my relationship to them. I felt confident that having practiced our communication fairly extensively in the co-op setting we could mediate the process of the research successfully, and that those not interested in participating would feel able to decline. This group was emailed a recruitment script, and then after five days if I had not heard from them I emailed a single reminder, asking them to be in touch within the next five days if they wanted to participate.

I then asked participants from the first group to recruit others, by emailing the recruitment script to people who might be interested. I did not request that they email a

follow-up. Those who were interested then emailed me so that I could confirm their participation. Because I was not aware of who was being contacted, I outlined in the recruitment form the nature of a power-over relationship, and asked all participants to contact me before the first workshop if they felt such a relationship might exist. I also outlined some of the ways that we could resolve such a conflict, so that participants were clear it would not automatically prohibit them from participating.

While these changes were accepted by the Human Research Ethics Board (at the University of Victoria), when I put them into action I found they did not work out as I had hoped. While many of my former co-workers were quick to show their interest, I received little response from anyone else. In order to maintain the ethical structure I had created I could not ask the first group of participants whether they'd sent out the recruitment info to others, or for them to follow up with anyone. But when the first group of participants discovered that the group was made up primarily of their colleagues they were understandably disappointed that they would not be making new connections. Additionally, working alongside colleagues outside of work hours can feel more laborious.

Scheduling also proved difficult. Within a month two of the five participants had to withdraw because of lack of availability. Looking back, I realize that February was not an ideal month for a workshop. Valentine's Day is mid-month and often means that it is a busy time for people working in sex-positive services. For my former colleagues this is one of the busiest months of retail, and for people running workshops there are often extra requests, zines create special V-Day editions, etc.

**Preparation and time requirements.** With the participant numbers dwindling, and the realization that the workshop was taking place in a particularly busy time of year I became quite concerned about alienating my remaining participants in anyway. Although I had already planned for a considerably less time consuming process than Davies and Gannon (2006) present, as the workshop approached I further reduced time expectations. I sent out about 23 pages of material explaining collective biography and some of the themes on bodies and pleasure, but told participants it was there for their interest but not required reading. I also shaved the workshop timeline down from four hours to three, which seemed doable, as the smaller numbers would make the process go faster. Finally, I had planned to have email discussions about the topics for the workshop, with me suggesting some possibilities and the group considering others they might like. I chose to shift this, planning to have these discussions in person during the workshop, based on the smallness of the group and a desire not to overburden participants.

**The workshops.** Below I will describe my own collective biography process. By describing each of the two workshops I hope to provide some insight into how I adapted the method presented by Davies and Gannon (2006) to meet the needs of my group and my research. I also hope to draw out the ways in which I allowed my framework to help guide me in making these adaptations. In order to do this I will refer back to the numbered framework points found on pp. 33-36. For example a sentence followed by (#1) refers back to point #1 from Davies (2008) lecture “The standpoint or positioning of researcher does not take up the god perspective, but positions the researcher’s self as also

taken up in discourse, and context, and relational positioning of self and other.” Finally, I hope to provide a window into what the workshops looked and felt like, in order to provide a sense of what challenges and successes arose and why.

*The first workshop.* The day of the first workshop, Feb. 17 2013, arrived following what the news described as a ‘deep freeze’ in Toronto that had forced the city to issue an extreme cold weather alert the day prior. With strong winds, the temperature hovered around -20C. I had arranged for the group to meet at my brother’s house in the west end of Toronto because he was out of town. Before the participants arrived I spent the afternoon making notes and checking and re-checking my audio recorder to ensure it was working. I checked it so many times in fact, that I convinced myself to put a new set of batteries in, in case I’d worn out the old ones with all of my checking.

I am not typically a nervous performer. The daughter of a drama teacher, I spent much of my youth on stage, either in theatre or music. In my working life I’m often presenting or facilitating large groups, and answering on the spot questions, and despite my introverted nature I tend to enjoy these opportunities. However on this day there is no denying I was nervous. In part this was because only two days earlier I had discovered that one of the participants had had a rather large life event occur. Although I had assured them that I did not expect them to attend under the circumstances they had said that they really wanted to be present, and so I was anxiously unsure whether they would indeed attend and if they did, what I should be conscious of in terms of their needs, the dynamic of the group, and our discussion topics. In addition to these concerns I had become worried about ensuring that the process felt useful and interesting for the participants.

With such a small group of people, all of whom were already quite familiar with one another, and all of whom were clearly tired and overworked in that moment, I feared my methodology might be too theoretical and seem futile and dull to them, compared to their daily interactions at work.

At around 6:30 pm the first two participants arrived, one with a charming dog they were caring for in tow. Shortly thereafter the food I had ordered arrived, but there was still no sign of participant number three. I checked to ensure I had not received any new messages from them, and after waiting another 15 or so minutes we decided to begin eating. I ate quickly, and aware of the time, suggested that we might begin with me explaining the grounding material while we continued to eat, and that we could perhaps move downstairs to the cozier basement couches.

Before beginning the grounding materials I reminded them that I was going to be turning on the audio recorder, and that they were free to leave at any time, for any reason, or have me turn off the machine if they would like. Then after turning on the audio recorder we started with check-ins. During the check-ins a few concerns became clear. Firstly, everyone was concerned about the absence of our third participant, and wanted to ensure that they were ok. So we decided to text message them with a check-in and hoped to hear back (which we did after about 10 minutes, they were ok and thought they had messaged me to let me know that they had decided not to come). Also both participants felt concerned that it was just the three of us. In part it became clear this was out of concern for me, and the success of my project. In part, there was some lingering disappointment that they wouldn't be hearing from other people in the field.

I tried to reassure them that I was actually very excited for it to be the three of us. Which was true, having come to terms with the idea that the group would be smaller than I had initially anticipated, I was quite excited by the prospect of the intimacy of working with people I knew well, and whose ideas I knew I valued greatly. Additionally, I tried to explain that the whole idea behind the project was in part for it to be flexible enough to accommodate whatever changes needed to take place and to allow for the group to determine its direction (#5 , #7, again, these numbers reference the framework points from Davies (2008) lecture as found on pp. 33-36 of this thesis, I make note of them in this way throughout the chapter to try to make visible the way they influenced my process and decision making). I explained that because of this, it might be possible for me to follow up the group sessions with interviews with other people in the field, and that if I was able to acquire other stories down the road I would certainly ask if they could be shared with them, or perhaps get permission from all parties to swap stories later, so in that way there might be later opportunities for connections that could not happen in the group in the end (#12). Both participants seemed interested in this prospect.

From here we moved on to the grounding work. I had known from the onset that this would be an area of divergence from Davies and Gannon's (2006) methods. Their participants entered into the workshop with an understanding of collective biography, feminist and post-structural theory, as well as the work of theorists relevant to the topic of the workshop. I was aiming to provide an accessible and extremely brief introduction to these ideas and practices. To do so I created drawn aids – for example, I drew someone in a rowboat on the water, to depict a quote from Davies (2010) “the rower, the boat and the stream are co-implicated in each other” (p. 56) and used this as a way to explain the

concept of intra-action. In this way, these simple images helped me identify a few keypoints (#9).

A. I identified my research as driven by feminist, post-structuralist, and queer theory, and attempting to embrace concepts of collectivity and complexity and challenge capitalism, neoliberalism, patriarchy, binaries, individualism, objectivity, and compartmentalism.

B. I introduced my vision in the research of collectivity as all things being co-implicated in one another and defined Intra-action.

C. I discussed the idea of bodies becoming, as bodies constantly shifting and intra-acting with social concepts, and how certain social norms may actually shape the physical and biological body.

D. I introduced the Deleuzian notion of a Body without Organs (BwO) where the body (or anything) ceases to be organized in these predetermined ways. I explained that in part I wanted to ask “what else can a body be?” and “what else can a body do?”

E. I talked about how we define pleasure, and whether pleasure might also be conceived of as becoming and always changing, and whether the parameters around pleasure vs. sexual pleasure are useful or important. After this I explained that the idea was that we chat about how we conceptualize things in our work. I read the questions I had prepared as starting points for discussion.

- How are bodies constructed in some of the services we provide?
- How do these conceptualization of the body influence pleasurable possibilities?
- How is pleasure constructed in some of the services we provide?
- How is a construction of pleasure related to a construction of the body?

- When is pleasure prioritized and for whom?

I went on to explain that the idea would be that we discuss a topic and then think of stories related to that topic, and perhaps even ask a specific question for us to draw our stories from.

After this introduction, the participants continued to look skeptical. They were clearly both as nervous as I was, and they expressed that they felt somewhat overwhelmed by the grounding information, and were worried that we would not be able to accomplish all that I had hoped. It was also apparent to me, that although I had endeavoured to make the process as collective as possible, they saw this as my project. I realized it was important to recognize this, and take responsibility for it (#2). From their perspective they felt obligated to ensure that my project worked and that they provided me with whatever it was that I would need. And they were anxious because they were pretty unclear as to what it was that I was going to need.

These concerns from them posed a major problem for me. Not only was I now even more concerned that they would not personally find the process useful, but additionally their concerns about doing it 'right' for my sake, though terribly generous, represented a position almost antithetical to the environment I had hoped to create.

They seemed to want me to clearly articulate what I wanted from them so that they could be assured that they were providing me with what I needed. Whereas I had imagined an environment where participants would be entirely unburdened by concerns of 'doing it right' and would be helping to direct the discussions and process according to their desires and needs.

After their feedback I paused for a moment, and one of the participants said: “Let’s break it down a bit.” An excellent suggestion! Davies and Gannon (2006) write: “Each memory that is told in response to the agreed question inevitably leads to the generation of new memories.” (p. 9). We hadn’t yet exactly agreed on a specific memory question, so I simply read them a paragraph long story I had created for my proposal when thinking about the topics myself. After reading it I talked a bit about some of the things about the story that I found significant. And ended by declaring with a laugh “So it’s not terrifying to come up with a story like that right?” They laughed and agreed, and we began to chat more easily. From here we launched into critical discussions of elements of our work that troubled us, or that we felt unsure of. Through that process a number of memories, stories, and personal anecdotes were shared. The conversation felt rich and everyone seemed quite engaged, and in the moment I decided to completely let go of the structure of the workshop that I had planned. It felt as though, if I disrupted the flow that we had so cautiously arrived at, I might re-open the concerns of the participants and lose out on the thoughtful conversation. From my perspective the primary goal of the structure was to help promote the kind of critical conversation we had arrived at.

One of the results of this choice was that the memories produced did not undergo the same group scrutiny that Davies and Gannon (2006) describe. They describe the group listening to stories and then “probing for details and images that could help us imagine and bring to life in our own bodies each other’s remembered stories.” (p. 10). I had not fully understood the trust this required until the moment of the workshop. My participants were people I knew and trusted deeply, but I had not realized that in trying to help me with this project they would become so vulnerable. I did not feel we had

established the groundwork necessary to start probing them for more. As a result the stories they told reminded me more of the *writing back* that Gonick, Walsh, and Brown (2011) described – a combination of remembering and analysis.

At 8:40 p.m. after a long discussion session we agreed to break for 20 minutes and write one of the stories we had shared. One of the participants now felt quite confident doing this, and the other still felt a bit timid. The first participant asked whether the story had to be written out, after some confusion I realized they wanted to type the story (as opposed to say, telling the story verbally), and so we agreed they could use my laptop. With the second participant I talked about what they had shared that they might write about, that what they wrote could be quite short, and that it could really be whatever they felt like putting down on paper, and that they would have a chance to change it later if they wanted. They seemed ok with this, so we took a break and when we reconvened we each read our stories aloud.

When we had finished reading them, with encouraging words after each, it was 9:15 p.m., and the workshop was only scheduled to go to 9:30 p.m. At this point in Davies and Gannon's (2006) process there would again have been a group discussion to try to push the stories into an embodied writing that would allow each group member to hear the story and envision having been there and experienced it. This was not going to happen in this workshop, so I began wrapping up by thanking them, and given how challenging I felt the process had been for them offering them a number of ways forward, including leaving the process there, and having me analyze the stories and conversations, or having some email exchange about it, or if they felt super keen doing this process a second time (as was the initial intention), but I made it clear I was not expecting that of

them. To my surprise both participants said they would be quite happy to do it again, so we agreed to set another time, preferably earlier in the day and we joked with better weather.

*The second workshop.* In preparation for the second workshop I had listened to the complete audio recording from the first workshop, and then re-listened to certain sections a second time. I had made some notes regarding threads I thought we could carry through from the first workshop and also some notes on areas I thought might be of interest that we had not touched on. I also made a loose schedule of how I thought we might spend our time. This consisted of check-ins, re-reading of the stories created in the last session, brief discussions of each story thinking critically about language as well as the ideas, re-writing of stories, discussion, writing of new stories, discussion, and re-writing. Judging from the first workshop I knew this would prove to be an overly ambitious schedule, but I laid it out with the same commitment as in the first workshop to adapt to the needs of the group in the moment.

The second workshop took place one week and one day after the first, on a comparatively much more pleasant day beginning at 4:30pm. This gap between the two workshops was immensely useful for me as a researcher. It gave me time to consider how the first workshop had gone, and how I wanted to approach the second workshop. It gave the participants time to relax, and having been told that they had already provided me with lots to work with, I hoped they could approach the second workshop with a greater ease. Yet, it was soon enough after the first workshop, to still have the discussions fresh in our minds.

The workshop day was a day off for both participants, and we had agreed to meet at one of the participant's homes. They had encouraged us to bring our pajamas as they intended to be in theirs. When I arrived I found both participants already there, having planned to hangout together before my arrival, and both hanging out on a pullout couch transformed into a blanket fort. It was perhaps not the wine and cheese, week-long retreat that would have been my dream, but for us I think it was the best possible equivalent.

After the check-ins and delighting in the blanket fort, I began by trying to illustrate the sorts of things we might look at critically in one another's stories. I was hoping that in the new more relaxed setting we might be able to engage in probing one another's stories to consider things like clichés, language choices, and perhaps dig deeper into a memory of how the experiences felt. I began with the story of the participant who seemed more comfortable. I noted the repeated use of the word 'we' throughout the story, a habituated language choice that I often fall into using, and tried to query who that 'we' was trying to reflect (#4). I noted that in Davies & Gannon's (2006) version of collective biography the stories are focused on embodied memories and participants are encouraged to focus on how they physically felt in moments, paying attention to their body memories. I also explained why I had chosen not to try to impose a certain style of writing on the process, recognizing what might become evident through the differences in styles and voices. I felt I was perhaps losing them again, so I suggested we might begin by re-reading our stories. There was some hesitancy about reading aloud, which had come up in the first workshop as well, and so we instead decided to pass around the stories and read them ourselves. This took about 15 minutes. When we were all finished we picked up the discussion again about the use of 'we'. This led to an interesting

discussion about the tension between the collective and individual. I then queried a second sentence in the story and that discussion spun off into a number of others.

We then moved on to the second participant's story, and the participants talked back and forth a bit about the story, while I stepped back and listened. They engaged readily with the concepts in the story in order to consider how dominant discourses create and limit certain possibilities. However, when I tried to note the ways the story might be told differently in order to reflect this thinking they seemed somewhat perplexed. I realized that perhaps in not trying to define the voice of their writing as the 'embodied' voices presented in Davies & Gannon's (2006) work, I had not presented them with enough information to engage critically with the writing in this way. Querying the language seemed to be met by them with bewilderment or even defensiveness, as though it was a criticism of their efforts and not, as it was intended to be, a way to challenge how dominant discourses can become entrenched in our language. I believe this failure on my part again stemmed from not having anticipated the unequal power dynamic created by this being my project (#2). So, when I presented the possibility of re-writing the stories I did so carefully and when they did not seem interested or clear on how to go about doing that, I let go of the idea altogether. The remainder of the workshop flowed easily, with much laughter throughout.

In place of re-writing our stories I presented the possibility of a new topic. Having noted that much of our discussion had focused heavily on being critical of what we were not able to accomplish in our work, or areas that we felt conflicted about, I proposed that we write the next set of stories drawing from memories of a time(s) that we felt we had made a positive contribution through our work. We discussed this briefly, and then took a

break and wrote, and came back and read our new stories aloud. Having already gone slightly over time at this point we decided to call it a day.

## **Phase II**

**Expanding my method.** After having completed the two workshops I was happy. I had engaged in a collective biography process outside of a purely academic context, and had many reflections on how that process had transpired. I also felt I had remained true to my research framework, engaging in an ongoing practice of reflexivity. Yet, in keeping with that goal, there were also a number of reasons that I felt uneasy about ending the process at this point. First, I had heard from my participants that they were disappointed not to have heard from a wider group of peers. Second, the people who had, for various reasons, chosen to withdraw from the project all indicated a continued desire to take part in the research if another opportunity became available. Third, I had heard from someone who had been very enthusiastic about the research but had shared that they choose not to participate because of the group setting and a fear that they might not ‘keep up’ with the other members of the group. This comment particularly troubled me because a part of my intention with the design of the research was to ensure that people working in the field, often not given an opportunity to share their wisdom and experience would feel welcomed and included in the project.

With these concerns in mind I began to craft a second phase of the research project. There were also two things I had learned in the first phase of my research that I now wanted to apply. First, I felt my recruitment process had been less successful than I had hoped. By sending out my consent form alongside a recruitment script I felt my first

interaction with potential participants had been too heavy handed and too time consuming. In order to limit barriers I decided I should design the second phase of the research in a way that allowed people to participate online, rather than in person. Now with the confidence of feeling that I had already accomplished my initial research goals I decided to be bolder in my design and propose the use of a youtube video recruitment tool posted to a facebook event page.

Second I felt I had asked too much of the participants, both in regards to their time and to their sense of ownership of the project. The aim of this had been to optimize the opportunity for a more collective approach to the research, but what had resulted was participants who felt intimidated by the depth of the commitment. With that said, I noted that by being open to letting the participants help direct the conversation, a number of topics, areas of discussion, and stories had arisen that might not have if I had done more to direct the session. So, I wanted to continue to allow participants to determine the nature of the story they wanted to share, but to do so in a way that they were quite clear on what I was asking for, and that did not require a large amount of their time.

I decided that for the second phase of the research I would ask participants to write a short story. It could be anywhere from one paragraph to two typed pages in length. I would use my youtube video posted to facebook to recruit, but also to provide potential participants with a brief overview of my research. Confirmed participants would be sent the stories the collective had created in the first phase of the research – with the agreement that when completed their stories would also be shared with the first group. The new participants' short stories would be created by responding either to something

that interested them in the video or in the stories, or in response to one of the following questions:

- “can you think of a time while working that an interaction made you reconsider how you think about bodies?”
- “can you think of a time in your work where you realized something you were saying or doing might limit how people can take up pleasure?”
- “can you remember a time while working that you felt constrained by normative constructions of bodies and pleasure?”
- “can you think of a time, or tell a story of how you have, or might have a positive impact on how someone thinks about their body or their experience of pleasure?”

**Recruitment.** In order to recruit participants for the second phase of the research I created a stop-motion video on my laptop<sup>1</sup>. The content of the video consisted first of introducing myself and explaining a little bit about how I came to work in sex-positive services. It then went on to use the grounding material I had designed for the first workshop to explain a little about the project. Finally it explained that as a part of my research project I was asking: “people who do work, paid or unpaid, and now or in the past, that engages sexuality as a potentially positive force in one’s life and includes discussions of pleasure to share a story about their experience of doing so.” I expressed that a series of short stories had already been created in the first phase of the research and that as a group we were keen to share those stories if other people wanted to share theirs with us. At the end of the video I asked interested parties to email me and let them know

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<sup>1</sup> An abridged version of the recruitment video can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nEs9OuLNrY&feature=youtu.be>

that if they did so I would send them more information about the project as well as a consent form. My own shift from a more traditional recruitment to an online, social-media driven approach reflects a wider shift in research practice as the usefulness of online recruitment becomes apparent (Bauermeister et al., 2012).

Once I received approval from the University of Victoria ethics committee for this research modification, and consent from the previous participants to share their stories I went ahead and posted the video to facebook (fb). I created an invite-only fb event, which means that only those invited can see and join the event. I also made the guest list private, so that only I could see those who had been invited. If people chose to click 'attending' then that became visible only to those invited to the event.

Eventually the guest list grew to 127 people, with 32 responding as 'attending' and seven 'maybes'. On the event I placed a link to the youtube video as well as an explanation that the event was actually an invitation to participate in my research, first by watching the video and then, if interested by emailing me so I could provide further details and a consent form. The youtube video wound up with 69 views, though I think it is fair to say that at least five of those came from me re-checking the page. I received eight responses to the request for participation. After receiving the consent form all eight consented to participate. One of the eight participants chose not to submit a story in the end, and one participant ended up splitting her submission into two stories.

**Modifications.** One of the participants requested that we arrange for them to tell me some stories in person, as they felt more confident conveying their stories verbally. I was quite excited by this request, as it allowed me to stretch the methodology further and to explore different experiences of telling stories. However, for the project I felt it would be

ideal to also have a written copy of all the stories. Based on the concerns the participant was expressing, I proposed that we meet up, chat about the topics while recording our conversation. I would then try to extract stories from the recording and type them up and send them to the participant, and then have them accept, reject, or edit what I had written up – with the offer to go back and forth with them until they had a written version of their stories that they were happy with. They were extremely enthusiastic about this idea, and so we put it into action. In the end they made substantial edits to what I wrote up and we were both extremely pleased with the outcome. This process created an experience and outcome that I felt was similar to that recommended by Davies and Gannon (2006), in that it allowed for the creation of a collaborative writing process, which I think helped the writer clarify what it was they wanted to convey. Unlike in the group setting, here I felt sure that the collaborative writing process was generative for both the participant and myself. The end result was considerably more concise than the original story telling session I had recorded, and through the process I saw the participant really clarify the points they wanted to see emphasized as well as the voice they wanted to tell them in.

**Process.** Once I had received all the stories from the participants (about 10 days after the suggested deadline, as many messaged me to say they continued to want to participate but needed more time) I read them excitedly and then filed them away, as it was the end of the final term of my coursework and I had other work to focus on at the moment. After finishing my coursework I prepared to move back to Toronto, and so my research process was further delayed. In September (2013) I was finally able to contact all participants with the collection of stories they had submitted (with minor changes, such as a

standardization of font to ensure that stories presented in the same font did not appear to be from the same participant and editing of the occasional spelling mistake or a consistent typographical error). At this point participants were reminded that should they want to withdraw their stories, or make any changes they needed to do so within two weeks. I heard back from all participants that they were happy with what they had seen and did not want to make any changes. This concluded the active stage of my research project.

**Description of analysis.** My analysis seeks to connect my founding principles, the literature reviews, and my theoretical concepts. In order to ensure I could quickly reference any part of the two workshops I transcribed the audio using a free downloadable program called ExpressScribe. Through transcription I became well-acquainted with what we had discussed, and by the time I was using the transcripts to analyze the material I was using them as a reference to confirm my recollections, as the topics and our thoughts were well engrained in my mind. If I could repeat this process I think it would have been a better use of time to only transcribe portions of workshops, rather than the entirety – as I really did not require a transcript of our jokes, or my explanations, and having almost 100 pages of transcript to sort through later proved challenging.

The next section of my analysis came quite a bit later when I had all the material from both phases of the research and was ready to examine it together. At this point I read over the workshop transcript and all of the stories from both phases of the research. I considered where there were connections between the conversations and stories. I also considered where the three over-arching literatures I had selected in my literature review

were being engaged in the stories. I was looking, as Davies (2011) describes: “to make visible relations among individual human subjects, discourses, and social practice, as these are lived out in those every day practices through which the real world is constituted” (#11). As I read, and re-read the stories and transcript (which together I will refer to as the data) I considered the following questions:

- where are there resonances and dissonances in these data?
- what ways of limiting pleasure arise in the data, and how does this happen?
- what ways of opening up pleasurable possibilities arise in the data, and how does this happen?
- how are the three over-arching literatures of sex education and youth, pleasure as prevention, and the medicalization of sexuality present in the data?
- how does this data illustrate ways of engaging with sex-positivity that generate new possibilities?

As I started to see connections I began to arrange the 15 submissions (seven stories from phase I, as the three of us had created four submissions at the first workshop, and three at the second. And eight stories from the seven participants in phase II, because again one person created two submissions) in an order. I created point form notes under each story about how I felt the story connected to my wider research. I considered how my own thinking on the topics that arose had been formed, and found writing and works from people who had influenced that formation. At times I struggled with critically analyzing the submissions, because I desired for that critical discussion to happen collaboratively. I want it to be clear that the critiques in my analysis are not of the people

who made the submissions, but of my own understandings and practices of dominant narratives and how they become enacted.

## Chapter 6: Analysis

This chapter includes contributions from anonymous participants as well as the following participants who chose to be credited: Laura C., Annanda DeSilva, Heather Elizabeth, Kate K., Noah Kloeze, Jack Lamon, Kael Howorth, and Rhiannon Webb. I owe them each a tremendous debt of gratitude for their thoughtful and generous contributions. When creating the research design I felt it was important that participants have the option of being credited for their contribution. However, I also realized that, given the nature of our work, people might not want their name attached to their contribution directly. I did not want people to feel that they had to choose between being credited and writing honestly, so I designed the research to credit all writing to the group rather than to individuals. I also did not ask for any other identifying information, so participants chose, through their writing process, to identify as little or as much about themselves and their social positions as they wanted.

In this chapter I present the submissions created both through the collective workshops, and the online process. Each submission is boxed, with a title that I have chosen from the content of the submission. The only other changes I made to submissions were to their formatting, so that they are presented uniformly here, and in a few instances I edited small typos only if I felt quite certain that they were not the author's intention. My analysis is presented under the boxed submission, with quotes from the submission appearing in italics throughout my response. In one instance I chose to present three submissions that I felt were deeply entwined with one another, one after the other, with an analytic response to all three underneath.

I developed the order of the submissions by considering what question, relevant to my research might the submission help to shed light on. The submissions are thus organized under four subheadings: What else can a body do? What else can pleasure be? What else can sex education be? Who is pleasure for (and who is it not for)? The order of the submission within each subheading was selected by considering the flow of the analysis, with the hope of making visible to the reader the connections and distinctions between the submissions.

The goal of the analysis is to make visible the way the dominant narratives from the literature arose in practice, and to consider how the conceptualizations of the body and pleasure from the theoretical foundations of the research could be taken up in the data to consider how else sex-positive service work might be enacted. I also saw the analysis as an opportunity to connect the submissions to a body of literature from local sex-positive service workers whose work has deeply influenced the growth of my thinking and practice.

### **What Else can a Body do?**

“The body in subjection becomes the occasion and condition of its productivity, where the latter is not finally separable from the former. These are not two bodies – one subjected, another productive – for the body is also the movement, the passage, between subjection and productivity.” (Judith Butler, 2004, p. 187).

#### **How she *feels* “sexy” in her body**

In my work as a sexuality empowerment coach it's often about getting the mind to catch up with the body. See, bodies... they kinda just are, and, medical problems aside, they do themselves very well. Applying our thoughts, what we *should* look like, what *should* or *should not* feel pleasurable, what kinda of libido we *should* have, or how quickly we *ought* to be aroused – is what trips people who work with me up so badly! A number of my clients even tell me they forget they have a body – or it's just something along for the ride while sexuality happens in their heads. Entire scenario's get played out in people's minds (I'll enjoy this, I wouldn't enjoy that, that would be too scary) without any input from their body.

But I fully believe the truth is you can't be connected to your sexuality if you're disconnected from your body. Our bodies experience pleasure lots of times, in loads of different ways - often we just need to get better at recognizing it, so we can really take advantage of it. Recently I worked with a client to discover how she *feels* “sexy” in her body. After observing how her body does emotions she realized when she's feeling sexy

and confident, her body lowers slightly and her hips swing wider than usual. Now, when she wants to invoke that feeling of sexy and confident in her mind, she can have her body perform it giving her brain a kick-start.

The flip side to this is that bodies also hold so much information about the negative past we may carry with us into new encounters (example: tight throats when we fear we'll have to enforce our boundaries, shrinking into ourselves so the people we crush on won't notice us because if they notice us we might have to talk to them and might sound stupid....) and being as mindful of how your body processes negative emotions as it does positive emotions can really teach us what areas we need to start focusing on for healing work to happen.

*“when she's feeling sexy and confident, her body lowers slightly and her hips swing wider than usual.”*

The image of her hips swinging is a nice counterpiece to Butler's (2004) writing – “the body is also the movement” (p. 187). Here it seems there is a power shift, a resistance that emanates from a material shift in the body. I imagine her hips opening, cracking open an imagined encasement, built up fear that has caused her to tighten her body, and now her open swinging hips, relaxed, cause a rearrangement where she is able to create a new narrative about her body and her sexuality. Her body becomes engaged in writing its own narrative, and in doing so also makes it clear that it was always engaged in writing its narrative. Before it responded to ideas of what it should and should not be by pulling upward and inward, now it becomes ‘sexy’ by letting go of that tension.

Yet in the same piece of writing the writer states: “ *it's often about getting the mind to catch up with the body.* ” There is a tension between wanting to acknowledge the power of the material body in participating in a shift that will change the whole person’s experience of ‘sexy’ and yet still using language that sees the body and mind as separate. “*See, bodies... they kinda just are, and, medical problems aside, they do themselves very well.*” Yet, the body in this story is not ‘just’ anything – “*tight throats when we fear we'll have to enforce our boundaries*” – it is always engaging, both responding to past experiences and to new possibilities. This language subtly values certain bodies (those without medical problems) over others (those without, that do themselves well), while also acknowledging that conflict arises from this very notion of what the body *should* do.

In my own experience running workshops with a wide range of participants I have often found that the most creative approaches to sexual pleasure have arisen from communities of people whose bodies are not acting the way they are ‘supposed to’. Those of us with disabilities and/or illness are often pushed to shed the notion of what sex *should* look like or what our bodies *should* do in favour of working with what we *can* do to achieve what we want. Reynolds (2007) explores the work of Bob Flanagan who uses film and performance art to document his experience of living and dying of cystic fibrosis while engaging in Bondage & Discipline/Dominance & Submission/Sadomasochism (BDSM). She notes that for him, as well as others with ill bodies, BDSM represents an opportunity to subvert illness, and to reclaim control in the face of chaos. For Flanagan BDSM offers the opportunity to re-envision pain as pleasure, to take control of that pain, and to present the experience with humour in the face of often demoralizing and humiliating experiences with doctors and hospitals.

### **Hangups still reign supreme**

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I have a tough time trying to relate with my body - as a transmasculine sex-positive, intuitive, servicey person I have done work to think, pull apart & try and put myself back together into something vaguely genuine/self actualized as a sexual being. Or, at the very least, to be committed to that process.

However I still have done a huge amount of work historically to socialize and sexualize myself as female. And, at the end of the day, those structures and hangups still have incredible power in my life. As such, I really wonder about people's opportunities to change when our early structuring weighs so heavily on the rest of our lives (for most people, at least). The fact that I still have a very hard time understanding, owning and actualizing a self-promoting sexuality makes me very cynical about my potential for the future and even more so for people who haven't had nearly so much privileging info, education and experiences as I have had. My hangups still reign supreme, and I don't see many ways of reimagining possibilities for myself, and actualizing an enlightened sexual self.

*"I have done work to think, pull apart & try and put myself back together into something vaguely genuine/self actualized as a sexual being."*

This description is remarkably similar to how Foucault (1994) describes the limit experience: "experiences aimed at pulling myself free from myself, at preventing me from being the same (p. 242). When Foucault (1994) talks about limit experiences in the

context of writing his books the end point is quite clear. Through the process of writing he is engaging the limit and when the book is complete, his thinking, and indeed his being is forever changed. In the piece of writing above, the process of pulling oneself apart and putting a new self back together does not seem to have an end point. There is a desire to become ‘self-actualized’ but not a sense of that being achievable. He has become transmasculine, but still feels the intense power of having been socialized as female. This experience, which I will call transitioning in order to consider how this might be relevant to a broader community, is perhaps better conceptualized as a Body without Organs, than a limit experience.

This piece of writing suggests that transition is, at least for some, not a means to shed an old gender and adopt a new gender, but a process of continuous difference “involved in always becoming different from itself” (Davies, 2010, p. 59). Conceptualizing transition in this way presents it as full of openness and possibility, but also of vulnerability. This means that community support cannot be temporary, or event focused, but rather needs to be as continuous as the process.

Campaigns such as “It Gets Better”, developed as a response to the high rate of LGBT youth suicide, create an opposing narrative. There is no doubt that there are unique challenges and vulnerabilities that LGBT youth face confronting a culture of judgment, stigma, violence, and fear. But not all of these challenges and vulnerabilities come from being young, many of them will continue for a lifetime. Raven Kaldera (2002), a trans/intersexual FTM writes about hearing a female speaker declare: “sometimes, we just have to draw a line between male and female.” He responds by drawing a line down

his face and approaching her with a knife (with the hilt facing out) declaring: “Here’s your line. Put your money where your mouth is.” She runs away, but he writes of the experience: “I hope she got it. I hope she finally understood that whenever a line is drawn, it passes through someone’s flesh.” (pp. 156-157).

The cracking apart of binaries, particularly those as culturally-embedded as gender is in North America, does not happen easily, or painlessly. I imagine a body dismantling the organization of gender, held together by organization of love and community. How can sex-positive service providers, and communities, build that structure that will let someone safely come undone?

## What Else can Pleasure be?

“Bill C-36 recognizes that prostitution’s victims are manifold; individuals who sell their own sexual services are prostitution’s primary victims, but communities, in particular children who are exposed to prostitution, are also victims, as well as society itself.” (Canada, Department of Justice, 2014, “objectives of the legislation”).

### **I am changing how people experience their bodies and pleasure**

What I love about the work I do now, is getting to be present with people and not just tell them but show them all these new ways of being in their body. Talk about empowering.

Obviously our getting freaky with ourselves and getting freaky with other people is a huge source of power in our lives. My goodness, the confidence it can give you in all aspects of your life. Power to tell somebody off, power to tell somebody about yourself, power to everything. Literal empowerment.

Because it’s such a source of power someone can drain you of that life energy. People think of the obvious ways, if someone is violent towards you, and has stolen that from you, my goodness. But it can also be in more subtle ways.

Often I hear from the female clients I get to fuck, that they are surprised to see I am enjoying myself. They think because it is a service that the connection must not be real. But they feel it, and I tell them, no that is real, I enjoy this, and I see how good that makes them feel. It is empowering for them to know that. So often they have spent their

whole life ignoring their own desires and trying to fulfill other people's visions of what they should be and what they should look like. They are working to be good wives and good moms and good workers and good looking and they don't get to stop and ask what feels good to them.

I get to shepherd them through the process of discovering or rediscovering what that looks like for them. I ask them to tell me their fantasies, to express their desires, I help them to vocalize that and then I help them to live it. I help them to stay in their body, I ask them to breathe, and I keep asking them to tell me where their mind wanders and then bring it back to the fantasy and to their pleasure. And I get to open up this door of playfulness where I can be a schoolboy, or a teacher, I can be any gender, we get to play and pretend together. I think experiencing that helps to break away a lot of the constraints and confines that limit pleasure. And then I try to help them carry that over into their day-to-day life. I try to free them from their shame and encourage them to go keep exploring these fantasies on their own. I tell them the next time I see them I want to hear all about all the things they've been thinking and playing with on their own.

I get to watch how these experiences change them, and I get to feel that pleasure with them. I show them how much I enjoy my body and my genitals. Often with men I focus only on my pleasure and show them how that can be their pleasure too. I teach people how to negotiate consent, and when they make mistakes I'm patient but firm, so they learn. I really feel like what I do is so amazing. I know I am good at it and I know I am changing how people experience their bodies and pleasure.

*“Often I hear from the female clients I get to fuck, that they are surprised to see I am enjoying myself. They think because it is a service that the connection must not be real.”*

Perhaps nowhere is the shame and stigma connected to sex more visible than in the discourses around sex work. In 2013, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled 9-0 in favour of a case challenging provisions in the Criminal Code that outlawed public communication for the purposes of prostitution, as well as operating a bawdy house or living off of the avails of prostitution. The Court determined that the laws were unconstitutional, but suspended the declaration of invalidity for a year to allow the government to replace the laws (Gender and Sexual Health Initiative, Summary of Bedford SCC Decision). The government responded with Bill C-36 which it said “reflects a significant paradigm shift away from the treatment of prostitution as ‘nuisance’, as found by the Supreme Court of Canada in *Bedford*, toward treatment of prostitution as a form of sexual exploitation that disproportionately and negatively impacts on women and girls.” (Canada, Dept. of Justice, 2014, “objectives of the legislation”). The document goes on to say “Bill C-36 recognizes that prostitution’s victims are manifold; individuals who sell their own sexual services are prostitution’s primary victims, but communities, in particular children who are exposed to prostitution, are also victims, as well as society itself.” (Canada, Dept. of Justice, 2014, “objectives of the legislation”). In this narrative, sex work is presented as devoid of positive potential. The experience is assumed to be exploitative, and the outcome is deemed hazardous, not only to those directly involved but to society at large.

The idea that a sex worker might enjoy their work challenges so many dominant narratives about sex and sex work. That sex without romantic love can still result in a meaningful connection, that it can be powerful and valuable. That sex workers may choose their work because they desire and enjoy it. That sex in exchange for money does not have to be ridden with shame and guilt. Sex work serves to disorganize the notion of sex such that we can see it as a BwO – the sex of sex work might look like anything.

In a sense the purchasing of sex makes it already something other than what it is supposed to be in normative discourse, and this opens up the possibility of what else it might be. Like all BwO's this is not inherently positive – it might open sex up to be violent, or exploitative – and because we know this does happen, we must consider how to prevent these circumstances from arising, and also how to promote safety and healing wherever possible. However, there is also a possibility in this BwO for something new to be generated, something that is positive and filled with pleasure.

### **I embraced the freedom of burlesque and dove in**

You could say I got into burlesque on a whim. But I believe it was more than that. For a long time, I struggled to find beauty and take pleasure in my own body. It was always something I strived for, but it wasn't until I began to explore a polyamorous relationship with my husband that I saw how open, beautiful and full of pleasure this world could be. After watching friends and partners put it all out there onstage, I embraced the freedom of burlesque and dove in. Before long, I was hooked on the idea of creating fun, open and sexy routines that forced me to expose myself and my body. All of the sudden, nudity and

erotic art (be it live performance, photography, film, etc.) became a much larger part of my life. I couldn't believe how easy it was to shed those societal constraints of regarding eroticism and the body as taboo. My new community is so open to all body types, genders, sexualities and levels of nerdiness :)

*“I couldn't believe how easy it was to shed those societal constraints of regarding eroticism and the body as taboo”*

As sex-positive service providers it is interesting to consider what decisions or actions we have taken in our own lives that have allowed us to reconceptualize (or at least begin to reconceptualize) sex, pleasure, and the erotic body as full of value and potential. In this story many normative constructions are dismantled – that relationships should be monogamous, that bodies should be private, or perhaps that only certain bodies should be public, that sexy should be serious, or at least not comedic. But for the author, burlesque is presented as the limit experience that allows for the shedding of these societal constraints. Unlike the examples of sex work and BDSM that I have explored here, burlesque is less sensation focused and more performance driven. While most people would probably describe the first two examples as forms of sex, I think most people would not describe burlesque as a sex act. Yet, we see in this story that it engages with many of the same constraints and challenges them in a way that clearly has the potential to open up a new sense of freedom and possibility. By engaging in a performance that eroticizes the body it creates a new opportunity to embody pleasure in a way that does not focus on an act of sex as the only source of sexual pleasure.

### **Lack of imagination limits the possibilities**

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At the progressive sex store I worked at, we carried packers, which are silicone or cyberskin penises, often used by transfolks, drag kings or really anyone who wants to stuff their pants. Often, people come in and laugh at the packers, not knowing what these softer dildo-like products are for. The way we often deal with such lack of information is to casually respond to their puzzling looks by saying something like " This is a packer. It is used to stuff people's pants, either to enhance a bulge, or give the appearance of one. Transfolks, drag kings and other folks tend to use them. It like stuffing your bra, but stuffing your pants." After such a straight-forward answer, folks usually respond positively, and move on. However, due to a lot of transphobia and lack of information, it is often a site of contention and ridicule. As someone who seriously questions their own gender, I found myself harboring a lot of feelings around the packers.

One day, someone came in and asked about the packers. They wanted to know if the packers were for playing. Often, people ask about the packers with a mocking tone, and I was concerned that this might be the case. I immediately responded with the canned answer of "No, it's used to stuff your pants." What I didn't think of was the possibility that someone would also want to use a more flaccid silicone penis toy for sex play. That this toy is not only used as an identity piece, but is also used during sex play for non-trans folks as well. That was what the customer in question was looking for, and after realizing that, I checked my assumptions, and affirmed that really, any kind of "toy" can be used in whichever creative, safe and consensual way that you want. It was an experience that

made me more aware of the assumptions that I harbor as an educator, and pushed me to check-myself. It also made me aware how sometimes lack of imagination limits the possibilities of how people can experience pleasure.

This is definitely not the most flattering of anecdotes I could have told, but I chose it because it clearly demonstrates an important outlook on sex education, or really any form of pedagogy, that I have learned through my time working in a progressive sex shop. That is, that sex educators aren't the experts.

We all learn from each other and are the experts of our own sexuality. The socially imposed sludge of sex negativity and misinformation is so ingrained in us, that we will have to continually unlearn and work through the muck in order to not harm each other by squashing others possibilities for sexual pleasure, experimentation and identity.

*“They wanted to know if the packers were for playing. Often, people ask about the packers with a mocking tone, and I was concerned that this might be the case. I immediately responded with the canned answer of “No, it's used to stuff your pants.”*

This is a great example of a challenge that arose for all of us in the collective workshops. Working in a sex store certain items attract more negative attention than others, items designed for trans people, or people wishing to play with gender, probably lead the way. This is obviously a direct reflection of a wider systemic transphobia, and as such disrupting it feels like an important action. However, it is easy to become over-

active in your defense, and as the story points out, potentially shut down possibilities for someone asking from a place of desire and not harm.

A similar challenge arises when deciding what merchandize to carry, or not carry. One example that arose was that of desensitizing cream. Desensitizing creams are often sold as aids to anal sex, by numbing the area they limit sensation. This can be a serious concern as pain can be an important indicator that something is going wrong – that tissue is tearing, that the body is not relaxed and receptive. The narrative around using desensitizing cream also promotes the idea that being the receptive partner in anal sex is not supposed to be pleasurable, but rather is an experience to be numbed and put up with for somebody else's pleasure. This, again, is something we encounter frequently at the store. Most commonly men come in inquiring about how they can make their female partners 'better' at anal sex, sometimes women come in asking how they can 'learn' to do anal sex for their boyfriends. These conversations provide us with an opportunity to explain that bodies are different, and that not all people will ultimately desire or be able to fit large things in their bum, but that for those who find it pleasurable the keys are generally to use lube, go slow, communicate lots, and start small.

However, often times when the interaction is done I am still left feeling gross – concerned that one partner's pleasure is being vastly prioritized over the others' in a way that is ultimately reproducing societal power imbalances. So not carrying desensitizing cream seems, in many ways, like an easy decision, the last thing we want when such scenarios arise is for someone to say: "excellent, I needn't bother with all that lube and go slow business, I can just buy this cream." But in the workshops we also discussed the inherent discomfort of being the people who decide the limits of what constitutes healthy

sex for others – by deciding which toys/products are good and which are not. There are surely a myriad of ways that we have not considered that a desensitizing cream might be used such that it would open up new pleasure possibilities.

There is also a challenge in recognizing that something presents a ‘risk’ – in the case of the cream that it increases the likelihood of causing unwanted pain and tearing tissues – and choosing how to talk about that, and whether to carry it. Risk is an inherent part of life, and thus of sex, but it has been employed as a tool in sex in order to conform peoples’ behaviours. Discussions of sex that are non-normative (that is that are not straight, monogamous, conventional sex) are often accompanied by discussions of risk. As Manning (2010) explores in the thesis “Who are the men in ‘men who have sex with men’?” the Canadian Guidelines on STIs illustrate that certain groups of non-normative sexual identities are assumed to be at higher risk of STIs, and listed as participating in unsafe sexual practices such as “unprotected anal intercourse (otherwise known as bare-backing); an increase in the number of sexual partners; partner-finding on the Internet; other anonymous partnering venues (e.g. bathhouses); recreational and non-recreational drug use; and unprotected oral sex” (PHAC, 2008, p. 1, in Manning, p.131.) Manning challenges readers to critically examine these so called ‘unsafe practices’. Unprotected sex is only a risk-factor for transmission if one of the partners is infected and finding people on the internet does not inherently make them more likely to have STIs. Sex at anonymous venues may in fact be more likely to be protected – as sex is often anticipated in such spaces and condoms provided. And drug use, may influence decision making, but again somebody involved has to be infected – these actions are not inherently risky, they may become risk factors when someone involved is infected. Furthermore, Manning

notes, they are not limited to MSM or WSW, but because they are presented in an appendix looking specifically at risk factors for these groups they appear to support the idea that these groups are high-risk populations.

In the store, what might be constructed as non-normative sex (queer, kink, sex work, poly, etc.) by public health becomes normalized. But, when someone who has perhaps identified as straight, goes to pick up a packer and ask about its use it is easy to slip into assumptions. When you have seen something negative play out over and over again, it is easy to become reactive, and begin to create habits and make assumptions. It is much more challenging to approach each interaction with openness to new possibilities; to respond to risk with information and honesty, to challenge and check your own assumptions, and to talk openly about the larger concerns of consent, power, transphobia, etc.

### **What Else can Sex Education be?**

“Now we can’t change our whole sexual script overnight, but we can make decisions differently. Right now, we deal with sex the way we deal with commodities: we focus on outcomes, we expect pleasure to be rare, we hold opposing interests to our partners. What if we collectively imagined sex as a series of jam sessions: Some good, some not so good, all process, all pleasurable, all collaborative.”

(Chan, K., 2013, “Jam”)

#### **Sex is something that feels good**

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Any story that comes from me can only start from one place and that is with my mama whom I admire and love so much. My perspective on sexuality began taking shape within the extremely sex positive environment in which I was raised. It was extreme in the sense that it was entirely different from how she was brought up where not even your body, let alone the sexuality it could know and express, was ever discussed. She recounts her own experience of believing that she was about to die upon suddenly bleeding profusely. She quickly created a will expressing her love for her sisters and leaving them her few possessions. She was later laughed at and finally shown how to use rags to prevent making a bloody mess, still not comprehending any connection the event had to reproduction. Despite being raised in a very traditional and conservative culture, she was inherently different in her thinking and refused to conform and so was treated like an outcast. As a result of this isolation, she quickly learned that the way others perceive you

is not really who you are and certainly not who you have to be. She practiced thinking critically for herself and as such developed her own style of feminism long before ever hearing of such a concept or word.

It was a conscious effort to raise me differently, with as much knowledge as she could give me and to smother me with expressions of love that she never felt. Growing up in our little team of two, I watched and learned from her how not to just accept what other people project onto you, that you have to think about it and decide for yourself what is right and determine your own individual truth. In the way that the children of immigrant families inherit a head-start through all their hard work and labour, I benefited from her experiences and the lessons she mined from them. I am often grateful that the greatest privilege I have is to have known, without a doubt, that I am deeply loved and worthy of that love. It was within this context that my mama approached sex.

One day, when I was about eight or so, we were in our bedroom and heard our neighbors moaning through the adjoining wall of our apartment. Giggling, we pressed our ears up against the wall to listen closer. Suddenly the moaning got louder and peaked in a yell. "That was an orgasm," she told me. She then laughed and said, "it's funny because it's usually the woman who makes so much noise." I learned that day that sex is something that feels good. In this similar inquisitive shame-free way, I learned about my body, reproduction, pleasure and other people's bodies. I distinctly remember the day I learned about erections. On this day my mother sat me down on our bottom bunk, with her anatomy book from nursing school opened on her lap. On the page was an illustration of

a flaccid penis on a male body with a dashed dot-dot-dot outline to vaguely represent its erect form. This, she told me, was happened when a pretty girl walked by. Then cautioned me to be aware that it was a bodily impulse that could not always be controlled.

Through these open discussions, I formed an early impression that sex wasn't inherently bad and that in fact it was a beautiful thing, but that there's a lot of fucked up shit around it mostly due to how people have been conditioned to think about it. Similarly, I've come to know that sex work is not inherently problematic, but certainly within the context of hierarchy, is plenty fucked up. Through my work teaching people about pleasure and sex through both hands-on and off lessons, I aspire to show people through the mess to the empowering and healthy other sides possible within our sexualities. I've since evolved my understandings of sexuality (especially around sex work, queerness and gender), but will forever be grateful to my mama for the starting my journey from a place of shameless love and compassionate thinking.

I've always been super enthusiastic about teaching people about pleasure and the empowering possibilities from sex because of the impact it has had on me personally. I have also discovered that there is a great opportunity to impact people through sex work, because of the intimate nature of the exchange. In the way that romantic or sexually charged encounters can allow people to open up to each other and therefore fast track learning or healing or changing of perspectives. It is akin to that five-hour conversation you have on the phone with someone you just met because you're feeling the connection.

In sex work, it's lying in bed after a session with my client and them feeling empowered enough to push through their personal shame and ask me if they think something is wrong with them for thinking about sex so much. I'm let into that private secret nook where I can validate them and give them a sex positive perspective they've likely never heard or let-in before. I believe all intimate relationships create wonderful opportunities for this greater sharing and deeper impact between people.

The greatest influences I've had in people's lives have been through these one-on-one teaching opportunities. Perhaps it's because of the early impactful experiences I was fortunate to have with a trusted person during my own learning.

*“In this similar inquisitive shame-free way, I learned about my body, reproduction, pleasure and other people's bodies.”*

The impact of early sex-education that emerges in this story also came up in the group workshops. In some ways this story turns us back to that over-arching literature on sex education and youth, but in another way it points away from that, as the educator in this story is the mama. There is lots of debate about what should and should not be included in sex education in school, but the reality is that probably has only a fractional influence on the formation of our understandings of sex and pleasure. Our families, friends, and indeed other aspects of our education are likely much more formative.

Burns, Futch, and Tolman (2011) examined young women's first experiences of fellatio in the context of an increasingly results oriented school system, and found the narratives that emerged around their sexual experiences replicated those academic

achievement narratives. They note that not only do very few of the stories engage with any sense of desire or pleasure, but many of them are concerned with being ‘good’, ‘doing it right’, ‘not being terrible’, or with learning and practicing, and ultimately with achievement being the completion of the task.

This idea of practicing sex in order to get good at it also arises in a resource by one of my favourite local sex educators Karen B.K.Chan. In Karen’s youtube video entitled “Jam, 2013” the idea of sex being like a musical jam is explored in order to examine how sex can be process driven, with renewable pleasures, and collaborative with consent given continuously. Part of the metaphor explores the idea of getting better through practice, getting over being nervous, and learning to tune into the other musicians, and getting out of your comfort zone by changing up your repertoire. These are all things that make sense in terms of exploring pleasure possibilities. The larger message of the video is very much in tune with the focus of this research – how to open up more pleasure possibilities, instead of shutting them down. I propose that the notion of ‘getting good at sex’ (or for that matter at musical improvisation) presents a possibility of failure that limits pleasure possibilities, instead I suggest that the skillsets and innovation Karen presents are tools for expanding pleasure possibilities.

This notion of being good at sex is pervasive, and I found emerged repeatedly in the collective workshops. When I addressed this and we considered it reflexively, it still seemed there was a hesitancy to let the concept go entirely. We all acknowledged that individually we are often achievement driven, and also often seek to please, and then to have our efforts recognized and rewarded. Yet it was also clear that the notion of ‘good’ sex is particularly valued because we so often encounter people so miserable with their

sex lives. Particularly women with male partners where the woman expresses that her desires and needs are not being explored. We note that at the store when we offer workshops geared towards pleasing men they almost always sell out quickly, but often similar workshops geared towards women have dismal attendance made up primarily of queer women. In this context I think we often see that the fear of not being ‘good’ at sex is one of very few motivators for men, that women sometimes engage to try to encourage more creative, and thoughtful sex processes. Ultimately, however I think this narrative serves to harm more than it helps, and is engaged with unevenly by men and women reinforcing an imbalance rather than rectifying it. It also presents a vulnerability that is exploited by the medicalization of sexuality, where pills are presented to ‘fix’ a problem rather than consider how else the process might be approached. It is hard to let go of the notion of shame when talking about sex.

It is interesting to note that the protagonist in “Sex is something that feels good” does not suggest that the content of the education received was of value so much as the approach more broadly being valuable. *“I’ve since evolved my understandings of sexuality (especially around sex work, queerness and gender), but will forever be grateful to my mama for the starting my journey from a place of shameless love and compassionate thinking.”* Indeed there are many aspects of the interactions described that I could be critical of – they are creating, or reinforcing normative narratives about sexuality as well (women make more noise during sex, men get erections when pretty women walk by) but the education did not try to dismiss the role or value of pleasure in sex and did not promote a sense of shame. As sex-positive service providers often we

focus on the information we can provide, but perhaps the more valuable opportunity we have is simply to model discussing sex and pleasure without shame.

### **I catch myself in an odd assumption**

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I'm running late. In the middle of an unfamiliar bus stop that doesn't look anything like the google map I printed. By the time I finally arrive at the location where I'm supposed to be facilitating a workshop I'm sweaty and embarrassed to be so late. I frantically begin unpacking sex toys and launch right into my talk.

Usually when I do this workshop my audience is a group of university students or a social group, but today I am in front of health professionals. Because of this, I focus on information with obvious health ramifications – types of lubricants more or less likely to result in infections, sex toy materials and how easily they can be cleaned. When I finally get around to passing the toys out the group suddenly perks up. As they squeeze the silicone cocks and cyberskin masturbation sleeves they giggle and begin to ask questions that become increasingly personal and pleasure focused.

I catch myself in an odd assumption – that the most useful info I have to give professionals is about “health” and not pleasure.

Because pleasure is rarely seen as a valued component of health in professional spheres it can be difficult to find ways to make yourself heard and have people take you seriously. One route is to accept their medicalization of sex and display that you have medically relevant information – such as understanding lubricant ingredients and the skin reactions they may elicit. This may seem counterproductive, but sometimes it is a way to get into the room. However as this story points out, it is easy to have this behavior become habitual, or to wind up reinforcing these narratives to the people who perhaps most need them challenged.

This story illustrates another potential entry point, which is to step away from the notion of expertise or professionalism, and present pleasure for pleasure's sake. Although a professional audience may not make the connection to their work, they connect on a personal level and perhaps in the conversations that follow their thinking shifts in a way that changes something in their work life as well. The challenge here is that this process can begin to feel as though it is reinforcing the notion that pleasure is an individual, rather than collective concern. That health is a professional domain, where pleasure is a private one. These challenges, and balances represent the many ways sex-positive service workers are entangled in these discursive webs, sometimes reproducing them and other times subverting them.

### **Instead we talk**

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I specialize in crank and non-con (non-consensual) phonecalls at work. I fucking love them. I love when kids call up with the intention of pranking me only to find that the dirtiest/funniest thing they can think to say is ‘do you carry condoms?’ and I take their inquiry totally seriously until they break into wild laughter on the other end. I then tell them to call me back with something better or funnier. Sometimes they do.

When guys call up talking about their cocks and erections, it can be difficult to discern the non-cons from the serious inquiries - quite possible that they are in fact one and the same. People don’t always use caya-approved language for their genitals or orgasms or whatever, and caya folks can get pretty triggered by dudes not respecting or understanding their boundaries. I lose nothing from the interactions, so I tend to get more of those phonecalls and customer interactions than most.

A few years ago, I decided to intentionally shift the dynamics of these conversations.

Typically, guys call with concerns about their cock size or how long they’re lasting. Sometimes folks are explicitly looking for information, but mostly for products we don’t like, don’t work, and thus don’t carry. I used to just provide that info, but I consciously decided to use those conversations to shift guys’ ways of thinking about their erections. People call us up looking for a pill to make them last longer, and instead we talk about how ejaculation and orgasm are associated but don’t have to occur at the same

time – in women, they very often don't happen together – and almost without exception, the dude's way of thinking about his body has changed dramatically by the end of the conversation.

Similarly, I once had a customer who called up asking 'what does orgasm mean?' – literally, that was his question – and it was impossible to tell from his voice whether he was being serious or just fucking with me. So, I go way off caya-script and start talking honestly about what orgasms mean to different people and different groups of people. So, some people find orgasms to just be a source of physical pleasure, or a goal of sexual contact, and for some religious folks (and hardcore natural selectionists), orgasm is just something god (or Darwin) gave us to encourage us to procreate. We talked for a good ten minutes. At the end of the call, he says 'So, orgasms can mean really different things to different people?' and I'm like, 'Precisely.'

*“When guys call up talking about their cocks and erections, it can be difficult to discern the non-cons from the serious inquiries - quite possible that they are in fact one and the same.”*

Anyone who has ever worked in a sex-store knows the challenges of the 'non-con', or prank call. People, youth in particular, do this to lots of businesses, but sex stores get more than their fair share. The problem, for the ethical sex-store worker at least, is that it can be hard to tell someone putting on what they think is a funny voice, or breathing deeply into the phone, from someone with, for example, a disability causing a speech or language barrier. Because the latter represent a wildly underserved population

when it comes to sex, you really do not want to hang up on them. A second common problem, is that in a culture where making jokes about sex is often better received than asking direct questions, jokes are often a tool used to try and obtain information.

In the collective workshops we acknowledged that we all regularly use humour as a tool to open up discussions about sex and pleasure. For every workshop I do I probably have a dozen jokes built in that I have told thousands of times. For me, this typically looks something like holding up a vibrator and saying something like “yeah and it kinda looks like a giant microphone, right” (yes, I’m not going to have a comedy tour anytime soon). The jokes aren’t really all that funny, but they create an environment that makes it clear that this is going to be fun, that talking about sex can be light-hearted, and that I’m not taking myself too seriously. The point of creating that environment is to make people feel more comfortable, which hopefully allows them to engage more fully, and maybe even ask questions.

While my jokes are careful not to come at anyone’s expense, the person making the prank call is usually doing just the opposite – they are voicing discomfort by saying something that is offensive or taboo that they think will elicit a response. Some of these people just want to cause harm, and do not really want to talk. But it is amazing how often I find that the heckler at a workshop, or the prank caller, when engaged with calmly and compassionately will begin to ask serious questions, and sometimes will even thank me at the end of the conversation. One of the repercussions of not talking openly about sex as a culture is that when people have questions they do not necessarily have the skills to voice them in appropriate ways. Perhaps challenging the narrative that sex is shameful

or taboo sometimes looks like simply allowing space for these conversations to evolve instead of shutting them down.

### **“Rehearsing for the Revolution”**

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We've taken our sex ed theatre performance to an alternative school just outside of town that was designed to give a different kind of learning environment to youth who, for whatever reason, are having a hard time sticking around in their mainstream school. This is our second time here, and I kind of like the place... it has pool tables, and comfortable couches, and the teacher/facilitators acknowledge that most of the students need smoke breaks. I think that's pretty cool... why pretend like students aren't doing that kind of stuff? Might as well not stigmatize it. We gather the students together for the performance, and go through the show like usual. I open with my usual facilitators' spiel, you know... forum theatre is about experimentation, trying things out... don't forget the actors are people, don't touch them without their consent and they will respect the same boundary... Augusto Boal said some stuff about "rehearsing for the revolution", and so on and so forth.

There's this one scene in the short play that we use as a way of talking about gender experimentation and handling disclosure. Basically, the scene goes like this: there's a person who we read as a young man in his bathroom at home, getting ready for a party. He puts on a dress, and spends some time checking himself out in the mirror. He's

suddenly interrupted by his brother, who walks in on him and "catches" him in the dress. They have an awkward conversation wherein the young person tries to brush off what's happening, and the brother, after informing the young person that their parents are starting to notice the makeup and nail polish that he's been slipping into his fashion choices, tells him to "get some help" and storms out of the bathroom. The young person, clearly distraught, throws the dress away and rushes out. After this plays out, we ask questions like, "What do you think might be going on for Derek (the young person) right now?", "How do you think the brother handled this situation?", "How do you think you might like *your* brother to react if you were the young person?", "How might the brother have reacted better?", etc.

The play is filled with "controversial" subject matter... we talk about sexual orientation, drug use, abortion, consent, and STI stigma... but this is the scene that always seems to bring out the most complicated stuff for me as a facilitator. A couple of things happen, without fail, every time we do the scene. Firstly, when the scene opens and we see this young person putting on the dress, the audience laughs *every time*. I don't even know if they notice that they're laughing, but we've been so conditioned as a culture to see the image of "man in a dress" (or what we perceive as such) as being profoundly and inevitably funny. They always just assume we're making a joke. Secondly, when asked what might be going on for the young person, youth always think he's working through a queer identity rather than this being an issue of gender. *Maybe* they understand that this might be a person coming into a trans identity, but I have to actively work against their tendency to slap a label on the young person immediately.

In this particular situation, though, I find myself working with another variable: a teacher who seems intent on proving his masculinity. He starts questioning the arguments we're making about the importance of responding well to disclosures of queerness or transness by making some overblown, straw man argument about feeling uncomfortable showering with queer men at the gym. The whole conversation devolves into our entire team of educators trying to get him to change his viewpoint; I put myself to this entire room of people in the course of trying to prove a point, but this leaves me feeling vulnerable and defensive. It is definitely not my finest moment as a facilitator.

Moments like this break my heart a little bit as an educator who tries to centre pleasure in her work. Whenever we go into a school, I always try to ground myself at the beginning by imagining one queer kid in the room, and I always try to gear my education to meet that theoretical kid's needs. In this moment, I picture this kid (like I did when I was that age and closeted) constantly surveying their surroundings and assessing each moment in terms of risk and safety. I imagine this kid mentally checking the "unsafe" box next to this supposed mentor's name on the list of people in their life who could be potential sources of support for them. I imagine this moment being one more block in the construction of a sexual identity that the world views as somehow threatening and invasive, and I wonder how coming to understand one's desire as "dangerous" (at least, dangerous enough to scare straight men in the shower) impacts one's ability to pursue and experience pleasure. When the entire room of people laughs at the young character trying on a dress, I imagine this kid shrinking a little bit away from their desire, away from their ability to take their desire seriously, away from their ability to picture themselves as a person who might one day wear woman-typical clothing and only be

funny when they tell a hilarious joke. When everybody in the room insists that this character *must* be gay or trans, I wonder what this means for whether this kid is able to think about gender expression as a potentially pleasurable activity. If trying on a dress means *you are a transgender person*, what does this mean for this kid's ability to experiment, to try new things, to feel the feeling of silk or lace on their body and like or dislike or feel somewhere in between about that feeling and not have to have that mean something conclusive and irrevocable about their identity? And I think, Good god, it is not easy to be a high school student.

This can all feel so daunting, as somebody who is brought in to spend only two hours with these youth. But I like to think that for every cringe-inducing social pattern, our presence in the school for these two hours presents liberatory opportunities as well. Like, maybe seeing a confident queer woman work a room and take no shit opens possibilities for that theoretical queer kid? In moments where I'm feeling down about the limited amount of influence I can have in such a short period of time, I take *immense* amounts of pleasure in seeing the horror on teachers' faces when I say stuff that would probably get them fired if they said it themselves. Like the time when I asked "What could Taylor and Graeme have done instead to avoid getting pregnant, now that they've forgotten their condom?", and the one kid in the room tried to trip me up by yelling "ANAL", and without missing a beat I replied "Yes, anal sex definitely carries less risk of pregnancy than vaginal sex, and can be fun, too!" and totally left the little fucker speechless. I can talk frankly about abortion and make jokes about oppressive masculinity and deconstruct whorephobic language and celebrate masturbation and they'll probably *never* ask us

back, but at least we're able to drop a little sex-positivity bomb, every time. And it's so worth it.

*A couple of things happen, without fail, every time we do the scene. Firstly, when the scene opens and we see this young person putting on the dress, the audience laughs every time. I don't even know if they notice that they're laughing, but we've been so conditioned as a culture to see the image of "man in a dress" (or what we perceive as such) as being profoundly and inevitably funny. They always just assume we're making a joke.*

This is such a great description of what I perceive to be one of the greatest challenges of doing sex positive presentations/workshops/dramatizations with groups. In any group of people you will have such a wide array of different sexual experiences and assumptions about sexuality. Before I begin a workshop I often look out at a group and remind myself that there is likely someone in the group (probably many people in all these cases) who have experienced rape or other forms of sexual violence, and possibly also someone who has enacted that violence, there is probably someone with a lifelong STI, someone who is queer or questioning, someone who is unsure of their gender or whose gender has not been respected, someone who has never had sex, and someone who has never desired sex. These people are the ones who stand to lose the most in that moment of unconscious laughter by the group. *"When the entire room of people laughs at the young character trying on a dress, I imagine this kid shrinking a little bit away from their desire, away from their ability to take their desire seriously."* There are many things I do, and have learned from others, to try and minimize those moments. I often begin workshops explaining that we often laugh in moments of discomfort, and that it is normal

for us to feel some discomfort when talking about sex, but that I ask that we collectively try to remember that our laughter can also send a message to others, so to be conscious of this as we go. I tell the group that although I do not expect any of them to be interested in everything I talk about, or to have experienced everything I talk about, to assume that I like and/or experience all these things, and that I do not want to be judged for that. I tell them we all have different desires and that we do not want to ‘Yuk my Yum’ – that is suggest anything I talk about is gross or undesirable. I tell them to leave at any point, without explanation, to prioritize their needs. I ensure there are resources around the room for people they can talk to if the workshop brings up feelings they need help with. And yet, almost every time I do a workshop a moment arises where there is laughter, or a comment, that pierces me, that I imagine is that shrinking moment for someone in the room. I can, and do, challenge that response, unpack it for the group, but nothing I do can take it back. Ultimately I leave workshops feeling that for the vast majority of the people present the workshop has been eye-opening, expanded their vision of sexual possibilities, challenged some of their assumptions, and given them some tools to communicate more openly about their sexuality. But I am never sure if this is enough for the ones who had to experience that moment where the group laughed, and for them it was personal. Maybe it is enough to hear a facilitator say – actually lots of people desire that thing, and I do not think it’s funny I think it’s wonderful and really sexy. But maybe it is not.

I think this challenge is perhaps similar to the challenge of trying to teach across cultures is addressed in article entitled *The Limits of cross-cultural dialogue*. Jones’ (1999) article describes her own experience co-teaching a course on feminist perspectives on education. Based on Maori educators’ calls for separate Maori educational spaces,

Jones and her Maori colleague decided to split their group for three quarters of the classes based on ethnicity into two groups: one white, and one Maori and Pacific Island students. Jones outlines that the response to this decision was deeply divided, with white students expressing disappointment and frustration, while Maori and Pacific Island students universally expressed their contentment. Jones goes on to explore how this reaction challenges discussions in education regarding working across difference via dialogue. She argues that the power of cross-cultural dialogue is premised, problematically, on the assumption that the dominant group is able to hear the voices and stories of their subaltern counterparts. Equally problematic for Jones' is the way this pedagogy romanticises a vision of unity, which she argues serves to create, within the dominant group, a sense of entitlement to the stories and knowledges of the 'other'. When this 'vision of unity' was challenged by creating the split class white students expressed not only a sense of loss, but a sense that this split created a barrier to their ability to become more aware and informed about Maori perspectives. Jones' suggests that this reaction serves as a means for white students to distance themselves from the role of the oppressor and the history of colonization and privilege. Implied in these comments she suggests, is the desire for a sharing of knowledge that would lead to a unity beyond these historical differences, that is, an absolution for the dominant group of their privileged position.

I think Jones' (1999) work is worth considering in creating sex positive spaces both for workshops and more broadly. While the majority of a group engaged in a sex-positive workshop/presentation/dramatization might walk away with an expanded sense of possibility and potential, those who walk into the space with the most vulnerability are, I think, likely to gain the least through the process. Jones work presents the possibility of

trying to create culturally specific spaces to address sexuality, and focusing on developing ‘ears to hear’ in spaces with culturally dominant experiences. This is certainly not a new idea as sex-positive services, there are an array of groups dedicated to gay, lesbian, queer, bisexual, trans, poly, people of colour (POC), and HIV pos, spaces (to name a few). Though identities within these labels can be diverse, I think such groups do offer the potential opportunity to talk about sex with a greater comfort and sense of safety for many. These spaces can be affirming and community building. However, often times it is simply not possible or practical to try to separate a large group into these predetermined labels. Sexual identities are often times quite fluid, changing over time and with experience, and also often private, particularly among youth.

The diversity of sexual experiences creates a complex challenge for sex-positives service providers. I think it is important to ensure that space is created for specific identity groups, for example trans women’s spaces, run for and by trans women. However, there remains a challenge of providing education, in spaces where identities and experiences are diverse, in such a way that normative narratives about sexuality are not reproduced (by the facilitator or audience) such that they cause further shame/pain/humiliation for those trying to push back against them. In working towards this I think as presenters we have to consider that the need to challenge the normative narrative should not come at the expense of for example, the queer youth in the audience. We have to consider as we design our presentations how to avoid those moments that cause someone to shrink away from their desire, even if it means that a learning opportunity for the larger group is sacrificed. I think we have to consider the ‘ears that hear’ – how can we talk about normative experiences of sexuality in a way that equally

challenges expansive thinking rather than exploiting the perhaps more obvious experiences of non-normative sexual identities.

## Who is Pleasure for (and who is it not for)?

“Connected to Body, Connected to Land”

(Native Youth Sexual Health Network, “What we Believe In”)

**Vibrators – for most hetero people – are merely a means to shorten the amount of time between women’s and men’s orgasms**

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One of my favourite sex educators and workshop facilitators commented once that vibrators – for most hetero people – are merely a means to shorten the amount of time between women’s and men’s orgasms. I cringed when she said it as she was essentially undermining the premise of the work that we do. We see vibrators as a tool to create sexual pleasure in people’s lives at the very least, and a possibility for a changed world at best.

The reality is, many women aren’t interested in their own physical sexual pleasure, and instead view and experience sex as social currency or as a social obligation. Their orgasms are only important when they validate their partners’ masculinity or sexual performance.

As a feminist organization that purports to support the actualization of women’s goals/ideals/fantasies/etc., it seems inherently antifeminist to espouse an idea of women’s sexuality that prohibits or discourages women’s own sexualities and ideas about sexuality and pleasure.

**She was shopping for things to improve his sex life, in hopes that that might  
improve hers**

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Last week I had a pretty good customer interaction – these 2 femmes came in and wandered around. One came up to buy a vibrating cock ring and started chatting with me. She jokingly asked if the ring would make her like sex again. I fired back a witticism about guarantees on toys. She proceeded to explain that while she loves the boy she's with, he doesn't do much in the way of being imaginative, intuitive, or creative with his sexuality. This, combined with an issue of doctors ruining her genitals has left her totally disinterested in having sex with him.

I responded by being affirming and understanding about not having an engaged partner, having one's body and gender medicalized and lacking any kind of sexual self spirit. I showed her one or two products that may be helpful for creating conversations, engaging in role-play, and otherwise acting as a “creative facilitator”; explaining she can also cater them to whatever she likes, or doesn't like.

As she left she expressed how much she liked talking to me and sounded genuinely surprised as she shared that. I know that I was an important person to be able to listen, share some non-pressuring options, and affirm that the fact that she's turned off by her boyfriend's non-interesting/interested sex identity.

However, at the end of the day she was shopping for things to improve his sex life, in hopes that that might improve hers. She also is taking on the primary “creative” responsibility, again not even to honestly meet her own sex desires and possibilities but in the hopes that if her boyfriend gets off on something she might derive some pleasure in the process.

This isn't to antagonize her decision making/priorities, but more so to dictate that while we both valued that conversation, and she walked away feeling affirmed, her sexual quest was based on engaging her boyfriend in “better” sex so he might do something in return, so she might actually feel turned on from having sex.

To be clear, I adore this work. It's stressful, defeatist, consuming, and will never end. But, I also do get so much from being around and in a position to listen, affirm, educate, suggest, and otherwise create stories and possibilities and space for folks, regardless of where they are at.

### **The introduction of possibility**

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I think for the shop there isn't much else to be done within current social structures. We listen. We give space for as many experiences and stories as we can. We try to be optimistic. But all that being said, we don't really acknowledge the sexual strife most

folks (I'm thinking cis, straight women especially) experience and the fact that our store is a band-aid to try and make things less shitty.

I think change could be better affected by us with greater personal contact and directly introducing the possibilities available. Right now we are totally a site of possibility – but actually only the introduction of possibility (if even that) – it is up to the individual to actualize sexual change and momentum.

And again, this is the optimistic side. The downside is that we STILL aren't really being honest about what sex often IS ABOUT for so many people.

There is a challenge in wanting to present pleasure as a site of emergent possibility and simultaneously recognizing that this is not what most sexual pleasure is for most people, much of the time. The discursive limits of what sex should look like, feel like, and for whom, are omnipresent for those working in sex-positive services. Presenting the possibilities of pushing back to create new positive potential can feel woefully inadequate when so many people experience it as a space of frustration, violence, trauma, and exploitation.

In a world where sex is so often segregated from other dimensions of life it can be difficult to address its complex intra-actions with the other parts of our lives. This was the topic of a presentation I saw at the University of Victoria in April 2013 by Jessica Danforth (*Native Youth Sexual Health Network: The politics of sexual health and reproductive health*, Distinguished Women Scholar Lecture). Jessica Danforth is one of

the founders of the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN). She described being a Native youth and going into different Native communities to provide sexual health workshops and discovering, for example, that the community had recently lost another youth to suicide and was in a state of grieving. In such circumstances workshops on safer condom use were simply not appropriate, and so she developed a broader approach to sexual health – meeting communities where they were at, understanding more about their challenges and then asking them to determine where sexual health connected to those challenges. She emphasized NYSHN’s commitment to the idea of being “Connected to Body, Connected to Land” which their website describes as meaning that “what happens to the land and the environment(s) around us (good, bad and everything) also happens to our bodies, and our communities.” (“What we Believe In”). This approach draws on the reproductive justice movement that developed in the US in the late 1970s which emerged as a response to the pro-choice movement dominated by white, middle class women and focused primarily on abortion rights (Gurr, 2015, p. 31). Organizations of women of colour such as Sistersong wanted a broader mandate that considered issues of race and poverty and came to define reproductive justice as “the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, environmental, and economic well-being of women and girls.” (Sistersong 2006, p. 5 in Gurr p. 32).

Danforth’s lecture made me consider how often I am in spaces dedicated to sexual health that fail to situate sexual health in a wider cultural and political context. As Danforth points out it is neither useful nor appropriate to enter a space of tremendous struggle and speak to the experience of pleasure in isolation. And yet, because sexual pleasure is so individualized, and seen as so private, it is hard to have it enter

meaningfully into wider discussions of well-being. If pleasure is to hold possibility for all, it has to be historically and culturally contextualized in order to make it meaningful and accessible.

### 1 in 5

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I look over and see her standing staring at the vaginal dilators. She looks forlorn, but having already said hi and asked if there is anything I can help her with I'm hesitant to go over and inquire in case I end up over stepping my welcome. Instead, I try to make myself seem very available – dusting a nearby shelf, but regularly looking up.

After a time she asks me for the price of one of the dilators and the door opens for a wider conversation. As I tell her the price I explain that the dilators can be purchased individually or as a set, and mention that we at the store helped to create them because we found so many women came in experiencing vaginal pain and looking for good dilators – and it seemed to us that most of what was out there was hard plastic with potentially uncomfortable seams.

She responds: “really, so you get a lot of women coming in who have vaginal pain?”

From here the conversation looks like so many I've had before. I mention that around 1 in 5 women experience vaginal pain, that often their doctors tell them it is in their heads when in fact there is a very real physical issue at play. I grab our brochure on the dilators

and talk about how they can be used, but also mention that while the goal of the dilators is often to help control the muscles response to penetration and create the possibility of future pleasurable penetration, many women find that what they are looking for at the store is actually something that can be immediately pleasurable.

So, for example, some women with vaginal pain still find clitoral stimulation pleasurable so they are looking for a small external vibrator, or for more information or tools for oral sex. Others find anal stimulation pleasurable, so they are looking for more info about that, or for a butt plug or anal vibrator. While others still are looking to explore sensations outside of their genitalia – like nipple clamps, or massage oils, or a flogger – really the possibilities are endless! In this instance the woman shows interest in a vibrator so we go and explore the shelf of options. By the time she checks out with a small vibe, some lube and a handful of brochures she looks so physically different from when she came in – talkative and engaged and so much more confident. I too feel energized (and simultaneously exhausted). These are the interactions that give me hope.

In professional health settings I often find that pleasure is treated dismissively, as a laugh, but not as a serious component of health. There are, on the other hand, a couple of ways that I have repeatedly seen sex become important in these settings. The first is when someone wants to get pregnant. The second is when a woman expresses concern that she cannot meet the sexual needs of her husband or boyfriend. The second example in particular continues to take me by surprise. I attended a pelvic health conference where I heard a physiotherapist say she hates it when her patients do not have boyfriends

because without them there is no real way to know how much progress they are making. When I asked her to clarify what she meant she said that dildos and toys were useful up to a point but her job was to get the patient to a place where she could have real sex again. My own experiences have thus very much supported Potts (2008) findings that increasingly medical approaches to sex focus on supporting increased function even if it is at the detriment of pleasure.

However, it is also true that I have heard countless women tell me that when they sought medical help because they were experiencing vaginal pain they had doctors tell them to “relax”, or that it was “just in their head”. As a result some women see the medicalization of sexuality as progress. Potts (2008) also encountered this and notes that it has arisen in other studies as well; women describe access to sexuopharmaceuticals as an indication that women’s sexuality is finally being seen as important as men’s (p. 270). The problem is that in conceptualizing the mind and body as separate some component of the whole is always being left out, and with it the notion of considering pleasure, rather than function, a central indicator of wellness.

### **Being fat doesn't preclude anyone from being a smokin' hot absolute babe**

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During a training weekend with professionals who facilitate different types of movement I found myself in a familiar conversation after the day's workshops had ended. There had been discussion during the day about creating movement that embodied some level of

sexuality and the considerations when creating that space for participants. The theme of this discussion spilled over into our conversation in the evening and I noticed the body shame and disassociation from sexuality that seemed to inform the others' comments. When one woman qualified that she doesn't "sweat", she "glistens", I saw my entry point for challenging the perspectives that underpinned the dialogue. We began to talk about how thoroughly our culture trains us to reframe just about anything that could threaten a femme person's position as being dainty, pretty, and unobtrusive. Of course no one can claim that femmes don't sweat, so we can at least reframe such a graphic (accurate?!) description so that these *passive creatures* simply "glisten".

I decided to bring up (to these self-identified women all of whom expressed shame about their fat bodies) the wild notion that as much as "sweat" was not an offensive word to describe a person's *sweat*, "fat" was not a word that carried a mark of lesser-personhood, desexualisation or lack of entitlement to all-encompassing beauty. It's just an adjective. One of the women said "I've always believed that it's what's inside that counts anyway" and I explained that the concern I have is that there is the automatic assumption that the fact of having a fat body and the idea of being physically beautiful are mutually exclusive concepts. Indeed, who we are as people and how we go about our daily lives is of utmost importance. What I clarified though is that being fat doesn't preclude anyone from being a smokin' hot absolute babe. And if we could all take a look at our bodies just as they are and thank them bit by bit (*feet, thank you for walking and dancing and feeling the rocks at the beach, arms, thank you for holding my loved ones, belly, thank you for nourishing me and being a soft place for my loved ones to cuddle and my hands to rest* etc) then maybe we could also recognise the

faults in the idea that these fat bodies are somehow unentitled to pleasure. What would happen if the perspective shifted so that these bodies were offered permission to receive sexual pleasure without focusing on how they can be concealed? What if the same notion of a person being wholly beautiful, inclusive of their fat body, was extended to being wholly sexual and sexy, inclusive of their fat body. There were many tears. Lots of stories about damaging experiences and relief at the feelings coming up in a space of permission to stop buying in to self-hate. One woman said, "It's like they always want to tell you 'your partner accepts your body' or 'who you are is so much more important than what you look like' and those sound like they're supposed to be positive but you're right: it always comes down to 'you can't be a gorgeous sex goddess if you're fat'. I never realised what bullshit that part was."

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This presents an interesting attempt to engage in a reflexive process around language. This is perhaps an example of what Davies and Gannon (2006) describe as being “caught in the sticky web of discourse...enmeshed in and resisting the power of determinate discourses.” (p. 106). Here there is the rejection of a discourse that demands femininity be all encompassing, that it not include bodily functions such as sweat. But in the process also a dismissal of the positive possibility that might arise from reframing –

the experience of glistening might be quite positive, experiencing glistening might create a different embodied experience. In the web of discourses two people are located ever so differently and the path to their resistance seems in conflict. How then can sex-positive service workers learn to practice this reflexivity with language while recognizing those different positionalities, so that we can both challenge the need for a reframing, while also recognizing its potential for some.

This tension arises again in the discussion of fat bodies and their entitlement to pleasure. There is such a complex web of discourses at play here. There is a challenge to the very dominant narrative that being fat makes you less attractive, and that being less attractive makes you less entitled to pleasure. But in suggesting that “*being fat doesn't preclude anyone from being a smokin' hot absolute babe*” is there perhaps a subtle reiteration of that second part of the discourse that says that being less attractive makes you less entitled to pleasure. There is also a presentation of an alternate narrative that recognizing the value of what the body offers, and acknowledging it with gratitude helps to make visible that it is entitled to pleasure. This is another reframing that potentially presents possibility. However, for some (for example those with sick bodies, with pained bodies) it may not be as easy to positively frame the body's value in what it does, there may not be gratitude there. This story continues to raise the question: how can pleasure be conceptualized such that it is not a commodity earned, but intrinsic possibility for all bodies?

### The 'flesh' crayon in the Crayola box of my youth

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A person who had been browsing had decided on a dildo he wanted to purchase. I told him that I was just going to go to the basement to see what colours we had the toy available in, and as I started down the steps he said something like “if you have it in skin colour, that’s the one I want.” I said I would just bring up all of them and he could choose from what we had available. The product came in a light beigey peach and jet black, and I was already sensing that this customer and I were about to have a moment where some racialized assumptions were going to need to get broken down right there and took a deep breath as I put them on the counter. “Did you just call that colour ‘peach?’” he scoffed, and I said “well I guess more of a beigey, vanillaish peach?” and he says, as if he’s schooling me, “I’d call that colour ‘skin colour’. It’s skin colour! Look at it, wouldn’t you call it skin colour?” as if he feels like I’m being smug or difficult or something as I say “well sure, it’s a rendition of some peoples’ skin colour, but we don’t tend to call it The One Skin Colour or anything.” I am trying to be gentle with my dismantling of his assumption that his is the only skin. I am smiling and being intentional with my words and just trying to keep his frustration from getting to me. I imagine the ‘flesh’ crayon in the Crayola box of my youth. I imagine free samples in fashion magazines in tones like ‘lightest ivory.’ My outward calm doesn’t reach him though, and he is practically slapping himself in the face with the dildo package at this point saying ‘skin’ colour! ‘Skin’ colour! You can’t tell me it’s not ‘skin’ colour!” and as hard as I tried, I couldn’t keep myself from saying softly, “well it’s not my skin colour.” When dealing with deeply

ingrained ideas of race and bodies and skin, it is super hard to not take things personally. At our shop, we've already practiced fake scenarios around what to do when people say racist stuff, from the "subtle" to the not-so-subtle, so that we have a go-to script in our heads when people start to go to the racist-jokes-to-mask-inner-discomfort-with-being-in-a-sex-shop place. But sometimes the education moment doesn't go the direction you hope it will, and you've got to go off script, which can feel a bit brazen, and necessary. As a person of colour and an artist, I spend a lot of time thinking about colours and the meanings we ascribe to them, associations we link to them and the words we call them. In the context of a sex shop, there are toys that come in candy colours, steamy boudoir colours, utilitarian colours and, of course, skin tones. Our shop doesn't carry "skin coloured" items unless the item in question does come in more than one version of "skin colour." I think it is so interesting and complicated how customers react to the colour choices a toy comes in. I always bring all the colours available of a toy up from the stock room for the customer to choose from. Sure, if the colour choice is between candy apple green, dusty rose or gold lamé, it can seem to people like an extravagant or extra thing to need to decide on, whether they find it fun, luxurious or annoying. When the toy is something more representational of a body part, though, and it comes in a variety of rubbery versions of skin tones, the act of choosing feels different, more physically personal for some, and quite often this part of a customer interaction is when comments start coming up involving racial stereotypes (if it has or hasn't already come up in the condom section, or the DVD section, or...well you feel me). I like the work I get to do around helping people unlearn stereotypes; I like modeling the way you can give people choices completely without assumptions. When it comes to the more representational

toys, having a multitude of colour options can mean a lot to many customers, and can make a difference between feeling acknowledged and valued or frustrated and erased. For folks looking for a toy that will be used as an extension of their body and a symbol of their gender, finding something that is as close to their skin tone as possible is a form of embodiment, and I love being able to facilitate that process. Being able to affirm that we do exist and we do deserve representation and acknowledgement everywhere, including in the dildo aisle, is one way I can support my customers in their journeys through feeling embodied. Taking a deep breath and gently educating people about the existence of a million skin tones is often a hard part of this work, but worth it. Since the assumption in a lot of areas of the sex industry is that bodies are beige peach and nipples and genitals are petal pink, people of colour's bodies can be categorized as non-normative. Dismantling racism while talking about sex toys is one way that I open people's minds up to the vast variety of our bodies' colours. While we know that race is a construct, we wear our colourful skins everywhere we go and they are interlaced with every single experience we carry.

The sex industry continues to be a space of overt racism. Online porn is frequently categorized and marketed by race, with repeated overtly racist stereotypes presented, while all white sites present white women as young and innocent (Bernardi, 2006, pp. 220-243). Packaging for many toys is the same. At a conference once I mentioned to someone representing a high-end sex toy company that I thought it was a shame they had changed their packaging from a colourful box, to one that included an image of a couple. When she asked why I pointed out that the couple was white, thin,

able-bodied, and hetero, and that this was the almost universal depiction of couples on high-end sex toy products. She looked positively mystified and replied –“of course, that is our target market.” I was almost too shocked to respond, but managed to say something along the lines of “talk about limiting your market” which really does not begin to address how problematic her comment was.

This is not unusual, I should not have been shocked. If you work in sex-positive services and do not note the racism in the sex industry, the absence of positive representation of people of colour (POC) in products, resources, leaflets, books, and fellow educators and service providers you are not paying attention. In the past few years this issue surfaced among educators when a book was put together entitled *Secrets of the Sex Masters* and it was pointed out that all of the well-established sex educator contributors were white, after the controversy arose the book was published with a contribution from a Karen Chan, a person of colour based in Toronto, Canada (Frankel, 2014). The Women of Colour Sexual Health Network (WOCSHN) responded, drawing attention to the historical absence of POC voices in sexual health communities, and the specific challenges faced by POC in sexuality, down to the details of the complexity of race play in kink communities for POC, the challenges of BDSM books showing impacts on light skin, but never dark skin, and the frustration of witnessing a large conference use “a faux ‘Asian’ font and the image of a white woman in a geisha outfit to promote their conference.” (WOCSHN, 2014)

This is once again a reminder that sexual pleasure cannot be viewed in a cultural void. Embodied pleasure is limited not only by the current context but also by a historical context that continues to play out in our bodies and societies. “*While we know that race is*

*a construct, we wear our colourful skins everywhere we go and they are interlaced with every single experience we carry.*” Dildos in skin tones is one important component, but it must be accompanied by the inclusion of POC voices in resources, conferences, education, kink communities, with positive representation on leaflets, bookcovers, posters, and magazines and beyond.

The WOSHNS wrote in their 2014 letter “**Now that everyone’s watching**, who will be the first to publish our amazing book of testimonies, recipes, healing strategies, community building, and pleasure many of us may seek?” Again here they have situated pleasure in a wider context with recipes, and healing strategies. This contextualization is also seen in a calendar created by Elisha Lim in 2013 entitled “The Comfort of Queer Family Wisdom.” The calendar was a collection of Elisha’s heroes, with beautiful portraits of a person each month and information about who they are and what they’ve committed themselves to. The creation of the calendar came about because, in Elisha’s own words: “I wrote this calendar because I left Toronto and moved to a xenophobic community. I don’t think I’d ever felt so unwelcome, and feeling sexy was out of the question. Being butch or sissy or trans or queer or anything hardly registered – it was hard just to keep up with conversations.” (Lim, 2013, “The Comfort of Queer Family Wisdom”). They found solace in the writing and works of their ‘queer family’, those who had come before and written about going through the same pains. When the calendar first came out, I too had moved away from Toronto, and found I was deeply homesick for my queer community, and the vibrant diversity of my Toronto community. I wrote Elisha with gratitude for creating the project, and ordered the calendar – when it arrived I

opened the envelope and was sprinkled with red heart sequins. This tiny gesture felt so comforting, I was quite overwhelmed.

My move to traditional Lekwungen territories (Victoria, B.C.) – a much smaller and less culturally diverse city than Toronto – reminded me of the many ways I benefit from diversity, from the projects of people like Elisha Lim. As a queer person with chronic pain, my otherness was mostly invisible, but to me it felt ever present in a way that it had not in a more diverse community. I found myself having to challenge moments of ableism, racism, and homophobia, frequently where at home I realized I often relied on others to do this. The experience led me to realize how much I had taken this for granted. At the same time I was much more aware of being on indigenous land, then I ever had been in Toronto. The ongoing legacy of colonialism was more palpable to me, forcing me to consider the many ways that I both engaged and challenged it, and was both benefited and harmed by it.

I am aware of the contribution of people of colour in this thesis, who again volunteered their time to share their experiences, from which I gain so much. This is a generosity that I must repay. It is a reminder to me to ensure that whatever spaces may become open to me through the privilege gained from my skin, and this education and degree, I use to ensure that POC are also at the table, voices heard. It is a reminder to continue to listen and challenge my own assumptions, so that I can continue to grow and repay my communities.

## Chapter 7: Closing Reflections

### On the Methodology

Having attempted to engage in a process of collective biography I have gained a number of insights into how, and with whom the methodology might be best employed. With 20/20 hindsight I now realize it was not realistic to attempt to explore such a complex methodology in a short period of time, with peers who had not had access to extensive reading on the process. In particular the reflexive practice stood out as something that was simply not achievable in the context of this research. This is unsurprising as the researchers in Davies & Gannon (2006) also found this process extremely challenging, despite their familiarity with the wider process. The discomfort the researchers expressed was mirrored by the participants in this research project, but without the time and training it was not something we could overcome, and instead risked having participants leave feeling judged and unsuccessful.

As a complete methodology I do not feel I was entirely successful at transferring it into a new and untested setting. However, I remain at ease with the choice to pursue collective biography, as it presented me with an epistemology that left me free to improvise when needed, and adapt the research project to the needs of my participants as well as my own. For example, I was able to imagine and implement a second, complementary phase of research, and to make use of social media tools to recruit participants from different locations. I was also able to adapt my approach to meet the needs of my participants, for example recording and transcribing a verbal rather than written submission. I approached these changes as signs of a successful engagement with

a new process, as opposed to signs of a failed methodology, and feel that that approach allowed for the most ethical engagement in the research I could imagine.

Ultimately, I think the methodology allowed me to engage with the questions I sought to explore. Though not through as collective a process as I had imagined, I feel I was able to reflexively engage the narratives that arose through the research process in order to explore how sex-positive service workers both reproduce and challenge dominant discourses about sexual pleasure. I hope this research might encourage other new researchers to consider collective biography and how it might be enacted in new and different settings.

### **On Reconceptualizing Bodies and Pleasure**

The theoretical foundations that helped me to reconceptualize bodies and pleasure as sites of transgressive possibilities informed both the process of the research and the analysis of the data. I felt they were extremely useful tools in helping to engage the positive potential of sexuality and pleasure without becoming stuck in binary constructions of positivity. For me, these concepts came alive as I analyzed the submissions. Engaging with this thinking allowed me to conceive of challenging experiences not as limitations but as opportunities to make change, without negating the, often painful, nature of those embodied experiences.

I found each of the three theoretical clusters I explored helped to expand my thinking. The concept of *The body dismantled* helped me to reconceptualize experiences of pain, vulnerability, and instability as potential components of generative change. I

came to consider the process of creating this master's thesis a limit experience, and in doing so was able to reconceptualize challenging experiences along the way as part of a positive process of letting go of myself in order to put a changed version of myself together again. I also drew a distinction between a limit experience with an end and a BwO engaged in continuous change, and this allowed me to consider how they pose different challenges and require different approaches to support. *The body becoming* helped me to reframe the body as emergent, allowing me to consider what other possibilities must always exist. This thinking allowed me to engage critically with the notion of a mind-body dualism, helping me to challenge approaches to sex, gender, or pleasure that only engaged with one side of that fallacious duality. *The body in pleasure* shifted my thinking away from outcome driven approaches to pleasure. By seeing pleasure as also emergent, I conceptualized it as a process, and challenged the idea that the process of pleasure should ever be seen as simply good or bad. This helped me also to consider what else pleasure might be, redrawing the parameters of what experiences might shift someone's thinking about or experience of their sexuality.

I am thus quite content with how the theoretical foundations of the research played out through its process. I think the reconceptualizations I explored presented me with important ways of approaching the experiences that arose through the submissions. I also believe they helped me to critically engage with the dominant narratives that I explored, in a way that supported me in moving beyond reactive responses and into new ways of thinking.

## **On the Practical Applications of the Research**

Certain considerations emerged through the collective process and the analysis of the data that will inform how I engage with sex-positive service work as I move forward. I believe these practices offer an opportunity for sex-positive service providers to increase the positive potential for pleasure.

These include:

- Promoting the inclusion of shame free discussions of sexual pleasure among youth and adults
- Promoting the potential of sex work as a valuable contribution to pleasure and the wider community
- Engaging discussions of pleasure in a cultural context, recognizing that our current and historical context changes our relationship to our body and pleasure, and recognizing that promoting pleasure means engaging with those realities to create new opportunities
- Being conscious of the negative impact of narratives of risk
- Promoting the inclusion of POC in sexual health communities on all levels, and working to ensuring that their voices are being heard
- Conceptualizing sexual pleasure as a process and not an achievement, thus avoiding discussions of “good” vs. “bad” sex
- Drawing attention to and learning from communities engaging in re-imagining the limits of bodies and pleasure, such as disability communities, kink communities, queer communities, etc.

- Exploring new ways of challenging normative discourses in order to ensure that they do not come at the expense of ‘non-normative’ sexualities

### **On the Experience as a Whole**

When I entered into graduate school I had a clear vision of the topics I wanted to explore through my research. I sought out a graduate program that would help me connect my work experience with progressive theory. When I found Studies in Policy and Practice at the University of Victoria I knew I had found what I was looking for. I didn't apply anywhere else. It turned out to be all I had hoped. My professors were brilliant and engaging, but also generous and humble, the course work was challenging but rewarding, and my classmates had such a wealth and variety of experiences and backgrounds to share. Conversations flowed in and out of the classroom, and I felt engaged in a way that was active and exciting. So, it came as quite a shock when towards the end of my first year of coursework the University announced that the program would be closing, and mine would be the final year of graduates. The program was, according to the University, not profitable enough to continue.

From that point on my graduate experience became more challenging. The energy of the faculty and students was deflated. The closing of the program was a reflection of the challenges we each faced in our own work, trying to keep our work and ourselves alive in the age of austerity. In the very space we had to come to engage critically with the limits of neoliberalism, capitalism was winning. For a brief moment it looked as though the student body might come together to fight to keep the program alive, but the moment passed. Each of us was fighting one too many fights already.

This was the backdrop upon which this research was created and realized. There were moments, sometimes stretches of time, where the research came alive, and I felt invigorated. There were many more moments, and longer stretches of time, when it felt undoable. My body was engaged in its own undoing, as my chronic pain became more active. There were endless doctors, painkillers, diets, physiotherapy, and exercises. My concentration was effected, so I was only able to read or write for short periods, which meant unlearning years of writing in 10+ hour stretches before a deadline. Nothing was what it had been. This was my limit experience.

Many things kept me from moving into unsustainability. I was able to move home, and work part-time, and sometimes not at all. I found a group of fellow chronic pain sufferers who met infrequently to complain, question, laugh, and generally validate each other's experience of struggle. I continued to develop my relationship with my two collective biography participants, and continued to work on and off at CAYA, which kept me feeling connected to the research and the ideas I had sought to explore. And for six months, I stepped completely away from my thesis as I spent my time caring for my then 18-month nephew who filled me with joy.

With this time and support I was slowly able to find new strategies that helped limit my pain, and others that helped manage the pain that remained. Despite the extremely drawn out process, I found that as I returned to my writing new ideas and understandings continued to occur to me, just frequently enough to keep me feeling that the project was alive. Through the generous editing of my supervisor, I saw the ideas take shape.

As I write this today, I have a bowl of sourdough fermenting beside me. One of the many new low energy hobbies I have picked up to keep me engaged on the days when I know I won't be leaving home. Today most bread is leavened in a few hours with large amounts of commercial yeast. Sourdough is leavened with a starter made of flour and water, which develops activity from wild yeast and regular feedings of more flour and water over several weeks. A tablespoon of this natural starter can leaven two whole loaves of bread, when given plenty of time, mostly resting, and occasionally turning the dough to help form structure. When it finally makes it to the oven, if all has gone right, an almost magical thing occurs – oven spring! – the bread rises up filling with air and flavor. Through a long and slow fermentation, and lots of care, it becomes forever changed, never to return to the bubbling liquid from whence it began.

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