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'Freedom to' and 'freedom from': A new vision for sex-positive politics

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Abstract

While the sex-positive movement has made a significant contribution to the advancement of women's sexuality, much of this work has emphasized 'positive liberty,' that is, women's *freedom to* expand sexual expression and sexual diversity. This work has largely ignored women's *freedom from* oppressive mandates and requirements about their sexuality, that is, 'negative liberty.' Drawing upon anarchist theories from the 19th and 20th centuries, political theories of positive and negative liberty, early radical feminist arguments, and the infamous 'sex wars' of the 1980s, the fundamental tension between women's *freedom to* do what they want, and *freedom from* doing what others require of them, proves a critical juncture in feminist understandings of sexual freedom. To illustrate this, I examine seven key examples where women are caught between joyous celebrations of sexual progress and disturbingly regressive attacks on their sexual empowerment: orgasm, sexual satisfaction, treatment for sexual dysfunction, rape and sexual coercion, body hair as 'personal choice,' same-sex eroticism, and sexual fantasy. Ultimately, I argue that the sex-positive movement must advance its politics to include a more serious consideration of the *freedom from* as it relates to the *freedom to*. In doing so, tensions around the 'sex wars' could evolve into a more cohesive and powerful feminist movement.

Keywords

Sex positive, sex radical, women's sexuality, anarchism, radical feminism, sexual subjectivities

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Introduction

Walking through the exhibit hall at the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality conference recently, the displays featured a vast array of new possibilities for sexual expression: dildos shaped like tongues, edgy books and journals on bisexuality and polyamory, videos for helping heterosexual women gain comfort with penetrating their (receptive) boyfriends and husbands, and even a pamphlet for an “autoerotic asphyxiation support club.” Clearly, the sex positive movement—inclusive of those who argue against all restrictions on sexuality aside from issues of safety and consent—has made significant advances in how scholars, feminists, practitioners, and the public think about, feel about, and “do” sexuality. For example, women’s access to feminist sex toy shops, pornography, blogs, and representations of queer sexuality have increased dramatically in the past several decades (Loe, 1999; Queen, 1997a; Queen, 1997b). Despite the relentless attacks from conservatives in the U.S., people today generally have more expansive options for how they express “normal” sexuality, and they can do so more openly and with more formal and social support. Sex-positive feminists have, in many ways, turned upside-down the notion of the once highly-dichotomous public/private, virgin/whore, and deviant/normal. The sex-positive movement has helped to decriminalize sex work (Jennes, 1993), expand representations in pornography (McElroy, 1995), teach people how to embrace sexuality as normal and healthy (Queen, 1997a; Queen, 1997b), explore “sexual enhancement” devices (Reece et al., 2004), advocate comprehensive sex education (Irvine, 2002; Spencer et al., 2008; Peterson, 2010), and challenge overly simplistic notions of “good” and “bad” sex (Rubin, 1993). From Annie Sprinkle showing her cervix as a “Public Cervix Announcement” (Shrage, 2002), to Carol Queen (1997a) arguing against “whore stigma,” to Gayle Rubin (1993) fighting tirelessly against a fixed (and faulty) construction of sex offending, sex positivity has laid the groundwork to depathologize sexuality, particularly for women, sexual minorities, people of color, and sex workers.

Still, the whole scene—clearly intent on a “progress narrative” of sexuality—gives me a strong sense of unease, as many contradictions still overwhelm women’s sexual lives. Along with these newfound modes of pleasure-seeking and knowledge-making, women struggle within a plethora of urgent contemporary challenges: alarming rates of sexual violence (Luce, 2010), body shame (Salk and Engeln-Maddox, 2012), eating disorders (Calogero and Pina, 2011), pressure to orgasm (Farvid and Braun, 2006; Fahs, 2011a), distance from their bodily experiences (Martin, 2001), disempowerment with childbirth (Martin, 2001; Lyster, 2006), masochistic sexual fantasies (Bivona and Critelli 2009), and a host of other sexual and political crises. When asked why they orgasm, women cite their partner’s pleasure as more important than their own (Nicolson and Burr, 2003) and they increasingly associate sexual freedom with consumerism, fashion, and commodities (Hakim, 2010). Women internalize normative pressures to hate their pubic hair and body hair (Riddell et al., 2010; Fahs, 2011b; Bercaw-Pratt, 2012) and hide their menstrual cycles from others (Bobel, 2006; Mandziuk, 2010). Across

demographic categories, women suffer immensely from feeling disempowered to speak, explore, and embrace the kinds of sexual lives they most want.

This paper takes this vast contradictory moment—that is, living between celebrations of progress and alarmingly regressive notions of women’s sexual “empowerment”—to explore the problems of (uncritical) sex positivity in this post-sexual-revolution age. Drawing from anarchist theories from the past two centuries—particularly the notion that true liberation and freedom must include *both* the freedom *to* do what we want to do *AND* the freedom *from* oppressive structures and demands—I argue that the sex positive movement must advance its politics to include a more serious consideration of the *freedom from* repressive structures (or “negative liberty”). More specifically, by outlining several ways that the *freedom from* and the *freedom to* are currently in conversation in discourses of women’s sexuality, I argue that the integration of these two halves could lead to a subtler and more complete understanding of contemporary sexual politics, particularly around tensions that arose during the infamous “sex wars” of the 1980s, thus helping to build a more cohesive and powerful feminist movement as a whole.

Anarchism and sexuality

There is a long history of association between anarchism and sexual freedom, but sexual freedom means different things to different people at different times, and has complex connections to ideas about nature, bodies, gender, power, and social organization (Greenway, 1997).

While anarchy and political theory may not seem like an intuitive bedfellow for feminists who study sex, the political and social bases of anarchy have much to teach feminists interested in bodies and sexualities as sites of social (in)justice. Anarchists have long espoused important divisions between those interested in individualist versus social anarchism. On the one hand, individualist anarchism, what Isaiah Berlin (1969) termed “negative liberty,” argued for freedom from the state and corporate apparatuses. On the other hand, social anarchism advocated for both negative liberty (freedom from the state) and positive liberty (freedom to do what we want to do). True economic freedom, anarchists argue, must include the simultaneous freedom from rules that lead to worker exploitation and the freedom to take actions to ensure worker control of organizations. Both sides, however, embrace negative liberty as a central tenet of freedom. In fact, the concept of negative liberty appeared quite early, as Thomas Hobbes (1651) alluded to it in *Leviathan*, while Hegel is credited as the originator of the concept (Carter, 2012). As early as the 19th century, Marxists constructed the freedom *to* and the freedom *from* as two complementary halves that advance the project of social justice, liberty, and freedom for all; some Marxists considered negative and positive liberty indistinguishable and therefore difficult to outline as separate entities (Fromm, 1941/1966; Carter, 2012). In other words, one cannot have true freedom without

both the freedom *to* do what we want and the freedom *from* having to do what others tell us to do. This dialectic between negative and positive liberty formed a central tension in political theories of freedom, sovereignty, and morality over the last century (Flickschuh, 2007; Carter et al., 2007).

Both within and outside of anarchist communities, tensions arose between those interested in negative liberty and positive liberty. For example, while Emma Goldman (1917) fought for the freedom *from* state-sponsored marriage, many prominent social theorists argued for the freedom to pursue our full potential (Fromm, 1966), the freedom to self-govern (e.g., Rousseau), and the ability to have “free will” (e.g., Hegel) (Carter, 2012). Feminist anarchists like Goldman, Voltairine de Cleyre, and Lucy Parsons fought to integrate individualist and social anarchism by uniting ideas, the social imaginary, and the gendered self (Ferguson, 2010; Ferguson, 2011; Passet, 2003), particularly as the notion of the “individual” became increasingly less relevant to Goldman and her contemporaries (Day, 2007). Anarcha-feminists were among the first who refused to conceptualize love, relationships, and domesticity as separate from state politics, calling for an end to “sex slavery” (de Cleyre, 1914), jealousy (Goldman, 1998), oppression through motherhood, marriage, and love (Goldman, 1917; Marso, 2003), and control of love and relationships (Haaland, 1993; Molyneux, 2001). In the 1960s, riffing on the work of anarchists, radical feminists—many of whom came from Marxist backgrounds that prioritized the elimination of class inequalities and the importance of structural equalities—fought for the *freedom to* as much as the *freedom from*, simultaneously advancing ideas about women *gaining* access to certain previously impenetrable spheres (e.g., all-male faculty clubs, all-male jobs) and *blocking* access to others (e.g., all-women consciousness-raising groups, all-women classrooms, all-women music festivals). (While freedom to and freedom from rarely serve as precise opposites, the ability to willfully *separate* has been considered more a “freedom from” than a “freedom to”). Though radical feminists rarely referred directly to anarchism as their inspiration, these same ideological concepts (negative and positive liberty) informed the center of their political claims about the pathological implications of patriarchy. Radical feminist circles explored the varying modes of power imbalances between men and women (and, later, between women) and attended to distinctions between “power over” (domination and oppression), “power to” (freedom to do and act), and “power with” (collective power to do and act) (Allen, 2008). Far from the oversimplified notion of a singular, rebellious anarchy, they argued for a multi-faceted approach to understanding the workings of power, the state, and social relationships.

Still, despite the clear retrospective links we can draw between radical feminism and anarchism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly surrounding notions of how women interact with state interventions about abortion, the tenets of anarchism have not typically linked up with the theories and practices of women’s *sexuality* (practices, identities, attitudes). While anarcha-feminists did focus on institutions that affected *women* (e.g., marriage, love, motherhood), anarchism as a political movement has typically failed to construct the individual,

corporeal body as a relevant site of interest (Ward, 2004), often preferring to focus on *freedom from* external social forces found in regimes, dictatorships, or authority (broadly defined). How people have sex, or what power dynamics they bring to sex, has remained largely absent from this rhetoric, even while communities formed around sexual identity (e.g., LGBT movements) garner attention. Even when these connections have existed (e.g., *The Joy of Sex* author, Alex Comfort, published numerous anarchist pamphlets, see Rayner, 2000), the relationship between anarchism and sexuality has rarely received much attention. And, despite the feminist plea that “the personal is political,” the overwhelming interest in 1960s counterculture and the sexual revolution, and the (highly commercialized) notion of “girl power” and “sexual empowerment,” sex and the body have typically fallen outside the modalities of anarchist political activism and have not formed a central component of most anarchist movements (Greenway, 1997; Heckert and Cleminson, 2011).

As one rare exception, Jamie Heckert (2010, 2011) has interrogated links between sex, love, the body, and anarchism as fundamentally intertwined, particularly as anarchism helps shed light on phenomena like monogamy and polyamory, friendship, and the power of the erotic (Heckert, 2010; Heckert and Cleminson, 2011). To counter the “phallicized whiteness” of capitalism, Heckert and Cleminson (2011) argue that processes and relationships themselves have value, that the conversations, connections, love relationships, and collegial bonds that *produce* knowledge do matter, perhaps more than the *outcomes* or *products* of those interactions. More precisely, “love and solidarity can be articulated in the sphere of sexuality and beyond within societies that may seem ever more disconnected, atomized, and authoritarian. . . rather than supporting charity, anarchism favors solidarity where all practices of freedom are recognized as interconnected” (Heckert and Cleminson, 2011: 4).

Even though anarchist theories of rebellion from the state form an intuitive companion to claims for sexual “freedom,” sexuality and anarchy have not typically joined forces (with Greenway, 1997, Passet, 2003, and Heckert and Cleminson, 2011 as notable exceptions). Nevertheless, the two share an important set of common goals, particularly around the *freedom from* oppressive structures, mandates, statutes, and interventions. As Gustav Landauer wrote, “The state is not something which can be destroyed by a revolution, but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently” (Heckert, 2010). Sexuality, then, allows us to “relate differently” and “behave differently,” to reimagine our relationships to sex, love, friendship, and kinship (Heckert, 2011), to forego the boredom and monotony capitalism engenders (CrimethInc, 2012). If we understand sexuality as a tool of creativity, as a force that reconsiders power, equality, and freedom, it becomes a perfect companion for anarchist sensibilities. Sexuality as *process* rather than *outcome* (as desire rather than merely orgasm, as exchange rather than merely physical release) links up with the political sentiments of anarchy by suggesting that interaction between people—ideally devoid of power

imbalances—matters far more than goal-oriented drives toward an *end*. Thus, drawing upon these claims, I argue that merging the *freedom from* and the *freedom to* with sexuality may result in a powerful overhaul of fragmented segments of social and political life: the personal and political, the corporeal and the cognitive, the “sex-positive” and the “radical feminist.”

Sex positives and the ‘freedom to’

Though sex-positive feminists as currently constituted would likely not categorize themselves exclusively as fighting for the *freedom to*, the vast majority of their work has centered on the expansion of sexual rights, freedoms, and modes of expression (Queen, 1997a; Queen, 1997b). The movement emerged in response to highly repressive discourses of sexuality, particularly those that they perceived as embracing a state-centered, conservative ideology of “good sex”—as heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, no pornography, bodies only, and vanilla—and “bad sex”—as homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, pornography, with manufactured objects, and sadomasochistic (Rubin, 1993). Though the sex wars of the 1980s—where feminists battled about pornography in particular—suggest that sex positivity arose in response to the supposedly pro-censorship notions from radical feminists (though that, too, is highly controversial), in fact sex positivity more clearly rebelled against conservatism, evangelical culture, homophobia, and religious dogma (Duggan and Hunter, 1995). In this way, the sex wars have arguably falsely framed sex positives as the “enemy” of radical feminists, causing much destruction and havoc to the feminist movement as a whole (Ferguson, 1984).

Sex positives fought fiercely for the *freedom to* have diverse, multiple, expansive, and agentic sexual expression; that is, to dislodge histories of repression, sex positives argued that women (and men) should freely embrace new modes of experiencing and expressing their sexuality. Often taking a sort of libertarian perspective on sexual freedom, some wings of the sex positive movement value lack of government intervention into sex as their top priority (Weeks, 2002) while other aspects of the sex positive movement more clearly value education and expansion of sexual knowledge (Irvine, 2002). Sex positives share a concern with external limitations placed on sexual expression and with the moralizing judgments placed upon diverse sexualities. For example, Carol Queen defined sex positivity as a community of people who “don’t denigrate, medicalize, or demonize any form of sexual expression except that which is not consensual” (Queen, 1997a, p.128).

One of the key battlegrounds for sex positives—sex education—has also been (arguably) its most successful terrain. Sex positives fought against abstinence-only sex education in favor of comprehensive sex education that would support not only *more* knowledge about STIs and birth control, but also more expansive ideas about queer sexuality, pleasure, alternative families, and options for abortion (Irvine, 2002). Further, as an offshoot of the push toward *more* sex education,

feminist-owned sex toy shops began to open (and thrive) throughout the country (e.g., Good Vibes in San Francisco, Smitten Kitten in Minneapolis, Early to Bed in Chicago, Aphrodite's Toy Box in Atlanta, and several others). These stores state that they promoted safe, fun, non-sexist ways to enjoy sex toys, pornography, and erotica, and have worked hard to navigate the tricky terrain of selling commercial products while nurturing an inclusive, community-based, potentially activist space (Loe, 1999; Attwood, 2005). The conflicts between supposedly promoting sex education while also embracing commercial gains presents tricky territory for feminist critics.

As another key victory for sex positive feminists, they have fought for heightened awareness about, and advocacy for, queer sexualities. This has included the expansion of trans rights (NCTE, 2003; Currah et al., 2006), more legal and social rights for lesbians and gay men (Bevacqua, 2004; Sycamore, 2004), and acceptance for bisexuality within the queer movement (Garber, 1995). Sex positives have rejected anti-gay-marriage statutes even while exploring marriage as fundamentally flawed (Sycamore, 2004), encouraged better social services for queer youth (McCabe and Rubinson, 2008; Orechia, 2008), and worked to understand sexuality as fluid, flexible, and not beholden to dogmatic and religious doctrines (Diamond, 2009). In doing so, they have embraced a diversity of bodies, expressions, and identities and have critically examined the all-too-narrow construction of the "sexual body" as white, heterosexual, young, female, and passive. Instead, sex positives have moved to recognize the sexualities of those on the "fringe": fat bodies (Johnson and Taylor, 2008), older bodies (Chrisler and Ghiz, 1993), people of color (Landrine and Russo, 2010; Moore, 2012), gender queer (Branlandingham, 2011), and "alternative" bodies (Hughes, 2009). These *freedom to* victories have certainly helped the feminist movement link up with other movements for social and political justice, particularly as sex positives reject claims of "deviance" for any particular group (Showden, 2012).

Radical feminists and the 'freedom from'

At the same time that sex positives argued to decriminalize, expand, and embrace sexuality—often constructing pornography as positive, educational, and anti-repressive—radical feminists countered these claims by looking at the *freedom from* (MacKinnon, 1989). While radical feminists have often been seen as the *opposite* of, or contrary to, the beliefs of sex positivity, I argue that radical feminists have merely wanted *more* recognition of "negative liberty," or the *freedom from* oppressive structures that most women confront on a daily basis. (Not all sex positives have totally neglected the *freedom from*, but rather, have *deprioritized* the *freedom from* in comparison to other goals and priorities.) Advocating caution about the unconditional access to women that is built into the sex-positive framework, radical feminists essentially said that, without women's *freedom from* patriarchal oppression, women lacked freedom at all. Real sexual freedom, radical feminists claimed, must include the *freedom from* the social mandates to have sex (particularly the enforcement of sex with men) and *freedom from* treatment as sexual objects.

Looking collectively at the work of Teresa De Lauretis (1988), Marilyn Frye (1997), Adrienne Rich (1980), Audre Lorde (2007), Andrea Dworkin (1997), and Catharine MacKinnon (1989), they all share the belief that men's access to women is a *taken-for-granted* assumption often exercised on women's bodies and sexualities. Indeed, all powerful groups demand unlimited access to less powerful groups, while less powerful groups rarely have access to more powerful groups. As Marilyn Frye (1997) said, "Total power is unconditional access; total powerlessness is being unconditionally accessible. The creation and manipulation of power is constituted of the manipulation and control of access" (411). For example, the poor rarely have access to the rich (particularly if demanded by the poor), while the rich almost always have access to the poor (e.g., buying drugs or sex in poor neighborhoods and returning to their "safe" communities). Affluent whites often live in gated communities, in part to deny access to people of color, while middle-class whites live in segregated suburban cul-de-sacs. Men notoriously operate in spheres of power that exclude women (e.g., country clubs, golf circles, "good ol' boys" hiring practices, and so on). At its core, radical feminism argues against the patriarchal assumption that men have the *right* to access women (and the patriarchal notion that women must internalize this mandate).

Lesbian separatism, particularly *political* lesbian separatism not based specifically or primarily on sexual desire for women (Atkinson, 1974; Densmore, 1973), represents a rebellion against this mandated access. By revealing the assumptions of access embedded within sexuality—namely that men can always access the bodies of women for their sexual "needs"—lesbian separatists make a clear case for the *freedom from*. All-women spaces that excluded men did not merely allow women to physically separate from men, but also to rebel against the constant surveillance of the male gaze and men's *assumptions of access* (Fahs, 2011a). These separatists understood that the "free love" of the 1970s, far from a celebratory moment of progress for women, merely allowed men's sexual access to *more* women and largely ignored women's experiences with "brutalization, rape, submission [and] someone having power over them" (Dunbar, 1969, 56). They also (rightly) noted that women's assertion of their *freedom from* interacting with men provokes dangerous resistances, anger, and hostilities.

Moving forward to the 1980s, scholars like Dworkin (1997) and MacKinnon (1989) made similar claims about sexual access when they argued for the *freedom from* messages and images embedded in pornography that portrayed women as "hot wet fuck tubes" (Dworkin, 1991). Further, they called out the power-imbalanced practices of sexual intercourse and theorized about the dangers of women tolerating their own oppression (e.g., not reporting rape). By calling out sexuality as a site of dangerous power imbalances between men and women, their version of *freedom from* became particularly threatening within and outside of feminist circles. Recall that both MacKinnon and Dworkin received death threats and had to retain security personnel for even *suggesting* that women can and should assert their *freedom from* pornography and power-imbalanced sex (MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1998). Taken together, these examples reveal that the *freedom from*

provokes greater threat from men and the culture at large, with increasingly hostile backlashes against those who assert their right to negative liberty. To suggest that women *deny access to men* undercuts core cultural assumptions about gender politics and patriarchal power.

Cycles of liberation

Looking at these histories together, a clear pattern emerges: rarely does the feminist movement (or the queer movement, or sexuality studies) adequately address the dialectic between the *freedom from* and the *freedom to*. I am particularly concerned about the degree to which sex positivity neglects the *freedom from*, particularly when the rhetoric of sex positivity often inadvertently allows for the unconditional access to women that many of their projects, goals, and narratives rely upon. That said, I also worry about the ways that negative liberty (ironically) could create new norms that require women to label their (heterosexual, pornographic, masochistic, etc.) desires as necessarily patriarchal (e.g., Showden, 2012 has suggested that sex positivity must become a “politics of *maybe*” rather than a “politics of *yes*”). The relative crisis of women’s “sexual freedom”—along with the hazards of *solving* this problem—becomes increasingly clear when examining contemporary dilemmas and quandaries women face in their sexual lives. In the following seven examples, I outline the ways that the *freedom from* has fallen more and more out of focus, even as the *freedom to* achieves small victories. These seven themes are organized by first emphasizing the more (supposedly) positive and personal aspects of sexuality (orgasm, sexual satisfaction), followed by an examination of how cultural norms infect women’s sexual lives (treatments of sexual dysfunction, rape and sexual coercion, body hair), and ending with an examination of how women function in the cultural imaginary (same-sex eroticism, sexual fantasy). Each of these elements reveals the tenuous nature of sexual empowerment and showcases the absolute necessity of uniting positive and negative liberty. I reiterate the anarchist principle outlined above: one cannot have true freedom without *both* the *freedom to* and the *freedom from*.

Orgasm

In my previous work (Fahs, 2011a), I looked at what I consider to be the most dangerous aspect of defining sexual freedom: it is subject to continued appropriations and distortions, and it requires continual reinvention. Sexual freedom has no fixed definition and is not static. Rather, because freedoms are easily co-opted, all definitions of freedom (sexual or otherwise) are transient and transitory, require constant re-evaluation and reassessment, and present an ongoing set of new challenges to each cohort and generation. In the articulation of freedom, co-optation is not only possible, but *probable*, particularly when addressing issues of women’s sexuality. As a key example, consider a brief history of women’s orgasms. During the sexual revolution, women fought hard for the right to have the clitoris

recognized as a site of legitimate pleasure. Until the late 1960s, it was assumed (largely due to the influence of psychoanalysis) that vaginal orgasm represented “maturity” and clitoral orgasm represented “immaturity” (studies by medical doctors—as recent as 2011—still argue this! See Costa and Brody, 2011; and Brody and Weiss, 2011); still more, women were expected to prioritize phallic male pleasure over anything clitoral, often resulting in harsh pressures for women to vaginally orgasm. As Ti-Grace Atkinson (1974) said, “Why *should* women learn to vaginal orgasm? Because that’s what men want. How about a facial tic? What’s the difference?” (7). During the sexual revolution, the convergence of the queer movement, the women’s movement, and the sexual revolution led to a concerted interest in dethroning the vaginal orgasm in favor of the clitoral orgasm (Gerhard, 2000). If women valued and recognized the power of the clitoris, some argued, they could embrace sex with other women, orgasm more easily and efficiently, and enjoy the same sexual pleasures men had always enjoyed (Koedt, 1973).

This celebration of progress on the orgasm front—notably something radical feminists expressed some concerns about even then—had a short-lived period of revolutionary potential. At the tail end of the sexual revolution, radical feminists like Dana Densmore (1973) and Roxanne Dunbar (1969) began to worry that all of this focus on women’s clitoral orgasms could lead to an “orgasm frenzy” where women would feel *mandated* to orgasm and men would use clitoral orgasms as yet another tool to oppress women. Dunbar believed that sexual liberation became equated with “the ‘freedom’ to ‘make it’ with anyone anytime” (49), while Sheila Jeffreys (1990) claimed retrospectively that “sexual liberation” from the 1960s and 1970s merely substituted one form of oppression for another. Indeed, over the next twenty years, clitoral orgasms evolved from a much-fought-for occurrence to a social mandate between (heterosexual) sex partners. Fast-forward to today and we find some startling data: over half of women have faked orgasms, often regularly (Wiederman, 1997), and women describe faking orgasms for reasons that still ensure male dominance and power: they want to support the egos of their (male) partners; they want to end the encounter (primarily intercourse), often because they feel exhausted; and they imagine that orgasms make them “normal” (Fahs, 2011a; Roberts et al., 1995). This suggests that, though orgasm once served a symbolic role as a tool of liberation (a new *freedom to* personal desire), orgasm eventually reverted to being another tool of patriarchy as orgasm became a marker of male prowess. Given the high rates of faking orgasm (Fahs, 2011a; Roberts et al., 1995) now seen among women, many women may now need the *freedom from* orgasm as a *mandate*; further, the mandate exists not primarily to please women themselves, but to please their (male) partners.

Sexual satisfaction

As an offshoot of the “orgasm problem,” recent research on sexual satisfaction has pointed to some disturbing trends. While popular culture (particularly movies, music, and magazines) generally advocates women’s *freedom to* have sexual

pleasure and satisfaction, little attention is paid to how women themselves *construct* satisfaction or how women's sexual satisfaction still showcases men's overwhelming sexual power. What does a "satisfied woman" say about her sexual experiences? Studies consistently suggest correlations between sexual satisfaction and intimacy, close relationships (Pinney et al., 1987; Sprecher et al., 1995), emotional closeness (Trompeter et al., 2012), reciprocal feelings of love, and versatile sexual techniques (Haavio-Mannila and Kontula, 1997). These findings underlie the relational dimensions of women's sexual satisfaction (and undermine pop culture's "bodice ripping" stereotypes). In this regard, women may have the *freedom to* sexual pleasure as long as it remains in the stereotyped confines of marriage and romantic love. This may represent a sign of progress, or it may signify the trappings of traditional femininity. Similarly, studies also show that sexually satisfied women typically have better body image (Meltzer and McNulty, 2010), lower rates of eating disorders, lower self-objectification tendencies (Frederickson and Robert, 1997; Calogero and Thompson, 2009), thereby suggesting other modest victories for the association between sexual expression and personal empowerment even while raising questions about women's interpretation of "satisfaction."

When looking more closely at data about women's sexual satisfaction, particularly measures of "deservingness" and "entitlement," women fall far short of full equality with men with regard to seeking pleasure, though differing definitions and assessments of satisfaction make these gender findings increasingly complicated (McClelland, 2010; McClelland, 2011). For example, the same relational dimensions that may help women equate sexual satisfaction with emotional closeness also demand that they prioritize their partner's (especially men's) pleasure over their own. When asked why they want to orgasm, women say that their partners' pleasure matters more than their own and that their partners' pleasure is a conditional factor that determines their own pleasure (Nicholson and Burr, 2003), calling into question *whose* pleasure women value when assessing their own satisfaction. Compared to men, women also more often equate sex with submissiveness, and when they do so, this leads to lower rates of sexual arousal, autonomy, and enjoyment (Sanchez et al., 2006). Further, compared to men, women also describe orgasm as a far less important component of their sexual satisfaction (Kimes, 2002).

Additionally, sexual satisfaction is certainly not static or equally distributed *between* all women, as different demographic groups report vastly different sexual satisfaction. Strong correlations between sexual satisfaction, sexual activity, and social identities have been found, as lower status women (e.g., women of color, less educated women, working-class women) reported having more *frequent* but less satisfying sex, particularly compared to white, upper-class (typically higher status) women (Fahs and Swank, 2011). That is, women without as much social and political power still have sex, but they have to endure less satisfying sex on a much more regular basis than women with more power. This suggests, most specifically, that lower status women more often lack the *freedom from* unwanted sex or unsatisfying sex even while they have the apparent *freedom to* have frequent

sexual activity. Compared to higher status women, lower status women do not have the same social permissions to deny others access to their bodies, and they do not feel as entitled to refuse sex when not satisfied.

Treatment for sexual dysfunction

Medicalization has also served as a tool for ensuring women's lack of *freedom from sex*, as women who abstain from sex, refuse sex, or construct themselves as "asexual" or celibate have been labeled as fundamentally dysfunctional by the medical community. For example, to turn a social problem into something supposedly derived from women's inadequacies, a recent study characterized a staggering 43.1% of women as "sexually dysfunctional," even though far fewer women reported subjective distress about such sexual "problems" (Shifren, 2008). When the medical community decides that women have dysfunction if they do not conform to some medically defined prescription of the "normal," they do not account for women's own narratives about their sexual experiences. Rarely do studies account for partner abilities, contextual factors in women's lives, or women's personal narratives about their "dysfunction." As it stands now, women can receive a psychiatric diagnosis of sexual dysfunction (according to the *DSM-IV*) if they refuse penetration, fail to orgasm, have "inadequate" lubrication or swelling response, refuse to have sex with partners, and feel aversion toward sexuality in general. (These diagnoses are labeled Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder, Sexual Aversion Disorder, Female Sexual Arousal Disorder). Such diagnoses normalize heterosexuality and penetrative intercourse as the pinnacle of "healthy sex" while setting clear and monolithic standards for sexual normality.

As a more precise example of the dangerous power of medicalization, consider the (especially egregious) recent treatments developed by the medical community to cure vaginal pain disorders like vaginismus. One recent treatment advises doctors to inject Botox into three sites of the vagina in order to allow women to "tolerate" penetrative intercourse (Ghazizadeh and Nikzad, 2004). Another common treatment advises doctors to insert vaginal dilators into women's vaginas in order to stretch out their vaginal opening to allow for penile penetration (Crowley et al., 2009; Grazziotin, 2008; Raina et al., 2007). These treatments ensure that women's vaginas can effectively ingest a penis, thereby constructing "normal" vaginas and "normal" sex as penile-vaginal intercourse. Normal sex becomes that which meets men's sexual needs even if it induces pain in women. Even if women can orgasm through manual or oral stimulation, even if women report sexual violence and abuse histories, and even with reliable statistics that consistently point to penile-vaginal intercourse as an unreliable facilitator of women's orgasms (Hite, 1976), these treatments are considered standard and routine for sexual pain disorders. Women do not have the *freedom from* penile-vaginal intercourse, even if it causes them physical or psychological discomfort and pain. If sociocultural scripts mandate that a "normal" woman has "normal" sex, the medical community will ensure that she complies.

Rape and sexual coercion

In an age so often characterized as “empowering” for women—and with so much rhetoric devoted to women’s supposed choices about their bodies and sexualities—the occurrence of rape and sexual coercion of women serve as a sobering reminder of patriarchy’s widespread influence. In addition to the staggering rates of reported sexual violence both within the U.S. (Elwood et al., 2011) and globally (Koss et al., 1994), women also deal (sometimes on a daily basis) with their lack of *freedom from* sexual harassment, street harassment, pornography, objectification, and coercion. Women typically minimize coercive encounters they have had, often to avoid the stigma and label of “rape victim” (Bondurant, 2001; Kahn et al., 2003). They also protect boyfriends, husbands, family members, and dating partners as “not rapists” by denying or minimizing the coercion that these men enact (Fahs, 2011a), often while endorsing “rape myth” beliefs that women deserve rape or brought it on themselves (Haywood & Swank, 2008). While women may have the *freedom to* experiment with their sexuality in new ways, such experimentation often goes hand-in-hand with coercion, abuses of power, pressure, and lopsided power dynamics.

Women’s lack of *freedom from* coercion and harassment also extends into their relationship with space itself. Women construct “outside” as unsafe and “inside” as safe, refuse to walk alone at night (Valentine, 1989), and imagine their (benevolent) boyfriends, husbands, brothers, male acquaintances, and male friends as “protectors,” even when these men most often perpetrate sexual violence (Fahs, 2011a). Women’s relative lack of freedom to occupy public space, travel alone, protect themselves from violence, or ensure non-coercive sexual exchanges represents a major component of women’s sexual consciousness, even if they have not experienced violent rape or clear-cut coercion. The literature on “sexual extortion”—where women engage in sexual acts to avoid domestic violence—also speaks to this continuum between rape and not rape (DeMaris, 1997). Their lack of *freedom from* violence is, for many women, an everyday occurrence that harms their well-being and blocks access to institutions that men use as sources of their power (e.g., better paying jobs, education, public space).

Body hair as ‘personal choice’

As a reminder of the invisibility of power, women also imagine that they have far more personal freedom when “choosing” how to groom and present their bodies to the outside world and to friends, partners, and families. As a prime example, women, particularly younger women, generally endorse the idea that removing body hair (particularly underarm, leg, and pubic hair) is a “personal choice” that they simply “choose” to do. That said, when women refuse to remove their body hair, they often face intense negative consequences: homophobia, harassment, objectification, partner disapproval, family disapproval, coworker disapproval, threats of job loss, anger and stares from strangers, and internal feelings of

discomfort and disgust (Fahs, 2011b). Women who do not remove body hair are labeled by others as “dirty” or “gross” (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2004), and are seen as less sexually attractive, intelligent, happy, and positive compared to hairless women (Basow and Braman, 1998). Women who do not shave their body hair were also judged as less friendly, moral, or relaxed, and as *more* aggressive, unsociable, and dominant compared to women who removed their body hair (Basow and Willis, 2001). While older age, feminist identity, and lesbian identity predicted less negative attitudes toward body hair (Toerien et al., 2005), few women receive full protection from the cultural negativity surrounding women’s body hair.

These findings reveal that women overwhelmingly lack the *freedom from* regulating their bodies through depilation. With increasingly vicious rhetoric directed toward their “natural” body hair as inherently dirty, disgusting, and unclean, women spend great energy and time fighting against these stereotypes in an effort to have acceptable bodies, particularly for already stigmatized groups like women of color and working-class women (Fahs, 2011b; Fahs and Delgado, 2011). With trends indicating that increasing numbers of women in the U.S. remove pubic hair, the hairlessness norms seem only to expand, particularly in the last decade (Herbenick et al., 2010). Women may have the *freedom to* groom their pubic hair into triangles, landing strips, or Vajazzled ornaments (thanks to the growth of corporate techniques of hair maintenance, see Bryce, 2012), but they cannot go *au natural* or not shave their bodies without serious social punishments (Toerien et al., 2005).

Same-sex eroticism

For several decades, the queer movement has fought to expand legal and social rights for same-sex couples, increase representation of same-sex eroticism, and garner cultural acceptance of LGBT identities as normative and non-“deviant.” (Clendinen and Nagourney, 2001; Swank, 2011). In particular, women have more *freedoms to* express their sexual interests in other women and to explore same-sex eroticism more openly, with blatant hostile homophobia diminishing some in the last decades (Loftus, 2001). That said, these supposed “freedoms” have also been appropriated by the patriarchal lens and converted into actions that women undertake to gain acceptance and approval in certain settings: bars, fraternity parties, clubs, bars, and so on (Yost and McCarthy, 2012). Women “making out” and “hooking up” with other women in these settings constitutes an increasingly normative practice, as long as men *watch* women doing this behavior and as long as the women fit stereotypical standards of “sexiness” for male viewers. Following the trends of *Girls Gone Wild*, increasing numbers of women report *pressure* to kiss and have sex with other women in front of men, either by “hooking up” at bars, engaging in threesomes (male partner initiated, only involving multiple women and one man), or allowing men to watch women kiss in public (Fahs, 2009; Yost & McCarthy, 2012).

Such pressures exist regardless of women's sexual identity, as queer women report pressures to "hook up" in front of men just as heterosexual women say their boyfriends and male friends ask them to "pretend" to enjoy same-sex eroticism for their viewing benefit (Fahs 2009). Women increasingly describe these pressures toward "bisexuality" as compulsory (Fahs 2009), as 33% of college women had engaged in this behavior, while 69% of college students had observed this behavior (Yost and McCarthy, 2012). Thus, large segments of women lack the relative *freedom from* mandated same-sex eroticism that is performed *in front of* men and for the sake of men's pleasure. The rebellious, transformative qualities of same-sex eroticism have also been distorted to serve the interests of men (and patriarchy) by ensuring that men are physically and psychologically present during these encounters. No wonder, then, that such "performative bisexuality" (Fahs 2009) has *not*, for the women engaging in these acts, consistently translated into shifts in political consciousness like increased identification with bisexuality, more support for gay marriage laws, and more LGBT activism (Fahs 2009; Fahs, 2011a).

Sexual fantasy

As a final example—and likely the one most directly contrasting with sex positivity—women lack the *freedom from* a sexuality that corresponds with mainstream (pornographic?) fantasies. They also lack the freedom from internalized heterosexist beliefs that distorts their imagination about what constitutes exciting sex. Even when women enjoy pornography without internalizing pornographic fantasies as *real*, they still grapple with increasingly narrow definitions of "the sexual." When examining women's sexual fantasies, an incredible amount of internalized passivity, lack of agency, and desire for domination appears (Bivona and Critelli, 2009; Fahs, 2011a). In particular, women report fantasies of men dominating them as their most common sexual fantasies, even when their best lived sexual experiences do not include such content. When women described their most pleasurable sexual encounters, these descriptions did not include dominance and power narratives, yet when women described their sexual fantasies, themes of power, coercion, dominance, and passivity appeared (Fahs, 2011a). In addition to fantasy, women described pressures from their partners to engage in (increasingly rough) anal sex (Štulhofer and Ajduković, 2011), threesomes (Fahs, 2009), forceful encounters (Koss et al., 1994), role playing, and dominance (Bivona and Critelli, 2009), indicating that many women negotiate these themes not only in their minds, but also in their partnered practices.

While women have certainly made advances in their *freedoms to* expand sexual expression and ideas about sexuality, they now face their relative lack of *freedom from* such dynamics both in their imaginations and in their body practices. Pornographic fantasies have entered mainstream consciousness in many ways: body and hair grooming (Fahs, 2011b), new procedures like anal bleaching, increasing desires for "designer vaginas" and labiaplasty surgeries (Braun and Tiefer, 2010), the much-read and discussed *Fifty Shades of Gray* (at the time of

writing it held the number one spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list), and pressures for women to conform to men's desires for threesomes, painful anal sex (Štulhofer and Ajduković, 2011), and rougher sex in general. (Indeed, the only recent study about women's experiences with anal sex (Štulhofer and Ajduković, 2011) asks in the title, "Should we take [anal pain] seriously?"). Sexual fantasy cannot be dismissed as mere frivolity, as rape fantasies have become increasingly common (Bivona & Critelli, 2009), and men's treatment of women often closely reflects the messages and themes they absorb from pornography (Jensen, 2007).

New visions for sex positivity

The tensions between *freedom to* and *freedom from* in women's sexuality constitute a central dialectic in the study of, and experience of, women's sexuality (Vance, 1984). In order to move toward the ever-elusive "sexual liberation," women need to be able to deny access to their bodies, say no to sex as they choose, and engage in sexual expression free of oppressive homophobic, sexist, and racist intrusions. Women should have, when they choose, the *freedom from* unwanted, mediated versions of their sexuality (e.g., Facebook, internet intrusions, "sexting"), heterosexist constructions of "normal sex," and sexist assumptions about what satisfies and pleases them. If women cannot have *freedom from* these things without social penalty, they therefore lack a key ingredient to their own empowerment.

Those who avoid sex, choose asexuality, embrace celibacy (either temporary or permanent), or otherwise feel disinclined toward sex (perhaps due to personal choice, histories of sexual violence, health issues, hormonal fluctuations, irritation or emotional distance with a partner, and so on) should be considered healthy and *normal* individuals who are making healthy and normal choices. Recent studies have begun to look at "sexual assertiveness," sexual autonomy, and the importance of women's right to refuse sex (Morokoff et al., 1997; Sanchez et al., 2005). The assumption that women must have consistency in their sexual expression, desire, and behavior does not fit with the way sexuality ebbs and flows and responds to circumstances in their lives. Sexual freedom means both the *freedom to* enjoy sexuality, and *freedom from* having to "enjoy" it, just as reproductive freedom means the *freedom to* have children when desired *and* the *freedom from* unwanted pregnancies.

As a new vision for sex positivity, I argue that we need three broadly defined goals, each of which contributes to a larger vision that prioritizes a complex, multi-faceted sexual freedom that fuses the political goals of both sex positives and radical feminists: first, *more* critical consciousness about any vision of sexual liberation. Definitive and universal claims about freedom and choice for all women must be met with caution or even downright suspicion. For example, while sex toys can represent a positive aspect of women's lives—they allow for more efficient masturbation for some, exploration for others, and fun and quirkiness for still others—these toys still exist within a capitalistic framework. While sex toys can be empowering, pleasurable, fun, and exciting, they also equate liberated sexuality

with *purchasing power*, buying things, and (perhaps) distancing women from their bodies (not to mention that the labor politics around making such toys, where women's labor in developing countries is often exploited in the name of First World pleasure). These debates also overlap with notions of "sexual citizenship" and the ways capitalism shapes not only sexual rights but also desire itself, see Evans, 2002. Also, when women masturbate with sex toys, they learn *not* to touch their vaginas in the same way. When couples "spice things up" with accessories, they often avoid the harder conversations about their goals, desires, and relationship needs. Further, sex toy packaging and marketing fall into the all-too-common associations between acquiring objects and achieving personal happiness (not to mention that sex toy companies often use poor quality plastics and exploit their workers, another decidedly "unsexy" side to the industry). In short, the relentless insistence upon a critical consciousness regarding sexual liberation (and claims of what is "sexually liberating") is a *requirement* if we want to illuminate the complexities of women's sexual freedom.

Second, *more* attention should be paid to how sexual access functions in the lives of lower status people (particularly women). Those with lower socially-inscribed statuses—women, people of color, queer people, working-class and poor people, less educated people (etc.)—are often expected, in numerous areas in their lives, to provide *access* to higher status people. Their bodies are expected to provide certain kinds of labor that serve the interests of high status people (e.g., physical, sexual, emotional labor) (Barton, 2006). Thus, it is especially important that lower status people not equate sexual liberation with sexual access. These groups should not equate sexual empowerment with providing sexual access to others; rather, their sexual empowerment might derive from the *freedom from* such access to their bodies and (eroticized) labor.

Third, *more* attention must be devoted to the insidious aspects of disempowerment. There is no single definition of "liberated sex." Rather, sexual empowerment is a constantly moving target that requires continual critique, revision, self-reflexiveness, and (re)assessment of our own practices, cultural norms, ideologies, and visions for the self. Even my own vision of better incorporating the *freedom from* into ideas of sexual empowerment carries with it many dangerous trappings that must be cautiously navigated (e.g., not creating new norms and hierarchies of "good" and "bad" sex; forgetting about the "politics of maybe"). Because our culture so often pathologizes "non-normative" sexual behavior, many individuals spend much time and energy defending their sexual choices, behaviors, and lifestyles against conservative, religious, politically regressive individuals and institutions. While this work is much needed and often politically effective, particularly in our current political climate, these defenses *cannot* preclude a *critical assessment* of how our sexual choices still often reflect and perpetuate sexist, classist, racist, and homophobic ideals. We must release our attachment to certain forms of negative liberty that defend us against critical "intruders." In other words, when we insist upon radically examining, critiquing, and unpacking our own sexual lives—even at the cost of unsettling and dislodging the barricades that defend us against intrusions

and judgments from the radical right—we move ever closer to a fully realized notion of sexual liberation, sexual empowerment, and sexual equality for all.

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