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To cite this article: Breanne Fahs & Sara I. McClelland (2016) When Sex and Power Collide: An Argument for Critical Sexuality Studies, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 53:4-5, 392-416, DOI: [10.1080/00224499.2016.1152454](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1152454)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1152454>



Published online: 30 Mar 2016.



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## ANNUAL REVIEW OF SEX RESEARCH SPECIAL ISSUE

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### When Sex and Power Collide: An Argument for Critical Sexuality Studies

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*Attentive to the collision of sex and power, we add momentum to the ongoing development of the subfield of critical sexuality studies. We argue that this body of work is defined by its critical orientation toward the study of sexuality, along with a clear allegiance to critical modalities of thought, particularly feminist thought. Critical sexuality studies takes its cues from several other critical moments in related fields, including critical psychology, critical race theory, critical public health, and critical youth studies. Across these varied critical stances is a shared investment in examining how power and privilege operate, understanding the role of historical and epistemological violence in research, and generating new models and paradigms to guide empirical and theoretical research. With this guiding framework, we propose three central characteristics of critical sexuality studies: (a) conceptual analysis, with particular attention to how we define key terms and conceptually organize our research (e.g., attraction, sexually active, consent, agency, embodiment, sexual subjectivity); (b) attention to the material qualities of abject bodies, particularly bodies that are ignored, overlooked, or pushed out of bounds (e.g., viscous bodies, fat bodies, bodies in pain); and (c) heteronormativity and heterosexual privilege, particularly how assumptions about heterosexuality and heteronormativity circulate in sexuality research. Through these three critical practices, we argue that critical sexuality studies showcases how sex and power collide and recognizes (and tries to subvert) the various power imbalances that are deployed and replicated in sex research.*

Sexuality research attracts scholars from across disciplines who use diverse methods and have a wide variety of investments in the knowledge produced by, with, for, and about human sexualities. This often sets up the field to have a cacophonous quality: many voices, all speaking at once, often urgently, and in many directions. As a result, researchers and audiences of our research must discern what elements are most pressing to them by locating harmonies among discordant voices in the field. In this piece, we aim to provide one such harmony from among the many sounds in the field of sexuality research, opening up more

possibilities for critical exchange about the relationship between power and sexuality.

In this article, we describe what we see as a crucial set of practices central to critical sexuality studies, something we see as both a subfield and a critical lens or mode of looking. We foreground three feminist and methodological elements we see as bringing needed critical perspectives to the field of sexuality research. These include conceptual analysis, focus on sexual bodies that are often considered abject, and insistent attention to heterosexual privilege. We develop and describe each of these research practices as rooted in a wide-ranging collection of studies that, when put together in this way, highlight and articulate a set of priorities within the burgeoning field of critical sexuality studies.

Rather than drawing clear boundaries around critical sexuality studies, we aim, instead, to develop three epistemological priorities to help describe what this work already

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has been and what it can be. Our intention is not to paint a coherent picture or set of parameters around critical sexuality studies, but rather to demarcate something that can aid researchers looking to invest in a shared set of critical priorities. Those working in this field often do so without a scholarly community, a clear set of allegiances, and often without shared disciplinary, political, or methodological practices. We aim for this articulation of critical sexuality studies to be useful for researchers who are new to the larger field of sex research, as well as for those who have been long doing critical sexuality research but have perhaps felt as if they labored without a shared sense of purpose or without a sense of organizing theories. We offer a set of arguments and examples as a way of marking something not as new but as shared, growing, and often disparate. The definition and priorities we offer here build on an array of research and theories by researchers who have been developing this work for the past few decades. In addition, we highlight crucial ways that space for this type of work has been carved out by feminist hybrid scholar/activist groups that stretch across several countries and continents, including the Critical Sexology Network, the New View Campaign, the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research, and the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom.

Critical sexuality studies takes its cues from several other “critical” moments in related fields, including critical psychology (Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009; Teo, 2014, 2015), critical race theory (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995), critical sociology (Burawoy, 2005); critical health research (Murray, 2015), and critical youth studies (Best, 2007; Harris, 2008). Across these varied and interdisciplinary critical stances is a shared investment in examining how power and privilege operate, understanding the role of historical and epistemological violence in research (Teo, 2010), and generating new models and paradigms to guide empirical and theoretical research. In addition to these influential voices, critical sexuality studies is necessarily and decisively feminist, indebted to the practices and modalities of thinking deeply about the social construction of gender, race, class, and sexuality, but also permanently critical, self-reflexive, and radical in its orientation to thinking about sex and sexuality. Critical sexuality studies is committed to investigating how voices of criticism can erupt from numerous disciplinary and interdisciplinary places and how critical scholarship can build on the momentum of earlier moments of revealing, noticing, and commenting upon things that have been buried or invisibilized by the existing literature. For these reasons, we see critical sexuality studies as generating new possibilities within the frameworks of feminist, social science, and sexuality research.

### Three Critical Practices

With this guiding framework, we propose three epistemological practices for further developing critical sexuality studies, with particular attention to how research can better attend to the many ways that power and sex collide:

conceptual analysis, attention to abject bodies, and critical assessment of heterosexual privilege.

**Conceptual Analysis.** We argue that conceptual analysis is a key practice of critical sexuality studies. Conceptual analysis can involve several possible strategies, including close readings of the components, logics, and definitions of concepts that are commonly used in research. Rather than determining whether there are “correct” definitions, we see this as an invitation to trace how concepts *travel* between and among disciplines and how the varieties of meanings bring with them different intentions and insights (Bal, 2002, 2009). Without attention to definitions (and how definitions are deployed), research tools such as measures, theories, and analyses suffer. We see conceptual analysis as a key component of enlivening the social justice implications of critical sexuality studies, because this critical practice demands that researchers trace the implications of the concepts they employ, which often means addressing how concepts are sites of debate and insisting that one be aware of difference and how power is employed through knowledge production (Bal, 2009).

**Abject Sexual Bodies.** The second critical practice we describe brings closer attention to the ways critical sexuality studies focuses on those who are overlooked in sexuality research because of their abject status. We draw from Kristeva’s (1982) framework of abjection as that which inspires disgust, repulsion, and the borders between self/other. Bodies that are ignored, out of bounds, or pushed out of bounds, as well as groups and individuals that are consistently hiding in plain sight must be given sustained attention—as sexual beings—and not just as sexual “Other.” A priority in critical sexuality studies must turn to how abject bodies (e.g., those with sexual pain, contagious bodies, young and old bodies) each broaden, nuance, refine, expand the targets of, and *literal bodies of*, our research. Ken Plummer (2007) importantly argued that sex researchers often avoid talking about the corporeal.<sup>1</sup> We add an additional layer to this argument: We too often avoid discussing material bodies that threaten the idea of sexuality as simply a route to pleasure and freedom. To widen the frame for critical sexuality scholars to consider the multitude of ways that material bodies maneuver and imagine sex, we argue for closer attention not only to corporeality but to bodies that disrupt and challenge ideas of sex as natural (Tiefer, 2004), sex as outcome driven (Potts, 2004), sex and sexual desires as universal (Przybyło, 2013), and sex as something that everyone enjoys (Segal, 1994).

<sup>1</sup> “There has been an exaggeration of the symbolic at the expense of the corporeal being ... Sexuality is most certainly a hugely symbolic, social affair ... But it is also (and not contradictorily) a lusty, bodily, fleshy affair” (Plummer, 2007, p. 24).

**Heteronormativity and Heterosexual Privilege.** The third practice we prioritize is how critical sexuality studies relentlessly challenges the hidden and not-so-hidden assumptions about heterosexuality that pervade the sex research literatures. For example, the intense focus on sex as intercourse, sex within the context of heterosexual marriage, sex as necessarily penetrative (and risky), and sex as producing orgasm all overlook a wide variety of sexual experiences that deserve critical analysis. Further, by insisting on an explicitly heteronormative notion of sexuality, the workings of power and how power circulates both within and outside of heterosexual exchanges becomes further obscured. We highlight how critical sexuality scholars have focused on challenging heteronormativity and unpacking the invisible assumptions made around gender and heterosex (practice), heterosexuality (identity), heterosexism (the insistence on heterosexuality as the only option), and compulsory heterosexuality (assumptions that one *must* be heterosexual).

These three epistemological practices showcase the field of critical sexuality studies, a subfield that works to integrate empirical social science research, sexuality studies, and feminist scholarship found in disciplines such as women's and gender studies, ethnic studies, American studies, queer studies, and trans studies. Each of these fields and disciplines, in its own way, traces the role of power and inequality; applying these critical lenses to sexuality research means that we must insist on recognizing power imbalances and remain vigilant to our own blind spots. While critical sexuality studies tries to describe and explain the social world, it also tries to improve it (self-critically, with awareness of the hazards of a linear progress narrative) by striving to be an emancipatory force in its examination of the relationship between sexuality and the politics of the social.

### **Borders and Boundaries**

We see critical sexuality studies positioned within a larger set of interventions in the social sciences, which imagine the radical potential to interrupt widely held assumptions not only about human behavior but also about how knowledge is made (Morawski, 1994). Taking a page from Thomas Teo's (2015) articulation of critical psychology as challenging the power and status afforded to the discipline of psychology, we similarly aim to trace the ways that critical sexuality researchers turn a reflexive gaze back on the research process itself, examining our own blind spots and what Nancy Tuana termed "epistemologies of ignorance" (Tuana, 2004, 2006). Building on work by Tuana (2004, 2006) and Jane Ussher (Ussher, 2005; Ussher & Mooney-Sommers, 2000), critical sexuality researchers are increasingly attending to how silences are reproduced in research designs and reinforced by the questions we ask, including imagining experiences as universal and/or easily communicated to another person.

In an effort to draw together a body of research that illustrates the work of critical sexuality studies, it is

inevitable that the boundaries become contentious and threaten to overwhelm the thing itself. We, in part, approach this topic drawing on Rosalind Gill's (2009b) analysis of the hidden injuries of the neoliberal academy paired with Tuana's (2004, 2006; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007) articulation of how ignorances are constructed and maintained. As a key tension in our work at large, and in this piece, we address these questions: What does it mean to *name* something about our work? How do we recognize that doing it without such a label leaves it without a "home"? How can we choose, sort, differentiate, pay homage to, and identify key pieces within critical sexuality studies without also participating in a kind of ignorance project, one where knowledge is constructed, maintained, and disseminated while silences are produced? How can we make big claims about difficult subjects without entering ourselves into rhetorics that inspire injury in others, ourselves, our colleagues, and our fields?

The term *critical sexuality studies* has been usefully developed by other researchers looking to similarly develop communities and ways of intervening in the larger fields of sex research and sexology. Plummer (2012), for example, outlined a field of critical sexualities studies that similarly focused on how sexuality was "orchestrated through power and inequalities" and the role of historical structures in shaping human sexuality. In their articulation of the subfield, Fletcher and colleagues (2013) defined critical sexuality studies as "an emerging field of academic enquiry linked to an international network of advocacy agencies, activists, and political issues" (p. 319). Several themes link across these definitions and our own, including consistent attention to "shifting relationships of power, knowledge, context, and culture" (Fletcher et al., 2013, p. 320), focus on the ways that sexual knowledge is produced, awareness and encouragement of how sexuality research is uniquely interdisciplinary, not only stretching across disciplines but moving consistently between the humanities and social sciences (Rubin, 1984; Traub, 2015). Similar to the map we offer here, Dowsett (2015) argued that critical sexuality studies was largely embedded in "the social sciences and humanities, rather than in biology, demography and epidemiology" (p. S9).

It is clear, however, that this delineation is increasingly incomplete. Scholars in biology, demography, and epidemiology have developed radical critical interventions in their own fields and are fast developing critical work in sexuality studies (Springer, Stellman, & Jordan-Young, 2012; van Anders, 2012; Williams, 2010). These exciting bodies of work illustrate how critical sexuality studies will always surpass whatever boundaries are imagined for it. This can mean, at times, that critical sexuality studies feels disparate and incoherent. With this in mind, we propose three epistemological practices that may help bring some organization to how critical sexuality scholars might imagine themselves, their work, and their community of colleagues: conceptual analysis, attention to abject bodies, and critical assessment of heterosexual privilege.

## Conceptual Analysis in Sexuality Research

### An Argument for Conceptual Analysis

To illustrate the critical practice of conceptual analysis, we address six key terms commonly used in sex research: *agency*, *attraction*, *sexually active*, *sexual subjectivity*, *consent*, and *embodiment*. We review these terms, including various theoretical and empirical perspectives, as a means to move toward highlighting conceptual slippages and blind spots that remain within these concepts and the research they produce. Our aim is to illustrate the practice of conceptual analysis as a means to further describe how critical sexuality scholarship has developed this practice. As cultural theorist Mieke Bal (2009) argued, developing a “concept based methodology” is necessary for continuing and supporting interdisciplinary research: “Concepts ... are the sites of debate, awareness of difference, and tentative exchange. Agreeing does not mean agreeing on content, but agreeing on the basic rules of the game: If you use a concept at all, you use it in a particular way, so that you can meaningfully disagree on content. That use does not go without saying” (p. 18). Bal (2009) argued that because concepts do so much work and carry so much weight they should be “assessed before, during and after each ‘trip’” (p. 20). There is often too little attention to what happens when concepts travel, what meanings they take up and lose. We argue that attention to these processes is key to the ongoing interdisciplinary work of critical sexuality studies.

The transformation from postulated psychological processes to measurable constructs is rarely transparent and often rooted in privilege (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955; Danziger, 1997; Hacking, 1994; Martin & Sugarman, 2009; Teo, 2016). A commitment to tracing how terms are used (and assembled) is meant to encourage researchers to consistently and relentlessly study how concepts are theorized and subsequently assessed, measured, observed, or even imagined. Machado and Silva (2007) argued for conceptual analysis to be recognized as an essential component of the scientific method and argued that clarifying meaning of concepts, “expose[s] conceptual problems in models, reveal[s] unacknowledged assumptions and steps in arguments, and evaluate[s] the consistency of theoretical accounts” (p. 671).

Conceptual analysis has proven to be essential to the field of sexuality research in its development and expansion over the past few decades (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Tiefer, 2006). Recent examples of conceptual analysis in sexuality research include safe sex (Alexander, Coleman, Deatrick, & Jemmott, 2012); female sexual orientation (Diamond, 2012); arousal in men (Janssen, 2011); empowerment (Lamb, 2010a); sexual satisfaction (McClelland, 2010, 2014); desire and arousal (Mitchell, Wellings, & Graham, 2014); wantedness of sex (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005); sexual attraction (Savin-Williams & Joyner, 2014; 21st century transgender studies (Stryker & Currah, 2014); normative adolescent

sexuality (Tolman & McClelland, 2011); and sexual orientation (van Anders, 2015).

To illustrate what the practice of conceptual analysis can include, we highlight six key terms and trace the range of meanings held within each one. The terms we selected—agency, attraction, sexually active, sexual subjectivity, consent, and embodiment—have largely been developed and applied in research on and with young women. These terms are often used in research about sexual development and have emerged largely from feminist research since Fine’s (1988) call to explore how social institutions overdetermine individuals’ access to aspects of language and selfhood, especially for young women. We turn to these terms now in an effort to bring feminist insights from the adolescent female sexuality realm to the larger field of sexuality research.

Concepts developed in adolescent sexuality research are relevant to critical sexuality studies across the life span. We see three reasons for this relevance: (a) while adolescence is imagined as a time of sexual emergence, change, and formation, these in fact are characteristics of sexuality across the life span; (b) heteronormative assumptions underlie the myth that sexuality is in formation only during adolescence and becomes stable later in life; and (c) researchers focused on developmental psychology have crafted some of the most promising models of human sexualities as fluid, multiple, and contradictory (Diamond, 2008; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Tolman, Striepe, & Harmon, 2003); we argue that these have enormous promise for critical sexuality studies.

The six key terms listed here have received increasing attention in recent years. This signals, we argue, an interest in conceptual clarity as well as the intensifying relevance of our findings to people’s lives and addressing historical prejudices that shaped early research in the field of sexuality research. For example, attention to such concepts as perversion, asexuality, and queer (Przybylo, 2013) have broadened researchers’ horizons and fused political and conceptual goals and priorities. For each term discussed in the sections that follow we review several examples of how researchers have used each concept and highlight areas that have produced debate, disagreement, and a call for continued analysis in the field. We chose these terms to model an analysis of how power moves within concepts, to trace how sex and power collide not only in the structures in which we live and the bodies we inhabit but also in the definitions we bring to our work. We highlight these six terms because they include elements of hard-to-see power, blind spots, and baggage; they are also timely and shaping research as we speak. These terms will, of course, change with time as their meanings expand or contract with increased use in and outside of research, but they are relevant and alive to our minds now. We take this opportunity to create a model for how critical sexuality scholars can engage with the terms they find most pressing, most provocative, and most challenging.

## Agency

The concept of agency has become a central discussion in feminist sexuality research over the past five years, with particular attention to the limitations and possibilities of agency within heterosexual interactions. Sexual agency has proven to be a generative and contested location for critical sexuality researchers, one intimately tied with the rhetoric of choice. For some, agency has been imagined as an essential component that protects individuals from bad outcomes (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012; Rudman & Phelan, 2007); for others, agency has been seen as a precursor to good and deliberately chosen sex (Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015; Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez, Kiefer, & Ybarra, 2006); and still others have critically analyzed agency for the ways that it encourages young women to see themselves (and to be seen) as individually responsible for all sexuality outcomes (Allen, 2003; Bay-Cheng, 2015; Gill, 2007). This variety of positions speaks to how sexual agency interfaces with feminism and, more specifically, feminist sexuality research.

In recent studies, researchers have situated sexual agency along two axes. The first axis defines agency as the presence or perception of having power and choice in one's sexual partners, activities, and refusals (Erchull & Liss, 2013; Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015). A second axis highlights how sexual agency stands in for how individuals (largely young women) adapt to sexual norms; agency in this work is less about power but rather a critique of the ways that individuals are expected to be "empowered" in ways that assume all persons can be equally "agentic" (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Gill, 2008). Feminist scholars have taken up and defined this term in a variety of ways, disagreeing about the role of *feeling* agency, *being* agentic, and *being expected to be* agentic. Scholars have also argued how sexual agency as an ideal has been co-opted and appropriated by neoliberalism (Gill & Harvey, 2011), a move that some have marked as a dangerous outgrowth of sexual agency rhetoric. These three definitions of sexual agency are explored in greater depth below as a way to examine how this concept has taken up a variety of meanings in feminist sexuality research.

**Protected by Agency.** Definitions of sexual agency have converged as a set of indicators of whether individuals are capable of protecting themselves. This body of work has focused largely on young heterosexual women and men who have sex with men (MSM)—groups shown to be most at risk from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and sexual violence, and the most likely to suffer negative outcomes if they are not able to protect themselves (Arreola, Ayala, Díaz, & Kral, 2013). Sexual agency from this perspective has often been defined in terms of self-efficacy and the perceived ability to decline invitations to sex (Levin, Ward, & Neilson, 2012) and has largely focused on how individual actions shape sexual

practices, and as a result, decrease sexual risk taking (Bell, 2012). Agency is imagined in these contexts as a key capacity that has the potential to lead to more healthy sexual and reproductive outcomes, including increased use of contraception, timing of childbearing, and protection from STIs and unintended pregnancy (Higgins & Browne, 2008).

**In Control and Agentic.** Other definitions of sexual agency have focused more squarely on the ability of individuals to act according to their own wishes and have control of their sexual lives. From this perspective, agency is largely equated with being sexually assertive, seeking pleasure, initiating sexual activity with a partner, having wanted (rather than unwanted) sex, and being able to resist submitting to sex at someone else's request (Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015). For example, researchers have found that sexual agency is associated with sexual satisfaction and orgasm frequency (Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015; Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Laan & Rellini, 2011; Sanchez et al., 2006). Much like the protection definition, this perspective also focuses on measuring sexually agentic behaviors (e.g., "I demanded we use a condom") rather than focusing on an individual's perception of feeling agentic (e.g., "I feel sexually in control"). This definition of agency, like the previous one, is also often paired with other sexual behaviors, including condom use, refusal of unwanted sex, and communicating with sexual partners (Curtin, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2011).

**Agency and Personal Responsibility.** In a third definition of agency, feminist scholars have taken a more critical perspective on the role of sexual agency. For example, Laina Bay-Cheng (2015) has argued it is a mistake to assume individuals are equally equipped and supported to make sexual decisions. The emphasis on developing sexual agency—especially within neoliberal political and economic conditions—has resulted in passing off responsibility for any consequences to the individual, often a young woman, who is now required to think of herself as "having agency" (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Brown-Bowers, Gurevich, Vasilovsky, Cosma, & Matti, 2015; Gill & Harvey, 2011). Sexuality researchers in this group have focused on tracing how responsibility for sex and its consequences is now absorbed by the (agentic) individual who has supposedly acted in bad faith or made "bad decisions" regarding her sexuality (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Fine & McClelland, 2006, 2007). Feminist scholars working in this tradition are increasingly critical of how feminist calls for sexual agency, control, and resistance have largely been appropriated and transformed by other compulsory requirements and propagated by a new postfeminist model of how young "emancipated" women ought to behave within romantic relationships (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Gill, 2008, 2009a, 2009b). These debates have resulted in further useful discussion about the limits, blind spots, and assumptions about how terms are employed in defining and

designing research, including, for example, the limitations of conflating levels of “high sexual agency” with “good” sexual decision making or “better” mental health (Lerum & Dworkin, 2015; Tolman, Anderson, Belmonte, 2015).

The debate concerning the term *empowerment* published in the journal *Sex Roles* attests to the concerns in feminist sexuality research about the terms and conditions of sexual agency (Bay-Cheng, 2012; Gavey, 2012; Lamb, 2010a, 2010b; Lamb & Peterson, 2012; Murnen & Smolak, 2011; Peterson, 2010; Tolman, 2012). Peterson (2010) summarized the debate as follows: “Feminists struggle with whether sexual empowerment should be conceptualized as a subjective internal feeling of power and agency or an objective measure of power and control” (p. 307). Across the set of commentaries, feminist sexuality scholars compellingly debated the possibilities and limitations of considering subjective accounts of “feeling empowered” and its relationship to the concept of sexual agency.

These debates are key because they usefully bring conceptual analysis to the forefront and link sex research with relevant and important scholarship in other disciplines. For example, feminist legal and literary scholars have traced the limits of agency for the past three decades and convincingly argued for the limitations inherent in theories that rest on imaging the self as an autonomous agent (Abrams, 1998; Davies, 1991). Ultimately, these various ways of defining and understanding agency point to some useful directions for critical sexuality studies: (a) further critical analysis of the roles that sexual want and desire play in sex research and, in particular, how we understand “agentic sexuality” and (b) critical attention to how feminist work around agency and empowerment can be co-opted in the service of patriarchal, consumer, and conservative rhetorics.

### Attraction

The concept of attraction remains a central, though underexamined, aspect of sexuality research. Researchers, for example, often rely on measures of sexual attraction when studying sexual orientation and focus on how often (or not), with whom, and when people have sex, feel desire, or experience feelings of attraction (Johns, Zimmerman, & Bauermeister, 2013; Priebe & Svedine, 2013; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). Attraction has largely been operationalized by identifying the object of attraction rather than the experience of feeling attraction. For example, researchers often ask participants “To whom are you sexually attracted?” (Thompson & Morgan, 2008) or “On a scale measuring your attraction to the (a) opposite sex and (b) the same sex, where would you place yourself?” (Priebe & Svedin, 2013, p. 729). The conceptual nuances of feeling attraction, however, have remained only thinly explored and researchers often assume that all individuals define this concept similarly.

Recently, however, attraction has been singled out as a concept that lacks coherent definition for participants and researchers alike and, as a result, may severely impact

research findings (Savin-Williams & Joyner, 2014). In the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health; Harris et al., 2009) attraction has been measured using two items (“Have you ever had a romantic attraction to a female?” and “Have you ever had a romantic attraction to a male?”). Based on answers to these two questions, participants have been classified as heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, or asexual in research (e.g., Lindley, Walsemann, & Carter, 2012). In a recent critical sexuality intervention, Savin-Williams and Joyner (2014) argued that the concept of attraction was underdefined. The authors made a compelling argument that this lack of clear definition had resulted in ambivalent meanings associated with “feeling attracted” and had, in fact, deeply affected the large number of research articles published using the Add Health data—and by extension the national knowledge base about same-sex-attracted young women and men.

McClelland, Rubin, and Bauermeister (2015), taking up the conceptual question “What does ‘feeling attracted’ mean?,” found wide variability in how individuals defined what it meant to feel attracted to someone. Using interviews with young lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identified women, they found that some relied on embodied experiences, others on feelings of closeness, and still others used cognitive appraisals as guides when assessing whether they felt attracted to someone. In essence, each highlighted the variability in the concept of attraction and the inherent limitations of using this term to create coherent demographic categories. These conceptual nuances represent a key contribution of critical sexuality studies, as terms frequently assumed to have universal definitions (particularly by the mainstream media) are exploded, unpacked, and reassembled in more complex ways. These and other critical interventions have begun a conversation about shifting and more closely examining how researchers understand sexual attraction and how society does too.

### Sexually Active

Being sexually active represents another key concept in sexuality research; however, the parameters of this concept are also often poorly defined. Research has pointed to the murkiness surrounding the edges of “having sex” and found variability in how participants defined this term (Bersamin et al., 2007; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007b; Sanders et al., 2010; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Stephanie Sanders and colleagues (2010), drawing from their phone survey with 486 men and women ages 18 to 96, stated this most plainly: “There was no universal consensus on which behaviours constituted having ‘had sex’” (p. 31); further, they emphasized caution when defining, studying, and imagining the concept of having sex.

To resolve this, researchers have made a variety of decisions in sex research. For example, in her study of Latina adolescents, Lorena García (2009) sampled participants who defined themselves as sexually active based on their own

definitions of the term, rather than García providing one coherent (and limited) definition for them. However, the most common sampling decision has been to define sexually active solely in terms of specific sexual behaviors (e.g., “had oral sex, vaginal and/or anal intercourse” in the last six months; Julio et al., 2015) or not to define the term at all (“Are you sexually active?”; Bach, Mortimer, VandeWeerd, & Corvin, 2013). Still others assume that vaginal intercourse is the universal definition of sex and that all sexually active individuals engage in penetrative penile–vaginal sex (McGraw et al., 2015). These sampling design decisions have enormous implications for the field of sex research. Most pressingly, these decisions result in obscuring the vast range of experiences that people may define within or outside of the boundaries of having sex (e.g., kissing, masturbation, touching/rubbing, fantasizing, watching pornography, getting an erection, feeling wet). Instead, the behavioral components of intercourse, an overemphasis on penetration, and the focus on risk (e.g., pregnancy, STIs) define sexuality and “having sex” in most sexuality research that lacks critical analysis of these assumptions.

In an effort to locate potential blind spots about the concept of “sexual activity,” and in the spirit of critical sexuality studies, we raise several key assumptions about the thing that is imagined to be activated in “sexual activity” (Tolman, 2002) and highlight several patterns that consistently limit what we know about sexual activity. In particular, we worry about the assumed role of the penis/phallus as the only real “activator” or “activating agent” in sexual activity. This reliance on penetration (accompanied by a desire for consistent measurement) has also resulted in the need for a “real” beginning, measurable and marked clearly, which has constructed a female body as only activated when penetrated. In fact, the term *sexual debut* (or sexual initiation) reflects the implications individuals have “started” or “begun” their sexual lives only once penetrated and that this debut is both a stable indicator and indicates something important (Akintola, Ngubane, & Makhaba, 2012). This insistence on measuring sexual activity has persisted, even as difficulties of measuring first sex have been found (Fahs, *in press*) and despite the relative absence of sexual activity measures for lesbian and bisexual women and gay men (for exceptions, see Carpenter, 2005; Goodenow, Szalacha, Robin, & Westheimer, 2008; Saewyc, Bearinger, Heinz, Blum, & Resnick, 1998).

We present these blind spots as a starting point for areas that warrant critique and revision to our current ideas about being sexually active (or “getting” sexually activated in the adolescent literature). This is an area where critical sexuality studies scholars have productively taken up the question of origin stories of sexuality by complicating ideas about first sex, imagining sexual activation outside of penetration, and broadening definitions of what is (and could be) included in generative ideas about early sexual activity that are not limited to measuring sexual risk (Braun, 2013; McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001; Tolman, 2002).

## Sexual Subjectivity

The concept of sexual subjectivity—or how people narrate and make meaning around their own subjective experiences of sexuality—has emerged in recent years as a key intervention to the overly positivistic (and potentially reductive) qualities of noncritical psychology and sociology. Arguing that complex, often contradictory, and “messy” understandings of the sexual self have inherent value to assess “what we know” about sexuality, sexual subjectivity researchers have addressed a wide variety of topics related to sexuality and the body. As Amy Schalet (2010) argued, sexual subjectivity varies greatly across national contexts and, as such, moves beyond individual interpretations of social reality to deeper recognition of how social norms, policies, and relationships shape what people think about their sexual selves. Research on sexual subjectivity brings critical attention to what and how people enact what is often assumed the most private or the most “true” self—the sexual self—and insists on an analysis of how subjectivities are created and maintained in social, political, and even national spaces (McClelland & Frost, 2014). In this way, critical work on sexual subjectivity insists that researchers must continually attend to the socialization of the sexual self.

While sexual subjectivities work has begun to look at women across adulthood (Fahs, 2011b), the term *sexual subjectivity* has primarily been used in research with young women, who are constructed as both striving for greater sexual subjectivity and blocked from achieving this goal. Sexual subjectivity has been linked to subjects as diverse as adolescent sexuality and well-being (Allen, 2003; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005; Zimmer-Gembeck, Ducat, & Boislard-Pepin, 2011), polyamory (Sheff, 2005), faking orgasm (Fahs, 2014a), sexting discourses (Karaian, 2014), male sex work (Lorway, Reza-Paul, & Pasha, 2009), sexual self-concept (Deutsch, Hoffman, & Wilcox, 2014), and sexual entrepreneurship (Gill & Harvey, 2011).

Karin Martin’s (1996) initial articulation of sexual subjectivity emphasized the role that sexuality has in young people’s ability to imagine and subsequently shape their world: “Sexual subjectivity is a necessary component of agency and thus of self esteem. That is, one’s sexuality affects her/his ability to act in the world, and to feel like she/he can will things and make them happen” (p. 10). Martin highlighted how initial experiences of pleasure and recognition of living in a sexual body remain essential moments in a young person’s life, one with reverberations throughout the lifetime. This is a useful reminder of how research on adolescent sexuality research is never simply limited to young bodies or early sexual experiences. Martin and feminist researchers (before and since) have demonstrated how experiences during adolescence shape relationships with people’s bodies, as well as relationships with peers, partners, and families, throughout their lifetimes. Building on Martin’s work, Deborah Tolman (2002) emphasized young people’s experiences of feeling entitled to



sexual pleasure, creating and maintaining sexual safety, and the role of active sexual choices, and perhaps most importantly, the role of sexual desire as the heart of sexual subjectivity. Tolman (2002, 2005, 2006, 2012) has consistently argued that *feeling* desire, particularly in contexts which strip women and girls of any assumptions that they have or possess desire, is a key component of sexual subjectivity and political mobility. This conceptual complexity encourages researchers to attend to the histories of concepts as well as how they shift over time.

Operationalizing this complicated construct, the Female Sexual Subjectivity Inventory (FSSI; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005) is a 20-item scale highlighting the role of gender norms in sexual relationships, the role of pleasure, the role of body esteem, and cognitive elements of self-reflection and feelings of entitlement (Cheng, Hamilton, & Missari, 2014; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck & French, 2016). Sexual subjectivity, as operationalized by the FSSI, has been associated with higher levels of self-efficacy in condom use, higher self-esteem, resistance to gendered sexual double standards, and lower self-silencing in sexual relationships (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005). Originally developed for research with adolescent heterosexual women, this scale has been more recently used with sexual minority young women (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2011) and young men (Zimmer-Gembeck & French, 2016).

The key focus of the larger body of research on sexual subjectivity has emphasized individuals' ability to create narratives about their own sexual lives, as well as complicate and disrupt assumptions held by researchers about people's sexualities (Fahs, 2011b). This interest in understanding people's capacity to imagine their own sexual lives has been pursued using survey designs, and well as qualitative work that prioritizes diverse sexual narratives (McClelland, Holland, & Griggs, 2015; McClelland, 2011). Further, much of the work on sexual subjectivities assumes that what we currently know about sexuality leaves out a variety of different bodies, perspectives, identities, and stories, and that too often social and sexual scripts are imposed upon people rather than learned from the ground up (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Fahs, 2011b). In this sense, sexual subjectivities are at the forefront of bringing marginalized or excluded voices back into the center of the analysis, such as those with cancer (Gilbert, Ussher, & Perz, 2013); butch, lesbian, trans, and queer voices (Halberstam, 1998); mothers with young children (Martin, 2009); and young women of color (Bettie, 2014; Fasula, Carry, & Miller, 2014). Intersectional work that examines the interface between gendered sexual double standards and racial identity demonstrates the power of using sexual subjectivities as a lens through which to foreground bodies and identities that have been previously excluded from sex research (Bowleg, 2008; Carpenter & Casper, 2009; Fasula et al., 2014; Grzanka, 2014). By using sexual subjectivities as a platform for putting forth a critical feminist analysis of sexuality, new and more complicated conceptualizations of sexual identities and sexual practices emerge (Gill & Scharff, 2011).

## Consent

Though most conceptualizations of consent frame it in dichotomized terms (e.g., as something one has or has not obtained from a partner), critical sexuality researchers have increasingly redefined consent in more complicated and nuanced ways. In particular, influential work has emphasized the importance of *wanting* (saying yes) and *refusing* (saying no) (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007a). In other words, saying yes to sex is not merely the absence of a no, but something that implies willingness or even enthusiastic feelings about consent (Beres, 2014; Friedman & Valenti, 2008; Harris, 2009; LaFrance, Loe, & Brown, 2012). When layering on the framework that people say yes and no within complex networks of power—particularly as they negotiate intention, understanding, and overarching controlling influences—critical sexuality scholars have argued for a more messy conceptualization of informed choice and consent that takes into consideration women's tendencies to feel obligated to consent and the cultural scaffolding of rape whereby women do not always express a clear "no" but where a clear shared understanding of the "no" nevertheless exists between both people (Ells, 2003; Fahs, 2016a; Gavey, 2005; McGuinness, 1993; Welch, 2012).

The fallacy of consent as a dichotomy (yes or no, to sex) is revealed most closely in the flexible and fluid ways that certain populations have been characterized as "always consenting" (e.g., Black women, sex workers; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Du Toit, 2008; Jozkowski, Sanders, Peterson, Dennis, & Reece, 2014; Sullivan, 2007), or "never consenting" (e.g., children, those with mental disabilities; Carpenter, O'Brien, Hayes, & Death, 2014; Doyle, 2010). Further, attention has consistently shifted away from men as perpetrators and, instead, toward women, who are held as solely responsible for avoiding rape, implicitly burdening women with "bringing on" their own encounters with sexual violence (Friedman & Valenti, 2008; George & Martinez, 2002). Men, in short, are not conceptualized as needing to consent (particularly within heterosex) because they, too, are conceived of as always ready, always willing, and always wanting; nonconsent becomes unimaginable if men are positioned as always wanting and always desiring (Braun, Schmidt, Gavey, & Fenaughty, 2009; Braun, Terry, Gavey, & Fenaughty, 2009; Gavey, Schmidt, Braun, Fenaughty, & Eremin, 2009). Further, men resist rape-prevention education in the process (Ehrlich, 2001; Rich, Utley, Janke, & Moldoveanu, 2010). Women, on the other hand, are stripped of wanting and portrayed as the sexual gatekeepers vulnerable to attack and coercion (Ells, 2003). This essentially makes it impossible for women to "say yes" to sex (that is, give enthusiastic consent and *want/desire* sex) if they are constructed as giving an implied "no" (that is, denying sexual access and being prodded, coerced, or enticed to have sex as normative). Further, because women are socially constructed to want to please others, to prioritize others'

emotional needs, and to engage in emotion work around sex (Elliott & Umberson, 2008; Fahs & Swank, *in press*), how can they say yes if they are expected to comply with others' (especially men's) wishes?

One key intervention that differentiates social scientists from legal scholars and activists is the recognition of "pseudoconsent," that is, sexual experiences in which people give partial consent, "sort of consent," halfway consent, agree to have sex reluctantly, engage in unwanted or partially unwanted sexual acts, engage in sex acts that feel painful to please a partner, and otherwise have sex that is laced with elements of coercion and pressure (Fahs, 2011b; Gavey, 2005; McClelland, *in press*). Scholars have recognized the difficulty of labeling sexual events that occur without force as rape (Leahy, 2014), just as they have emphasized the peculiar and painful dimensions of date rape and marital rape (Black & McCloskey, 2013; Hasday, 2000).

A second key conceptual thread that runs through this term is the importance of sexual refusals, an understudied dimension of sexual freedom. If, as feminists have long argued, true freedom involves both the freedom *to do what we want* and the freedom *from having to do things we don't want* (Fahs, 2014b), how can a framework of sexual refusal help nuance cultural scripts about consent? How, and in what contexts, do people (especially women) deny others access to their bodies when access to their bodies is assumed? How do they refuse, and can they refuse, sex that they deem unpleasurable, unenjoyable, or undesirable? A small but growing number of studies have started to critically analyze sexual refusals from a variety of conceptual perspectives, including, for example, saying no to sex (French, 2013; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999; McClelland, *in press*; Powell, 2008), refusing to label rape (Currier & Manuel, 2014), refusing unpleasurable anal sex (Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014), and men's ability to hear and interpret refusals that are both explicit and subtle (O'Byrne, Rapley, & Hansen, 2006). Such refusals draw from radical feminist histories of not only not buying into certain mainstream discourses of sex (e.g., sexual availability to men, being eroticized) but also imagining women's sexual autonomy (including the right to not have sex at all) as a crucial part of their sexual freedoms (Fahs, 2010). By taking seriously the notion that people can and *should* refuse unwanted (or partly wanted) sexual acts, and that these refusals present a fresh perspective on sexual rights and freedoms, the conceptual analysis of consent allows for more meaningful frameworks to think about sexual consent in other contexts, for example, on college campuses and within institutions such as the military (Holland, Rabelo, & Cortina, 2014).

### Embodiment

Embodiment refers to the experience of living in, perceiving, and experiencing the world from the physical and material place of our bodies (Tolman, Bowman, & Fahs, 2014). "Being embodied" is nevertheless a sticky wicket: It refers to the lived embodiment experiences of being in our

bodies, having corporeality, and existing in actual skin. Further, it is recognized not as a passive entity in need of cognitions to make sense of the world but as something capable of genuine experience, that is, "latent knowledge" (Grosz, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Young, 2005). In tandem with disability studies, fat studies, freak studies, trans studies, and feminist science studies—and drawing from, expanding, and revising these areas of study—critical sexuality studies pays attention to how embodiment is not fixed or stable; instead, it evokes discourses of normality and abnormality (something which must be refuted) and disappears from view in relation to structures of power.

Our bodies can have subjective experiences outside of the cognitions we impose on them (Young, 2005), as we simultaneously embody both an objectified and material self and an experiencing and subjective self (Fahs, 2011b). Embodiment theorists have suggested that the body can exist through "intersubjectivity" (that is, shared understandings of reality) or relationships to other people. In a sexual experience, for example, people can experience their own bodies and the bodies of another person simultaneously as objects and subjects, desiring and being desired (Cahill, 2014). This leaves a wide-open terrain within which critical sexuality studies scholars can define, explore, and theorize the lived, material, and theoretical spaces of embodiment, with close attention to how the term *embodiment* is being used and theorized.

Several key tensions arise within the embodiment literatures. Critical sexuality studies is uniquely qualified to shape and define these conflicts and questions, perhaps alongside and perhaps in tandem with forging new terrain in critical social science fields, such as critical psychology and critical sociology, but also with explicitly feminist interdisciplinary fields, such as women and gender studies and critical race studies. For example, how is the body simultaneously a biological entity and a socially scripted entity (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998)? How are sexual desires, identities, experiences, and relationships fundamentally social and dependent on interpretive processes (Nash, 2014a, 2014b; Plante, 2006; Tiefer, 2006)? If people cannot simply *choose* their definitions of the social forces that dictate, discipline, and control bodies (Foucault, 1978), how can they fight back against unwanted or destructive ways of imagining the body in relation to social identities like race, class, gender, and sexual identity? Is the body a performance of gender norms or a "thing that exists in the world" regardless of social scripts of gender (Butler, 1990), and is the body separate from technology (Haraway, 1991), imagined spaces (Gatens, 1996), and power?

Methodological disagreements have permeated the literature on embodiment, with some using positivistic approaches to studying the body (Hunter, 2002; Jones, 2001; Martins, Tiggemann, & Churchett, 2008), while others argue for the use of grounded theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Tolman, 2002). While a range of disciplines have worked to unpack

and understand embodiment, a key practice for critical sexuality scholars is to focus on how the concept travels though and between interdisciplinary spaces. For example, methodologies of embodiment have explored specific bodily practices and performances, looking at subjects as wide-reaching as tattoos (Pitts, 2003), crying and tearfulness (Hepburn, 2006), dizziness (Brown, Cromby, Harper, Johnson, & Reavey, 2011), anorexia and eating disorders (Bordo, 1993), cosmetic surgery (Heyes, 2007), breast-feeding (Schmied & Lupton, 2001), audible and visceral body movements (Bates, 2013), sweating, pain, and aging (Gillies et al., 2004), and walking (Young, 2005). Through each of these and the many other ways that embodiment is conceptualized and studied, the critical edge of critical sexuality studies asks researchers to attend to the blind spots and assumptions that are built into the architecture of one's definition.

### Who We (Don't) Study: Bodies Pushed Out of Bounds

The history of how to contextualize, situate, theorize, and map bodies marked as different, "Other," or abject (that is, repulsive or horrifying; Butler, 1993; Kristeva, 1982) has had a long and painful history in sex research. Psychology has a long history of ignoring women, people of color, queer people, as well as poor and disabled populations (Cortina, Curtin, & Stewart, 2012), while the sexuality literatures have been especially slow in studying lesbian, bisexual, queer, poor, and disabled women (Epstein, 2004). In this section, we consider how critical sexuality research has a responsibility to turn toward those bodies that are considered "out of bounds" and to theorize, study, and prioritize those bodies. That said, such work exists in the shadow of previous research that has overemphasized (and sometimes fetishized) the abject qualities of racialized bodies (particularly Black women and men) and sexual minority bodies (particularly the "troubling" space of the gay male anus; Bersani, 1987).

Discussions of abject bodies and the circulation of disgust discourses have also appeared in other related literatures, particularly in light of how women's bodies become framed within contexts of pollution and dirt (Douglas, 2003; Grosz, 1994; Nussbaum, 2009). From tattooed bodies as "monstrous" (Braunberger, 2000), to global politics of the vagina (Brown, 2009), to critical examinations of surgery (Shildrick, 2008), to women's bodies as always failing and always lacking (Chrisler, 2011), critical scholarship on bodies has fought back against these all-too-often-assumed links between the female body and abjection. Contemporary work around sex trafficking, prostitution, labor, and bodily transgression, both within and outside of the United States, have also situated the sexually laboring body as both out of bounds and as necessarily liminal and provocative (Russell, 2013; Taylor, 2010).

In this section, we examine several spaces where critical sexuality researchers have brought bodies on the margins

toward the center, consequently resituating the visibility of bodies once considered invisible, pushed out, or emphasized as quintessentially "Othered" and made abject. Specifically, we examine how marginalized, abject bodies—particularly fat bodies, hairy bodies, women's bodies, and racialized bodies—have been conceptualized, and we follow this with a discussion of viscous bodies (bloody bodies and "scary sex"; Grosz, 1994). We end with a discussion of bodies "in pain" (Scarry, 1987) by discussing bodies in sexual pain, contagious bodies, and young and old bodies. These three sections work together to bring the material, "embodied" body into play for critical sexuality studies, showcasing not only the body as a theoretical entity but as a viscous, fluid, oozing, desiring, wet/hard, sagging, disgusting, joyous entity (Grosz, 1994). Abject, viscous, and painful bodies work in tandem to redefine what "sex" looks like, who has sex, and how sex feels, looks, and operates for bodies across a range of spectrums. Each of these helps broaden, nuance, and refine the targets of and literal bodies of critical sexuality studies.

### Abject Bodies

**Fat Bodies.** The emerging field of fat studies and its attendant goals—namely, to provide a counternarrative that sees the fat body not as inherently failing, defective, disgusting, or problematic—is in alignment with the priorities and goals of critical sexual studies (Cooper, 2010; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009; Saguy & Riley, 2005), particularly as it resituates fat sexualities as rebellious and full of new possibilities for critiquing "mainstream" sexualities (Hester & Walters, 2015; Weinstein, 2015). Challenging notions of "acceptable bodies" and pushing back against the various intrusions of moralizing and medical discourses (particularly those with regulatory and norm-setting power), fat studies work has differently imagined the role of the fat body in contemporary culture, including how fat bodies are stripped of eroticism and, much like disabled bodies, viewed as asexual (Braziel & LeBesco, 2001; Cooper, 2010). For example, in response to claims that obesity is a contagion, Tim Brown (2014) has asserted that fat studies can intervene as a counternarrative against damaging public health discourses that frame "obesity" as a public health crisis (and fat people as inherently destructive to public health).

Fat acceptance and fat studies work also counters the anti-obesity movement by asserting that moral panics about obesity distract attention away from more important health and sexuality issues for fat Americans (Saguy & Riley, 2005). Emerging work on "fat masculinities" (Farr, 2013) meaningfully connects fat studies and disability studies (Brandon & Pritchard, 2011), and work examining links between fat women and their narratives about sexual health and deservingness of pleasure (Satinsky, Dennis, Reece, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2013) has also given the fat studies literature a decisive critical edge. Further, intersections between fatness and gender—particularly work that

consistently finds that fat women face more stigma than thin women and all men—helps nuance the impact of fat shaming on different bodies (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Rooth, 2009; Satinsky et al., 2013) and how such shaming might influence fat sexualities (Hester & Walters, 2015; Weinstein, 2015).

**Hairy Bodies.** Anxieties about hair on the head, underarms, legs, and pubis have led to an emerging body of literature that critically examines hair removal, “grooming,” and “hygiene.” The study of hair, and its attendant anxieties, brings up a range of issues that critical sexuality studies has taken seriously: the interface between self and culture, beliefs about race, class, and gender embedded in hair, and the power of using the body as a site of resistance and rebellion. Body hair norms have been shown to be pervasive and consistent across Western cultures: Studies consistently show that women feel compelled to remain completely hairless in their leg and underarm regions (Fahs, 2011a, 2012, 2014c) and mostly hairless in their pubic region, though men often have more flexibility about their body hair and pubic hair choices than women (Terry & Braun, 2013). Approximately 99% of women have reported that they have removed body hair at some point in their lives (Terry & Braun, 2013; Toerien, Wilkinson, & Choi, 2005), while women who refused to remove their body hair faced external appraisals of themselves as disgusting, manly, unattractive, and gross (Fahs, 2011a). While most men have “manscaped” or trimmed their pubic hair (Boroughs, Cafri, & Thompson, 2005), men have reported feeling entitled to choose the degree to which they remain hairy, while women report not feeling entitled to similar levels of choice around their body hair (Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke, 2013). Women of color also face more severe penalties than White women for choosing to have body hair, particularly as family members expressed concerns over “respectability” (Fahs & Delgado, 2011). Overwhelmingly, concern for appearing “disgusting” or “gross” has permeated research about women’s body hair, thus suggesting that critical feminist work on bodies continues to provide a necessary counternarrative to the messages women internalize from their social worlds.

**Women’s Bodies.** Critical work about how women view their vaginas, vulvas, and pubic hair (“genital self-image”) has also appeared in the literature in recent years, particularly as growing pressures for women to hate their genitals permeate pop culture (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; DeMaria, Hollub, & Herbenick, 2011; Roberts & Waters, 2004; Schick, Calabrese, Rima, & Zucker, 2010). Women receive messages that their bodies are always failing and inadequate and that they are not desirable in their “natural” states, thus prompting women to internalize the need for cleaning, sanitizing, deodorizing, exfoliating, and even surgically altering their genitals (Bartky, 1990; Braun & Tiefer, 2010). This “disease mongering” has led to pressures for women to engage in labiaplasties, vaginal

“rejuvenation,” the injection of Botox into G-spots, and the tightening of the vagina, all of which critical feminist sex researchers have framed as problematic for women and their body images (Braun, 2005; Braun & Tiefer, 2010). Researchers have found that women who underwent labiaplasties did not, in fact, report improvements in their sex lives (Bramwell, Morland, & Garden, 2007), again challenging the relationship between “idealized” bodies/sexualities and personal satisfaction or happiness. Feminist scholars have also linked negative genital attitudes with women’s resistance to partners performing oral sex on them (Bay-Cheng & Fava, 2011), as well as resistance to genital self-examinations, vibrator use, and gynecological appointments (Herbenick, Schick, Reece, Sanders, & Fortenberry, 2010).

**Racialized Bodies.** Links between abjection, gender, sexual identity, and race have also highlighted new and critical junctures within which critical work on sexuality thrives, opening up new possibilities for the kinds of work that crosses and disrupts disciplinary and identity boundaries. Historically, the link between race, gender, and sexuality has forced people of color—especially women of color—to bear the weight of negative stereotypes that destroy social, psychological, and sexual well-being (Brown, White-Johnson, & Griffin-Fennell, 2013; Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). Work that has examined links between race and reproductive politics has also recast Black women’s bodies as subjected to racialized intrusions and mechanisms of control (Bridges, 2011; Roberts, 1997).

Dorothy Roberts (1997) has documented the long history of reproductive racism in the United States, highlighting how policies and rhetorics surrounding race and sexuality disparage Black women and Black mothers in particular as continuously to blame for “perpetuating social problems by transmitting defective genes, irreparable crack damage, and a deviant lifestyle to their children” (p. 3). This has resulted in decades of public policies aimed at limiting the range and types of support available to poor families and women of color (Fine & McClelland, 2006; García, 2009; Nadasen, 2007). Policy examples include limiting access to and funding for sex education, contraception, and abortion, enforcement of sterilization and marriage incentives for Black women and other women of color, ignoring the needs of undocumented women of color, and imposing punishing limitations of welfare and other publicly funded supports (Fine & McClelland, 2006, 2007; Miller, Decker, Silverman, & Raj, 2007; Nadasen, 2005, 2007; Stern, 2005). Women’s reproductive freedoms—as well as how these freedoms are unequally distributed and unequally supported—are central to any critical sexuality studies discussion (Luna, 2009; Luna & Luker, 2013).

Critical sexuality scholars must see this not only as history but as unfolding in the present; as such, our role in this conversation as sexuality scholars cannot be underestimated. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) recently argued, “You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the

economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body” (p. 10). Research tools can (and do) exclude and enact violence through the development and maintenance of subtle and less subtle forms of racism in theories, methods, research designs, and interpretations. Critical sexuality scholarship aims to document, analyze, and protest when sexuality is used as a pathway to restrict rights, limit publicly funded supports, punish, and dehumanize.

There is a wide array of examples of critical sexuality scholars taking up questions of how, when, why, how, and by whom racialized bodies are made abject. Examples include the global impact of food studies and its connection to bodies and sexualities (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013), critical attention to the “reproductive tourism” and the exploitation of women of color in the surrogacy market (Donchin, 2010), as well as research on discourses of “disgust” and “repulsion” that inexorably link gender, race, queerness, and sexual bodies (Holland, Ochoa, & Tompkins, 2014; Nash, 2014b). This body of research with deep roots in critical race theory and feminist postcolonial studies focuses on how women and men of color and queer people are cast as abject; scholars from across several disciplines have importantly protested and refused this slippage (Mendoza, 2015; Nash, 2014a).

Bodies who have been pushed to the margins, including those made abject, provide a crucial framework to thinking critically about the interface of racism, sexism, and the assumptions in sex research that continually prioritize and examine certain bodies, practices, and relationships. This results in research that aims to disrupt (rather than reify) clear boundaries, hierarchies, and systems of meaning making about gender and its intersections with race, class, and sexual identity (Dozier, 2005; Nash, 2014a, 2014b; Pandey, 2009; Van Lenning, 2004). This requires that critical sexuality scholars remain constantly attentive to the abjectifying practices of sex research. Who is imagined as sexual (and not)? Who is imagined as at risk (and safe)? One of the most important epistemological practices for critical sexuality studies is to continually develop critical questions about whose body is imagined (or, if imagined, imagined only as abject) and whose body is simply ignored; this moves beyond simply “including” all bodies and sexualities and instead calls for *interrogating* genders, bodies, and sexualities in critical sexuality studies scholarship.

### Viscous Bodies

The link between viscous bodies, particularly the ways that fluids can be seen as polluting, contaminating, dangerous, abject, disturbing, or even “functioning with clarity” (Grosz, 1994), plays a key role in understanding abject bodies. Menstrual blood, for example, has been constructed as a “dirty” fluid, while tears become a “clean” fluid; viscous fluids—halfway between a solid and a liquid, a “cross section in a process of change”—link to the “horror of femininity, the voraciousness and indeterminacy of the vagina dentata (Grosz, 1994, 194).

The examination of menstrual blood and “scary sex” together is a conscious decision to examine this interplay between dirt, viscosity, fluid, and refusal to conform to laws governing the proper, clean, and solid. As Sharon Holland, Marcia Ochoa, and Kyla Wazana Tompkins (2014) argued, this requires that we map the “abject and erotic territory—the blood and guts, the cum and shit” (p. 394); erotic fluids mark the visceral (and we would add, viscous) body as contaminating, utterly dangerous, and continually pushed to the margins without the intervention of critical sexuality scholarship.

**Bloody Bodies.** Menstruation and the anxieties it provokes in the Western world have been a target of much feminist analysis in recent years, particularly as scholars combat the social stigma of menstruation (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Mamo & Fosket, 2009) and understand the often-polarized construction of gendered bodies (Tavris, 1993). The journal *Sex Roles* published an entire issue in 2013 dedicated to critical feminist views of menstruation, with topics such as menstrual product advertisements (Erchull, 2013), Twitter “outing” of menstruation (Thornton, 2013), religious experiences of menstruation (Dunnivant & Roberts, 2013), and critical analyses of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) (Ussher & Perz, 2013). Like breast milk, women’s menstrual fluid has been targeted as “disgusting” by mainstream media, film, advertising, and popular culture (Chrisler, 2011; Rosewame, 2012), something with deep resonances in women’s mostly negative ideas about having sex while menstruating (Fahs, 2011c). In response to the negative treatment of menstruation, menstrual activists have directed critical attention toward the construction of premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), the way women experience menstrual sex, menstrual shaming of women, the toxicity and dangers of mainstream menstrual products, the removal of a tax on menstrual products, the pop culture treatment of periods, and the implication that women should hide and keep secret their periods (Bobel, 2006, 2010; Fahs, 2011c, 2013, 2016b).

**“Scary Sex” and “Scary Pleasures”.** Because sexuality is so often situated in relation to moral panics and cultural anxieties, recent scholarship has also considered the psychological and social impact of “scary sex.” Breanne Fahs, Mary Dudy, and Sarah Stage (2013) argued that moral panics about sexuality divert attention away from actual sources of danger, thereby framing the dangerous as safe, and the safe as dangerous or in danger. In short, moral panics bury serious crises of sexuality (e.g., the overwhelming resistance to discussing or acting upon the rise of unprotected heterosexual anal sex) beneath the veneer of “scary sex” (e.g., gay men marrying, politicians and their sex scandals). Such panics obscure the pervasiveness of sexual coercion (and the implication that normative masculinity is perhaps coercive) by instead focusing attention on small categories of “sex offenders” or “serial rapists” (Mopas & Moore, 2012; Williams, Thomas, & Prior, 2015).

Critical scholarship, and feminist work in particular, seeks to meaningfully examine “scary sex” as important, valid, and visible, particularly as it moves into complicated discourses about consent and BDSM (Barker, 2013; Downing, 2013; Dymock, 2012), kink culture (Scott, 2015), “genderfuck” performances (Hankins, 2015), queer body modification (Pitts, 2000), professional dominatrix work (Lindemann, 2010), and new models of managing, containing, or controlling “deviance” (Larsen, 2013). Relatedly, there has been increased critical attention to debates within the asexuality literature about whether asexuality constitutes a politicized, feminist stance against the enforcement of mandated sexuality (Fahs, 2010; Przybylo, 2011) or an unchosen and biologically based identity (Bogaert, 2006). Often this work asks more questions than it answers and has led to heated debate as it unpacks some of the assumptions embedded within hierarchical and dichotomous notions of “good” and “bad” sex or “moral” and “immoral” practices (Barker, 2013; Bauer, 2014; Scott, 2015).

### Bodies in Pain

**Sexual Pain.** Given the overwhelming emphasis on links between sex and pleasure, or sex and politics, a blind spot has emerged for women struggling with sexual pain. The body in sexual pain does not fit with contemporary discourses on sexuality (e.g., pleasure, taboo, scandal, titillation, excitement), as it evokes the complicated interplay between self/other, pleasure/pain, and function/dysfunction. Elaine Scarry’s (1987) work has suggested that pain destroys subjectivity and enters the body in pain into others’ definitions and realities. Much of the earlier scholarship on sexual pain has asked whether definitions of “sexual dysfunction” based on sexual pain are too broad and how to best address women’s needs to feel sexually normal (Basson, 2002; Fishman, 2004; Labuski, 2015; Tiefer, 2004). The New View Campaign, a feminist activist group, emerged in response to the medicalization of women’s sexualities, arguing that far too many “sexual problems”—embodied most clearly in pharmaceutical efforts to manage women’s sexuality and in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition (*DSM-5*) diagnostic criteria—were actually rooted in gender and sexual inequalities rather than biological or medical dysfunctions per se (Cacchioni, 2015; Marecek & Gavey, 2013; Tiefer, 2010). Understanding the conflicts and tensions that occur surrounding women’s bodies—for example, the vagina should be tight but not “too tight” and should not be loose or “promiscuous” (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001)—also helps situate the cultural constructions of sexual pain.

Critical sexual studies’ interventions about sexual pain and sexual dysfunction provide necessary critiques of an otherwise overly medical, reductive, and woman-blaming framework for thinking about these issues. Sexual pain and sexual dysfunction, for example, may result from

women not communicating with partners, not experiencing or expressing their desires, not insisting on using lubrication (or even imagining lubrication as a possibility of something to use), or not having resolved previous sexual traumas; similarly, it may arise from overly rough sex (often glorified in pornography), relationship problems, the requirements of providing emotional labor to partners, an overemphasis on penetration, or body shame (Amaro, Raj, & Reed, 2001; Cacchioni, 2007; Fahs & Swank, *in press*; Fishman, 2004; McClelland et al. 2015; Wood, Koch, & Mansfield, 2006). Further, by challenging the notions of pain and dysfunction as an individual problem (thus leading to women blaming themselves for their “failing bodies”), and instead framing it as a sociocultural and relationship problem, critical sexuality researchers can offer women new tools to understand both the problems and the various solutions to their sexual concerns (Ayling & Ussher, 2008; Farrell & Cacchioni, 2012; Hinchliff, Gott, & Wylie, 2012; McClelland, 2015; McClelland, Holland, et al., 2015).

**Contagious Bodies.** Bodies that interface with disease and (imagined) contagion also face the social consequences of silence, exclusion, or being pushed out of bounds. In its most extreme manifestation, such as in human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) discourses, the contagious body functions as a social script linking medical statuses, social “pollution,” myth making, and counternarratives (Hausman, 2006; Mackenzie, 2011; Sultana, 2015). Gay men have had to endure numerous moralizing assaults and accusations of “deviance” stemming from the HIV epidemic (Dececco & Scarce, 2013), with newer concerns arising about online hookup practices and their implications for public health, pleasure, and risk (Race, 2015). Critical scholars have resituated HIV/AIDS by emphasizing key blind spots around lesbian, bisexual, and queer women with HIV (often completely ignored by public health due to perceptions of them having low risk factors; Logie & Gibson, 2013), and women with HIV/AIDS, who are often demonized as contaminating and contaminated (Leclerc-Madlala, 2001). Heterosexual men, on the other hand, have been found to use numerous strategies to not take STI prevention seriously with their partners (Broaddus, Morris, & Bryan, 2010). Women with other STIs have also had to reframe their experiences away from “disgust” and “abjection” and instead imagine themselves not as “damaged goods” but as normative, moral, and responsible for disclosure to partners (Nack, 2000, 2002).

**Young and Old Bodies.** In part because of the difficulties of institutional review board (IRB) approvals, funding support, and accessing adolescent and aging populations, blind spots have also emerged around young and old bodies (particularly as sexual bodies). Critical sexuality scholars have worked to situate both young (e.g., child and adolescent) and old (e.g., geriatric populations, those with cancer) as more visible and accessible

(McClelland, 2015; McClelland & Hunter, 2013; Mustanski, 2011; Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, & Thomas, 2000). For adolescent girls, a range of research has highlighted the specific ways that girls' desire and sexual activity gets pushed out of bounds, including work on the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine (Carpenter & Casper, 2009; Casper & Carpenter, 2008), lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) adolescent sexuality (Mustanski, 2011), and girls' sexual desire (Tolman, 2002).

For older women, recent critical sexuality work has reframed how researchers talk and think about old age, pleasure, and body image (Chrisler, 2007), older women's ambivalent feelings about Viagra (Loe, 2011), representations of older women in popular culture (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012), and older women's feelings about desire and desirability (McHugh & Interligi, 2015). Addressing yet another crucial blind spot around age and sexual identity, Williams and Fredriksen-Goldsen (2014) found that having a same-sex partner in older age was associated with better health and less depression compared to single LGB older adults. Reminders that 50% of adults over 60 and 25% of adults over 80 engage in semiregular sexual activity also push back against the desexualizing of older bodies (Somes & Donatelli, 2012).

Ultimately, the reimagining of abject bodies in their various forms, alongside viscous bodies and bodies in pain, pushes to the forefront of critical sexuality studies bodies that are otherwise out of sight, out of bounds, overly one-dimensional, or stereotyped/caricatured. We argue here that one priority of critical sexuality studies is the prioritization of the body as a site of potential resistance, particularly for bodies that rarely appear in narratives about how people imagine their own and others' sexuality. Along with many others doing feminist and anti-racist research, fat studies, and disability studies, to name only a few, we argue that critical sexuality studies can contribute substantially to the larger field by consistently asking this question: Who has been left out of sex research and why? Whose body is imagined as a site of pleasure and whose is not? By linking together several sites where critical sexuality scholars have intervened—fat, hair, blood, racism, contagion, pain, and age—we aim to create a lens through which to see how threads of marginalization operate to create ever-expanding networks, harmonies, and anger about the limited ways we have imagined sexuality research so far.

### What Counts as Sex: Critiques of Heteronormativity and Sexual Privilege

Critical sexuality studies, as we imagine it, has an obligation to challenge and undermine assumptions about heterosexuality. In this section we take up the question of how critical sexuality scholars have challenged heterosexism and sexual privilege alongside a critical examination of heterosex itself (that is, sex that occurs both as a part of heterosexual practices but also as an outgrowth of

heteronormativity and heterosexual privilege). We examine the differences between documenting and challenging sexual privilege and look critically at heterosex, heterosexuality, and heteronormativity.

In particular, we examine the phenomenon of orgasm as a “case study” to study heterosex and follow this by reimagining how critical heterosexuality might influence methodological decisions in empirical work within the paradigm of critical sexuality studies. Ultimately, we argue that *all* sexualities, however normative or nonnormative, should be subjected to critical attention, examination, and scrutiny, that no sexualities and their attendant scripts should proceed uncritically, whether asexual, polynormative, sexuonormative, or homonormative. That said, while critical attention toward less “mainstream” sexualities is important and necessary, critiquing heterosex should also take center stage to fully develop the critical lens necessary for tackling how sexuality becomes enmeshed with expectations and norms that inevitably create hierarchies.

While sex research is plagued with assumptions about what “counts” as sex, the role of penetration in sexual interactions, and the fundamental blind spots around non-heterosexual sex, research on heterosexuality often stops short of critically examining it. That said, some work has started to challenge heteronormativity and heterosexual privilege by critically examining heterosexuality and the practices of heterosex, particularly around issues like the dichotomy between men's sexuality as “active” and women's as “passive” (Potts, 2002, 2004), constructions of virginity, heterosexual practices, and heterosexual relationships (Elliott & Umberson, 2008; Stewart, 1999), research that examines “hookup” culture on campuses (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009), and the “coital imperative” (McPhillips et al., 2001). Compelling work that critiques and traces the production of heterosexuality also includes areas like the production of heterosexuality as bonds between men and dominance over women (Flood, 2008), the performances and productions of heterosexual masculinities (Bridges, 2014; Pascoe, 2011; Smiler, 2012), intersex studies and diagnostic issues of gender identity disorders (Bryant, 2006; Karkazis, 2008), the ways that heterosexuality makes invisible queer identities (Cech & Waidzunus, 2011), the physical and biological production of (heterosexualized) bodies (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Mamo, 2007), and the linguistic ways that heterosexuality is produced and maintained (Coates, 2013; Potts, 2002).

In the midst of this work, a compelling difference has emerged between documenting heterosexuality (i.e., describing heterosexual lives, practices, and existences) and challenging heterosexuality (i.e., working to disrupt heterosexism). In particular, attention to the term *heterosex* has emerged in recent years, as scholars from New Zealand and Australia have emphasized heterosex as both a practice deserving of critical attention and a funnel for power and privilege (Braun, 2013; Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003). In essence, heterosex is the critical examination of heterosexual practices. A body of critical feminist work has

emerged that examines heterosex (using the term *heterosex* strategically and in reference to a critical perspective) and its implications for gender, power, and sexuality, including work that critically examines notions of reciprocity in heterosex (Braun et al., 2003), the medicalization of women's sexual pain as a diversion tactic away from recognizing the role of patriarchy in heterosexual displeasure (Farrell & Cacchioni, 2012), men's sex drive (Vitellone, 2000), and fraught negotiations around contraception as connected to the imbalanced power dynamics of heterosexuality (Braun, 2013; Lowe, 2005). Further, much of the work on heterosex emphasizes the ways that women face numerous barriers to their wanting, desire, and ability to refuse or enthusiastically engage in sex (Sanchez, Crocker, & Boike, 2005; Shefer, Strelbel, & Foster, 2000). These analyses differ from other types of analyses that look at heterosexuality and heteronormativity because they look critically at the *practices* of heterosexuality as connected to the politics of heterosexism. Further, work on heterosex links heterosexism and sexism (Braun et al., 2003; Fahs, 2014a), a move that critical sexuality studies has and should continue to leverage as crucial for understanding how bodies and sexualities are still formed and enacted within scenarios marked by sexual privilege.

As a case study of the problems with heterosex, critical scholarship on orgasm as connected to heterosex has focused on the interface between the practices of heterosexuality and identities, power structures, and problems with heterosexual privilege (Jagose, 2012). Hannah Frith (2013a, 2013b, 2015) has critically examined the orgasm imperative (or the push that all heterosex must include orgasm) as connected to discourses of sexual performance, while Breanne Fahs (2011b, 2014a) has argued that the contemporary culture of heterosex produces not only a high number of fake orgasms for women but also the framing of orgasm as a product that *must* be produced. The push toward "hard work" and "efficient orgasms," alongside a reality that does not result in women's actual orgasms, portrays heterosex as increasingly problematic and counter to discourses of "pleasure" and "naturalness" (Frith, 2013b; Jagose, 2010; Johnson, 2010; Opperman, Braun, Clarke, & Rogers, 2014; Potts, 2000). These scholars argue that using orgasm to measure "healthy" heterosex only further exacerbates the power differences that already exist between men and women during sex (Frith, 2015; Potts, 2000).

Consequently, in developing a notion of "critical heterosexuality"—something we see as an essential next step in critical sexuality studies—might we consider the utility of reimagining heterosexuality as inherently problematic or troubling (Schneider, 2008)? Much like critical whiteness studies—which argues that, because whiteness functions as an identity of power rather than a "true" identity per se, it requires constant critical attention to its deployment, exploitative potential, and troubling silences/omissions around power (Nayak, 2007)—we also argue that critical heterosexuality studies make up a similar political project. Critical heterosexuality studies has, as its premise, the task of

questioning heterosexuality as inevitable and normative, and challenging assumptions of dominance (Fischer, 2013; Kitzinger, Wilkinson, & Perkins, 1992; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1993, 1994).

Drucilla Cornell (2007) posited that the imposition of heterosexuality functions as a widespread cultural trauma experienced within individuals, while Jackson Katz (2007) looked historically at heterosexuality as a recent invention based on power hierarchies. Social scientists, too, have worked to unpack and critically examine the imprint of heterosexuality and heterosexism on the world. For example, imagining heterosexuality as an institutional problem (Jackson, 2006), measuring a more self-critical and self-reflexive heterosexual identity (Flood, 2008; Simoni & Walters, 2001; van Anders, 2015), critiquing the marriage imperative (Heath, 2009), revising the implications of "casual sex" and the "naturalness" of monogamy (Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2013; Farvid & Braun, 2013), and putting forth new frameworks for thinking about young boys' heterosexual masculinities (Renold, 2007) all constitute "critical heterosexuality" work. Critical heterosexuality has great range and breadth, reaching into spaces previously demarcated as "normal," "assumed," or "taken for granted." We see this set of perspectives as just a few of the examples that together create a larger critical practice of examining what "counts" as sex and, in particular, where heterosexual privilege gets enmeshed in the fabric of sexuality research.

### Toward Critical Sexuality Studies

We argue that critical sexuality studies makes several key interventions within the fields of sex research, particularly in its sustained attention to critically minded, feminist, and anti-racist modes of thinking about the relationship between sexuality research and social justice. We define three primary sets of concerns for critical sexuality studies: (a) attention to conceptual analysis, with clear recognition that concepts *must* and *should* change over time and in relation to the social contexts that continue to shift and reinvent sexual relationships; (b) overt emphasis on bodies that are marginalized or pushed out of bounds, with attention to bodies that are silenced, unseen, ignored, or overly "sculpted" by patriarchal, racist, classist, and heterosexist social practices and priorities; and (c) a clear, relentless insistence that sexual privilege—and the overemphasis on heterosexist and heteronormative assumptions about the sexual world—is destructive, problematic, and troubling not only to the study of sexual identities but to the study of all aspects of sexuality.

When demarcating the goals and priorities of critical sexuality studies, we want to emphasize the importance of critically examining *what we see* (who researchers study, the concepts researchers examine), *how we see* (methodological choices, research designs, interview questions, populations studied or ignored), and *whom we make sense of this with*



(research communities, collaborations with students, journal publications, taking our work public, and so on). More attention to the overlap between critical sexuality studies and its impact on mental and public health practitioners, educators, and policymakers will allow greater visibility and more opportunities for grassroots activism related to these aims as well.

As critical sexuality studies remains ever interwoven with feminist theories and methods, the audience for this work is diverse and multiple, including sexuality studies scholars, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, those in critical studies (e.g., women's and gender studies, American studies, ethnic studies), and those in the natural sciences. Part of this work involves new kinds of imagining or situating, new ways of seeing or creating overlap and collaboration, and new modalities of enacting the practices of criticism and revision, particularly for those engaging in critical sexuality work without imagining a name and a community for that work.

Further, because we see critical sexuality studies as productive and creative, we imagine conversations between those, for example, studying hormones and those studying radical feminist politics of refusal; between those working on methodologies of studying adolescent sexuality and those working on locating and studying trans men late in life; between those working within and outside of the formal academy; between quantitative and qualitative scholars; between established scholars and new thinkers; between those firmly within psychology and sociology and those working on the margins of these fields. We argue through this articulation of critical sexuality studies for creating more opportunities to trouble existing frameworks and assumptions that often remain invisible within disciplines, methods, definitions, and assumptions about the "best" way to study sexuality.

Critical sexuality studies has far-reaching implications for applied areas, particularly activism (Fahs, 2012; Tiefer, 2010) and clinical practice (Kleinplatz & Ménard, 2007). For example, this work might include pedagogical practices that teach students how to revolt against patriarchal sexual practices and policies or clinical work that prioritizes new and complicated ways of thinking about trans men's menstrual experiences. We conclude by offering some advice (or, perhaps more accurately, signposts or road maps) for how scholars can engage with the goals of critical sexuality studies. To this end, we offer three ideas for researchers looking to build the capacity and impact of critical sexuality studies.

First, researchers are encouraged to imagine that concepts are *not* easily understood as "common sense" and are *never* universally imagined; further, nothing about sexuality is free from critical attention. We as researchers must ask questions about what concepts mean, what assumptions underlie those concepts, and how those definitions may obscure or drive underground certain nuances, contingencies, identities, or realities that constitute significant losses to the study of sexuality. Our hope is that researchers

continue to examine concepts and take up conceptual analysis as a necessary and generative aspect of the research process. As our work becomes increasingly interdisciplinary, traveling not only between disciplines but increasingly into clinical and medical practices, we should heed Bal's (2009) advice that conceptual analysis may enable discussion "on the basis of common terms and in the awareness of absences and exclusions" (p. 19). We also note the limits of travel for some concepts, referencing what Annemarie Mol (2002) calls "tensions between sources of knowledge and styles of knowing" (p. 1). Not all sources of knowledge are treated similarly; not all informants or scholars are treated fairly; not all ways of knowing are respected equally. Critical reflection on the ways that concepts travel within these conditions of inequity is part of the project when carefully considering the concepts with which they work, from where they have traveled, and to where they may travel next.

Second, sex researchers must stop assuming that penetrative sexual activities are the only ones that should be studied. While penetrative sex may be a site of pleasure, a site of violence, a site of risk, and many other important aspects of sexuality, critical sexuality research does not assign priority to this particular behavior above all others. Assuming that it is the most important sexual behavior reinforces heterosexist assumptions about sexuality and severely obfuscates and undermines the reality of people's sexual lives, especially women's sexual lives. Nonpenetrative sexual activities inform and underlie nearly all aspects of sexuality, from how we understand "first sex" to how we imagine "having sex" (or not) to how we understand embodiment, sexual subjectivity, pleasure, sexual activity, and agency. The emphasis on penetration (and the insistence on defining sexuality around penetrative intercourse) highlights risk and vulnerability, minimizes women's pleasure and orgasm, overemphasizes heterosexist notions of sex (or violence) "having occurred," foregrounds male ejaculation, and insults the way actual humans experience moving through their sexual lives (with other bodies, alone, in their imaginations, and as cultural text). We see the overemphasis on penetration as, at best, unimaginative and, at worst, as troublesome, devastating, and even violent, particularly to young women, lesbians, and gay men.

Third, we strongly emphasize the development of connections between disciplines, particularly the relationship between the social sciences (e.g., psychology, sociology, anthropology), critical studies (e.g., women and gender studies, social justice, ethnic studies, American studies), the natural sciences (Diamond, Hicks, & Otter-Henderson, 2011; van Anders, 2015), and sexuality studies in the humanities (Nash, 2014a, in press; Traub, 2015). Interdisciplinary work that engages deeply with the riches and rewards of working across and through multiple fields, that challenges, extends, and celebrates the disagreements of the disciplines and works to create something new, will greatly enhance how we understand, promote, and grow critical sexuality research. Evidence abounds that some researchers are

already working on these rich areas of overlap (Armstrong et al., 2012; Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012; Gavey, 2005), and these provide excellent examples of how to develop this kind of work.

We argue the subfield of critical sexuality studies is necessary, beginning to flourish, and defined by several core characteristics and priorities among the highly varied field of sexuality research. Using examples from research from within this larger field, we discern an important comingling of voices to increasingly press for issues of conceptual analysis, abject bodies, and analyses of sexual privilege to be front and center in sexuality research. This subfield is deeply rooted in feminist research practices, as well as other critical disciplinary interventions, which together aim to locate blind spots, oversights, and dilemmas when imagining and studying human sexualities. With this in mind, we envision a thriving field of critical sexuality studies that is politically minded, deeply informed by its feminist roots, and shameless about its connections to social movements, political rebellion, and the practices and priorities of social justice. Critical sexuality studies, at its core, aims to always attend to the ways that sex and power collide and, ultimately, who is asked to pay for this collision.

### Acknowledgment

Thank you to Harley Dutcher, Sarah Bell, Eric Swank, Michael Karger, Natali Blazevic, Laura Martinez, Kimberly Koerth, Chelsea Pixler, Crystal Zaragoza, and the Feminist Research on Gender and Sexuality Group who assisted with this manuscript.

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