

Working at the crossroads of pleasure and danger: Feminist perspectives on doing critical sexuality studies

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Abstract

For those entering the field of sexuality studies, there is often little advice or guidance on the many facets of the work, some of which are pleasurable and some of which are dangerous. Drawing from our personal and professional conflicts surrounding our work as feminist psychologists and sociologists studying women's sexuality, we extend Carole Vance's (1984) claims about pleasure and danger by arguing that, for the sex researcher, pleasure and danger are in fact *inverted*. That which should give us pleasure (e.g. having our work promoted to the public; teaching critical material about sexuality; thinking deeply about our personal relationships) ends up feeling dangerous, and that which should feel dangerous (e.g. saying and doing and working on taboo things; calling out homophobia, racism, classism, and sexism) ends up giving us pleasure. We examine several areas where we experience personal and professional costs and benefits of doing feminist sex research, including relationships with partners, communication with research participants, pedagogical challenges and conflicts, the interface between the sex-researcher identity and university/institutional practices, and, finally, our interface with the public world and the mass media. In doing so, we aim to use our personal experiences to highlight just a few of the areas that emerging sexuality researchers may encounter. In addition, we extend Vance's framework of pleasure and danger beyond the experiences of women having sex and into the realm of those seeking to

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understand, research, write about, theorize, and assess the complicated terrain of women's sexuality.

Keywords

Academia, critical feminist sex research, danger, feminist methods, feminist pedagogy, pleasure, women's sexuality

Thirty years of feminist sex research have produced an impressive array of ways to think about, study, and critically evaluate women's sexuality. One of the most important interventions in this body of scholarship has been Carole Vance's (1984) provocative and controversial linking of pleasure with danger. Working through the various ways that women negotiate and experience pleasure and danger – that is, pleasure combined with danger, but also pleasure experienced *as* danger – Vance's work laid the groundwork for both theoretical and empirical inquiries about the complicated and contested terrain of women's sexual subjectivities. What does it mean, for example, that women sometimes experience their sexuality as infused with anxieties about pornography, sexual violence, and insidious silences about their bodies and desires? Vance (1993) argued for a more complicated framework to consider these questions: 'To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience of sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live' (1993: 1). Relevant scholarship has extended Vance's notions of pleasure and danger by taking up such topics as immigration and economy (González-López, 2005), adolescent sexual desire (Fine, 1988), sex education (Cameron-Lewis and Allen, 2013), race and pornography (Miller-Young, 2010a), and reimagined histories of sexuality (Seidman, 1990).

While the framework of pleasure and danger has meaningfully been applied to the sexual lives of women – particularly as they make sexual choices, assess their sexual satisfaction, or evaluate their relationship to the broader sexual culture – this framework has not yet been used to understand the particular experiences of the feminist sex researcher, particularly within US contexts where repression, violence, and hierarchy serve as key ways that people understand sex and sexuality. Thirty years after Vance pressed feminist researchers to consistently weave pleasure with danger in studies of women's sexual selves, we return to her argument as feminist critical sexuality researchers. How do our own experiences as critically minded, US-based, cisgender white women illuminate pleasure and danger? Janice Irvine (2014) thoughtfully argued that assessing and critiquing the sex lives of sexuality researchers often serves to undermine or discredit the work. We aim to contribute to this conversation and examine the role of Vance's pleasure/danger proposition in the labor of *doing* feminist sex research. We situate this article within many other important conversations including: discussions across the social

sciences about the perils and practices of fieldwork (e.g. Bay-Cheng, 2009; Fahs and McClelland, 2016; Gailey and Prohaska, 2011), critical work addressing race and ethnicity in sexuality research (García, 2009; González-López, 2010; Stephens and Phillips, 2005), previous discussions of pleasure and danger in research (González-López, 2005), as well as feminist arguments for greater inclusion of the living, breathing, subjective researcher (Bellamy et al., 2011; Carter, 2016; Hayfield and Huxley, 2015).

We hope that this essay will become a work in progress. We aim to contribute to ongoing conversations on the personal and professional experiences of feminist intellectuals from all racial and cultural backgrounds advancing sexuality research in an increasingly diverse and complex contemporary US society. Our goal is to bring greater attention to some of the complexities of doing feminist sexuality research, especially for those new to the field or looking for guidance in developing their skills. Doing this work brings up many issues that are not unique to feminist sexuality research, but is nevertheless difficult terrain to cover.

In this article, we address several key questions related to feminist sexuality research: What are the costs and benefits of doing this work and how can we imagine the next chapter in the field? What does it mean to engage in work that is simultaneously trivialized (imagined as easy and/or not meaningful) and fetishized (having one's personal life and professional life confused as the same)? Throughout this discussion, we wonder how these experiences might revise and nuance earlier claims about pleasure and danger. We turn to our own experiences as researchers, and particularly, where we identify personal and professional costs and benefits. We briefly explore communication with research participants, pedagogical challenges and conflicts, the interface between the sex-researcher identity and university/institutional practices, theoretical frameworks, and our interface with publics and mass media. Thus, we aim to extend Vance's framework of pleasure and danger beyond the experiences of women having sex and into the realm of those seeking to understand, research, write about, theorize, and assess the complicated terrain of (women's) sexuality.

Inverting pleasure and danger

Vance's work prominently situated pleasure and danger as overlapping frameworks within which women experience their sexualities. She proposed that women experience, in contradictory ways, impulses toward pleasure and danger, and that both inform the core of their sexual selves. We extend this by arguing that, for the sex researcher, pleasure and danger are *inverted*. That which should give us pleasure (e.g., having our work promoted to the public; teaching critical material; publishing scholarship) ends up feeling dangerous, and that which should feel dangerous (e.g., saying and doing and working on taboo things; calling out homophobia, racism, classism, and sexism) ends up giving us pleasure. This inversion informs our work across multiple spheres and contexts, from committee work to public interviews to pedagogical challenges. We also imagine the possibility that

this inversion – experienced intimately by feminist sex researchers – also extends into other aspects of feminist writing, scholarship, and activism, particularly given the devastating incidents of feminist bloggers and gamers facing death threats and harassment simply for being in largely male spaces (Dewey, 2014; Goldberg, 2015).

Doing critical feminist research presents a notable set of challenges to the researcher, whose identity, body, and work intersect in private and public spheres. As J Richard Udry wrote, ‘Some people think sex research legitimates nontraditional sexual behavior. Sex researchers often become identified with nontraditional sexual views. In this way, the researchers themselves may become partisans in the politics of sex’ (1993: 103). As we put our own identities, bodies, and practices into the public sphere (Taylor and Raeburn, 1995) we want to make an argument for how doing critical feminist sex research is, in practice, a form of high-risk activism with enormous potential to be incredibly pleasurable *and* dangerous. Like many before us who have had their work downplayed or trivialized (e.g., Miller-Young, 2010b), we often hear claims that sex research must be ‘easy’, ‘fun’, or ‘more enjoyable’ than other ‘serious’ topics, and that publishing such research must also be ‘easier’ than other publishing. This image of fun is then consistently counterbalanced with trivializations, mockeries, and downgrading of the seriousness of the work that occurs both within and outside of academia. This pleasure in the supposed ease of critical feminist sex research is counterbalanced by the reality of doing such work, as we keenly experience the dangers of our scholarship regularly.

We also face compelling critiques from sex positive feminists who sometimes see our work as ignoring pleasure, being *too critical*, or otherwise discounting the importance of things like pornography. We face criticisms from radical feminists who dislike the way that critical feminist sex research appears to reinforce women’s connections to their bodies. For example, Fahs has interviewed radical feminists, hearing repeatedly that feminist sex research is bad politics. ‘What’s the big deal with sex? We have bigger problems!’ is a common refrain heard from 1960s’ and 1970s’ activists. In this light, sex is too often framed as a way to stereotype women’s connections to their ‘natural’ bodies and to reduce the meaning and significance of their cultural critiques and undermine activist struggles for justice. Simultaneously facing critiques from antifeminists, sex positive feminists, and radical feminists, contemporary critical feminist sex researchers find themselves in quite a bind. Should we consider ourselves an endangered species? Irrelevant? Too conservative, progressive, prudish, or outrageous? Pleasure and danger is written everywhere in these conundra.

In doing feminist sex research, we face a series of paradoxes: one must be an insider to understand but absolutely ‘must’ be an objective outsider; one must be expert, but anyone can do this work; this work is both fun and difficult. These assumptions not only overwhelm our energies (as we manage accusations and assumptions) but also penalize us within the context of our institutions and universities, being marked, perhaps, as ‘perverse’. Sex simultaneously operates as a potential locus for violence/trauma and a potential site of pleasure. This was the radical shift of Vance’s framing: sex is never one or the other – it is always

both – and it has been up to us to figure out how to work within this dynamic and always-shifting space. Irvine’s ‘dirty work’ argument (2014) – that research should clean up the dirty topic of sexuality – applies in terms of the reception and respect given to researchers, but perhaps also evident is the field’s response to being labeled as dirty: the focus on sexual health interventions (aiming to become less dirty), a focus on the physiology of sex (an appeal to the cleanliness of science), and a focus on group differences (leveraging the dirtiness claims as evidence of injustice).

Four spaces: The sex researcher at work

We turn to four spaces where we work as researchers: our classrooms, our research environments, the institutions we work within, and the larger public sphere that circulates our research to the public. These four spaces are interconnected and in connecting them here, we aim to examine qualities that overlap within them. We move into these four spaces to tell some of our own stories in order to demystify the work and to examine the place where pleasure and danger intermingle. In telling these stories, we draw inspiration from those who have put their careers on the line in research and in writing (Parreñas Shimizu, 2007) as well as those who have weathered and survived attacks on their work over the past century (Golden, 2012; Halperin, 1996), all of which are increasingly notable as attacks on critical sexuality scholars have become routine and even at times mundane (Gutfeld, 2014). These stories collectively point to the ways that sex research, and specifically the researchers, have a long history of being attacked, ridiculed, undermined, and degraded, even when working within more traditional positivistic methodologies (Laumann et al., 1994).

Classrooms: ‘So, you want to be a sex researcher . . .?’

An observer in any of our classrooms will likely hear students and professors talking about vulvas, anuses, orgasms and a slew of other things. Teaching about sex has long been vilified (Davis, 2005; Irvine, 2004) and is largely imagined to include ‘demonstrations’ that reinforce the idea that sex is either *too close* (as in, being demonstrated) or *too far* (as in, intellectualized away from the ‘real’). There is constant negotiation between the ‘too real’ and the ‘not real’, the ‘too dangerous/radical’ and the ‘not dangerous enough’. The pleasures and dangers of being a critical feminist sex researcher are, for those in academic institutions, also often paired with the pleasures and dangers of teaching students about doing this work (Decena, 2010). In unexpected ways, we find great pleasure in moments of being an outcast and creating outrageousness in unexpected places. Fahs’s (2013) pedagogical work of menstrual and vagina activism with students is one example. Conversely, teaching can be incredibly dangerous, as we place our bodies and minds in front of classes, becoming inadvertent objects of analysis or putting us at risk of exploitation or humiliation. We wonder what it means to train a (young) person to move into this space, marked by enthusiasm and deep pleasure, yet

treacherous and often quite ‘dirty’. As many queer and feminist scholars have long argued, teaching students about feminism and sexuality in the USA may be arduous, complicated, and taxing in ways that differ from what our peers may be teaching (Crabtree and Sapp, 2003; Halperin, 2002; Sprague and Massoni, 2005). Clarissa Smith wrote, ‘Many students perceive me as the lecturer who gets wheeled in to teach the “naughty bits”, when they can just “relax” and enjoy me talking about dildos and the community functions of “dogging” [public sex] sites’ (2009: 570). Mark McCormack (2014: 675) acknowledged that, although most teaching has risks in it, they ‘are exacerbated when one is lecturing about topics frequently deemed sensitive and sometimes taboo’. Our teaching can occur in the context of the seemingly dichotomous construction of sexuality as both trivial and overtly meaningful.

For women of color, the pleasures and dangers are additionally complicated by institutional and historical racisms, xenocentrism, and specific sexism (Gutiérrez y Muhs, et al., 2012). Aaronette M White (2006) described the development of a college course on ‘Black and White sexualities’ that had to ‘maintain its relevance’ for all students. The course also had to break the historical silence of many African-American studies courses that do not address sexualities. Further, in describing staggeringly racist high school sex education classrooms, Lorena García (2009) revealed the persistence of white teachers’ stereotypes underlying the advice that Latina teens should be ‘good’ (abstinent) girls. For faculty LGBT women of color, the intense scrutiny of their sexual lives from students, combined with tokenism from university administrators, adds additional stress (La Sala et al., 2008). How then might students’ stereotypes in college and university classrooms operate to frame and constrain feminist sexuality scholars’ teaching?

Students’ sexual histories/inventories are not immediately visible, and as a result, we are often tasked with assessing and managing how sexual content might land with students in the classroom, in mentoring dynamics, and in research designs. We have worked with students seeking space to explore their own sexual traumas and concerns, putting us in a grayed position of being therapist, mentor, and Foucauldian confessor. The strange possibilities of teaching students to talk about genitals, orgasms, and hard-to-explain socio-cultural experiences that defy description – along with the very important task of moving them from their own experiences of *something* (e.g., desire, arousal . . .) to something broader and more political – forces us to collectively consider the pleasures and dangers lurking in these boundaries.

Socializing students to talk about sex in a professional way can lead to uncomfortable and difficult dynamics; one of us had a student who repeatedly used the word ‘cock’ when describing his research on penis size (frequently pointing to his penis while doing so). Such explicit examples of male students sexualizing a conversation also highlight the gendered discomfort women sex researchers might feel in contrast to the reported pleasures men as sex researchers might feel during conversations and interviews (Thomas and Williams, 2016). The intersection of

our professional identities and students' personal lives can also create chaotic and difficult interpersonal exchanges.

Research environment: The pleasures and dangers of talking and listening

In the research environment, we find additional inversions of pleasure and dangers. The danger of sex research has historically and notoriously been lodged in the body of the person being asked questions and has been contrasted with the assumed perversity (and assumed safety) of the person who insists on asking the questions. Participants are considered 'in danger' from the research itself due to the sensitive nature of the questions, being asked to share details of what is 'private' with a stranger, along with affective aspects of the research, such as difficult memories, feelings of discomfort, embarrassment (Senn and Desmarais, 2006). Being asked questions about oneself is at best uncomfortable, at worst damaging; being the questioner is at best voyeuristic, at worst perverse and pathological. While these dangers are, in fact, true for many research endeavors, they nevertheless have come to act as proxy as the *only* possibilities of how critical feminist sex researchers and participants are imagined. In an effort to extend beyond these well-worn grooves, we offer additional pleasures and dangers that have been essential aspects of our experiences in research environments.

Being listened to can be pleasurable. Research consistently shows that feeling listened to is both precious and rare (Myers, 2000). In our research, participants sometimes talked about the unique experience of being heard during an interview, while acknowledging the rarity of this. But research is different from a therapeutic situation; the listening offered during interviews (and even surveys) can sometimes offer participants the opportunity to talk, share, babble, reflect, and even tell tall tales, even while recognizing the perilous and socially constructed nature of using words dictated by dominant structures beyond one's own making (Weatherall et al., 2002). By focusing only on the vulnerability of speaking, we have lost sight of the potential pleasure of – and political significance – of *being heard*. Trauma researchers have similarly argued that the constant focus on the vulnerability of participants means that researchers often ignore the costs of *not* asking questions about people's experiences, reinstating silences where there is already enormous reticence (Becker-Blease and Freyd, 2006). Research from several subfields consistently shows that participants report that being a part of studies about sex and sexuality is challenging yet rewarding (Campbell et al., 2010; Edwards et al., 2009; Mustanski, 2011). Participants report benefits including 'insight, a sense of emotional relief, and feelings of being supported' (Bay-Cheng, 2009: 243).

Listening can be dangerous. In the prototypical research dyad, the researcher is imagined to be potentially dangerous, but never in danger herself. Asking participants to talk about their sexual lives often involves listening to stories of pleasure, as well as pain, violence, and sadness. We hear about things that surprise us, tap into our

own pain/violence/sadness, and haunt us long after the interviews end. For example, questions about early sexual experiences inevitably lead to complex discussions of sexual violence (rape and childhood sexual trauma), coercion, disappointment, shame, uncertainty, longing, pleasure, confusion, and anger. When doing research, what previously operated as theoretical debates now occupy space – and at times, a lot of space – in our bodies (Carroll, 2013). For example, in Rebecca Plante's (2007) ethnography of university peer sexuality educators, multiple participants described their sexual traumas, rapes, and sexual assaults. Plante had to grapple with her feelings of empathy, sympathy, and concern, while pushing forward with the work *and* acknowledging these experiences as intimate and difficult. Critical feminist sex researchers are infrequently imagined as impacted by their research, but what of the dangers in this unimagined space? The personal costs are rarely documented, often leaving researchers without ways to help themselves, understand, or prepare.

Rebecca Campbell (2002) has encouraged the notion of 'emotionally engaged research' as a way to imagine the inevitable role of emotions in research. An 'ethics of caring' would include 'caring for the research participants, caring for what becomes of a research project, and caring for one's self and one's research team' (2002: 123–124). Reflecting on her research with women who have been raped, Campbell wrote, 'It was costly – emotionally expensive – to engage in this work' (2002: 144). Sometimes referred to as 'vicarious trauma', the costs of listening to traumatic material have been well documented by clinicians and social workers (Jenkins and Baird, 2002; Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995) who have developed excellent skills for bearing witness to large and small traumas in research environments.

Sara McClelland (2017) developed the concept of 'vulnerable listening' to highlight aspects of listening, including being emotionally affected by doing interview-based research, the role of the researcher's body in the listening dynamic, and the unexplored role of feeling strong and often negative emotions about the material we listen to. This model recognizes the *duality of vulnerability* within the research dyad. This dyadic and shared dynamic encourages us to consider what ethics need to be in place to protect those of us asking the questions (without simply stating, 'well, you were the one who decided to do this research . . .'). What protocols are necessary for methodological practices that both encourage vulnerable listening practices and draw attention to the potential effects of listening to respondents talk about sex? How can we better anticipate the potential costs (and help younger sex researchers) of asking difficult questions and hearing difficult answers?

Participants: The pleasures and dangers of being real bodies

Pleasure and danger also operate in complicated ways when we talk to participants in our studies. The pleasures and dangers of researcher sexualization were evident in Plante's field research within several kink/y communities (Plante, 2006, 2012). Observation in a private sex club required her to dress appropriately – in one case,

in a black vinyl dress. Multiple men initiated conversations and sexual interactions, but one man followed her, silent, naked, and masturbating. While the conversations were mostly thought provoking and richly illuminating for Plante's research interests, the masturbating man presented a dilemma. She was in a sex club where participants expected to play and create sexual scenes; it was not a research space or an interview location. When describing or discussing this event, how should it be treated? Plante was not seen to be an ethnographer, just a female observer at a sex club. Had she, as a researcher, entered a particular space where being sexualized was necessary for the research?

There may be a gray area between sexualization and sexual harassment (Grenz, 2005). Several of Grenz's respondents in a study of male sex-work clients made overtly sexual requests; one asked to kiss her feet, while another asked if he could show her his penis. Similarly, at gay club/bar events Plante attended as an HIV education program evaluator (Plante, 2014), some men outed themselves as heterosexual and then asked if she wanted to go on a date.

Feminist research has done an excellent job of describing the essential role of gender, power, and bodies in research (Oakley, 1981; Pascoe, 2007; Rice, 2009). We need additional voices to flesh out the *meanings of our flesh* and the many ways in which our flesh operates in critical feminist sex research. In her study with women who had been diagnosed with Stage IV breast cancer, McClelland (2017) found that her own breasts often played a part during interviews – as a source of envy, a symbol of youth and health, or a stumbling block when connecting with a participant. In addition, her breasts were an extremely important and real reference point for researcher and participant as they discussed what breasts meant, what they had provided, what was once real, and what was now gone. During interviews, women would often *look at* McClelland's breasts, an act otherwise read as breaking a social norm. However, in the intimate space of interviews about sex and cancer, the centrality of the researcher's breasts was many things at once: a question mark (*Why are you asking? Do you have cancer?*), a form of reminiscing (*I remember having those*), and a line in the sand (*you are there, healthy; I am here, sick*). They were rarely spoken of, but both bodies were present and meaningful in ways that often went unacknowledged. While feminist researchers have long argued for the important place of gender and sexuality in research (Fine, 1994; Presser, 2014; Ringrose and Renold, 2014), there is less explicit recognition of our physical bodies as sites of sexual meaning making (see also Rice, 2009).

Institutions: Sexualities in context

Feminist sex research and teaching occurs within socio-cultural dynamics that continuously evaluate our work. In our workplaces, we hear comments about how it 'must be nice' to publish on sexuality, with colleagues presuming that it is 'easy' to get this work into print because it is 'sexy'. Our teaching is subjected to similar assumptions, evident in faculty comments about how our classes fill or our evaluations are excellent because we 'teach the fun stuff'. A well-regarded feminist

researcher told one of us not to expect teaching success in any other classes because (to paraphrase) ‘the sex class is just fun and superficial, but teaching theory requires actual hard work’. Repeated trivialization of our scholarship, warnings to ‘do sex research after tenure’ and do something ‘real’ in the beginning of our careers, align with diminishment of sexuality researchers seen in larger studies (Irvine, 2014). We have each been subjected to colleagues and strangers, who ask about our work and proceed to tell us ‘what is wrong’ with our data, findings, or hypotheses: ‘Look, the problem is that you’re thinking about sex all wrong...’. We have also endured, in social settings, long and painfully vivid descriptions of people’s sex lives, practices, desires, feelings, wishes, and fantasies. When we have interviewed for academic jobs, we have been asked whether we needed sex toys as props, have received salacious comments over recruitment dinners, and been asked about our personal sexual experiences during Q&A with audiences after presenting our research. The dangers of such exchanges cannot be overstated in the high-stakes process of securing an academic job, as otherwise unmentionable subjects intrude in areas where they would never otherwise be considered ‘legitimate’. While some may argue, ‘this goes with the territory’ of doing sex research, we wonder instead, how this kind of emotional boundary work pushes some to avoid sex research, others to silence themselves, and still others to come to expect that doing sex research means doing boundary work that is not expected of our colleagues in other fields.

Media: The pleasures and dangers of visibility on the public stage

We are also asked to speak publicly about sexuality in contexts as diverse as talk shows, public television, radio shows, blogs, magazines, conferences, newspapers, and journals. These public conversations *should* symbolize in meaningful ways the public impact of our work (and we *should* feel excited about these opportunities). In reality, however, our public selves are often scrutinized, undermined, and even attacked. Ideas about what a sex researcher *should* look like, or what it means to be young(ish), female, and talking publicly about sex circulate within and around these conversations. Fahs, for example, has written about body hair for years and has published numerous pieces on the undergraduate extra credit assignment she uses to challenge students to engage in non-normative body hair behavior (Fahs, 2011, 2014). This work received attention from a variety of conservative media outlets which spread the word about this ‘controversial’ assignment to the *Drudge Report* and *Fox News* (national and local). It seems that people have a much more difficult time talking about women’s sexuality than they do about more mundane body rituals like the removal of body hair. Subsequently over 2000 articles around the world discussed this assignment and framed body hair as dangerous, controversial, and problematic (Jerreat, 2014; Lickus, 2014; Thomas, 2014).

The tension between speaking about our own work versus having *others* speak about our work becomes clear in reflecting on this experience. Rush Limbaugh discussed Fahs’ body hair assignment on the radio. After this aired, Fahs received a

host of threats, including vivid descriptions of how she should die and ‘jokes’ about bringing guns to her classroom or shitting on her desk at work. When her university did a safety assessment (ultimately concluding that free speech laws protect all of these utterances unless there is a specific and credible threat), she heard repeatedly that these sorts of things *often* happened to female professors. It became painfully clear that universities have few mechanisms to protect professors under attack in these ways. As public, easy-to-find people who appear in person at specific times/places (e.g., class schedules published online), we are, in essence, especially vulnerable. The seriousness of facing danger to our physical safety underscores again the various professional costs of doing critical feminist sex research, whether we examine ‘serious’ or ‘trivial’ subjects, and the line between the two seems perennially blurred (Fahs, 2016).

This particular example raises questions about the ways in which media interactions are at once painful, strange, ridiculous, difficult, uneasy, and contentious. We have expertise in a subject that many consider titillating and that many more consider trivial and silly. If we do an interview about *50 Shades of Grey* and argue against its depictions of sexual violence as ‘sexy’, is this serious work or does it paint us as frivolous, particularly in comparison to colleagues who study Proust, Beckett, Shakespeare, public housing, climate change, and border politics? If we do an interview about introducing sex toys into a new relationship – invited to do so because we have expertise in women’s sexuality – does such an interview frame us as trivial, our research as common sense and silly? In short, it is challenging to simultaneously speak about subjects that the general public relates to while still maintaining status and authority as serious scholars. When that fails and we receive threats and attacks, should we see signs of danger as a ‘good sign’ of our impact? How can we negotiate the various silences that befall feminist sex researchers? Should we take pleasure in the danger? Should we see danger in the pleasure?

Conclusion

This essay raises a variety of issues around themes of pleasure and danger for feminist sex researchers, particularly as we negotiate our students, research environments, institutions, and the public eye. The clear proximity people feel to the topic of sexuality gives us a strong position from which to launch an incisive cultural critique, yet paradoxically, the nature of the research strips us of the authority needed to make such a critique in the eyes of many. This proximity generates specific critiques from others within and outside academia, thus creating problematic dynamics where we continually face assault from one camp or another while also negotiating the ways we feel undermined and trivialized. We wonder and struggle with the implications for training sex researchers, developing notions of expertise about women’s sexuality, and accumulating expertise, honor, and respect in our fields.

The issues we raise also inevitably bring up new questions about the relationship between our own identities as cisgender white feminist sex researchers and the

experiences of other sex researchers that may – or may not – overlap with our own. What might trans or gender-queer sex researchers say about the pleasures and perils of sex research and teaching about sexuality (Warner 2004; Whitley, 2015)? How might heterosexual men – particularly those who study women – differently experience the rewards and limitations of this work as they create sexual stories for others (Messner, 1996; Parker and Gagnon, 2013; Thomas and Williams, 2016)? This essay clearly cannot address the complexities of the many other interpretations of the pleasure/danger paradigm in sex research, but it does point to a continued need for self-reflexivity and assessment of the role of the individual researcher (who, especially when outside of the white/male/heterosexual context, is often isolated, silenced, and ignored) in sexuality studies.

Ultimately, sex research and its personal and professional costs demands that we consider not just how sex circulates discursively (in academic writing, popular culture, and so on) but how it impacts individual researchers. This forces a consideration of new questions too often forgotten for emerging sex researchers: Should we view sex as a funnel (where anxieties, cultural feelings and institutional priorities get funneled toward sex), a lens (something we see other aspects of life through), a framework (something we use to wrap around topics like identities, bodies, and relationships), a metaphor (sex as representative of power, gender relations, ‘American-ness’ and so on), an embodied/lived experience (something we *do* and *feel* and *experience* within), or as a political enterprise (something with deep roots in the political policies and practices). Perhaps we have learned to take pleasure in these very questions and their inevitable, ambiguous, dangers.

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