

“The loving queer gaze”: The epistemological significance of queer joy

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Abstract

This article contends with queer joy as an epistemology to highlight an affective experience that grounds a basis for revising dominant approaches to sexual ethics. Drawing on findings from a mixed-methods study with 100 2SLGBTQ+ young adults from Canada and the US, we argue that queer and trans people mobilize queer sexual joy as an epistemology of script breaking that led participants to explore freedom and play, enjoy novel forms of care and communality, and to challenge oppression. We found that 2SLGBTQ+ young adults are undermining dominant sexual cultures which perpetuate gender-based violence through cisheteronormative logics of objectification and dominance. Rather than simply producing misery, normative sex and gender regimes produced a disorientation among 2SLGBTQ+ young adults which was fruitful for breaking sexual scripts and developing approaches to sex and relationships grounded in greater authenticity, creativity, reciprocity, play, and joy. We propose that by taking queer joy as a way of knowing, we may learn how queer and trans people negotiate the performativity of gender and sex, their own bodily knowledge, and the epistemic injustices that have precluded this knowledge from being valued. Pushing against the “joy deficit” in sociology that constrains the field to the study of the misery that minority

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communities face, this paper not only demonstrates what sociologists might learn from the texture of queer and trans lives, but also how these lessons can help to undermine cisheteronormativity as a root cause of gender-based violence.

KEYWORDS

2SLGBTQ, gender, gender-based violence, queer joy, sexual ethics, sociology of sexualities, youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

Depicted as threatening to the traditional, white All-American family, queer and trans youth are under attack. Confronted by “Don’t Say Gay” legislation and rhetoric that has been correlated to a rise in rates of gender-based violence (Human Rights Campaign, 2023), queer and trans youth are facing burgeoning fronts of homophobia and transphobia. While it is certainly imperative that scholars contend with this hostile onslaught, a focus on this oppression alone can easily produce homogenous representations of queer and trans populations as constantly suffering rather than reckon with their entirety. As identified by Shuster and Westbrook (2022), there exists a “joy deficit” within the sociological study of marginalized people, and the consequence is that these groups remain yoked to their own suffering. To disrupt this troublesome pattern, our research focuses on the joy of 2SLGBTQ+ (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and other sexual and gender minority) communities and the positive lessons we can learn from 2SLGBTQ+ young adults for fostering less violent, more just cultures free from gender-based violence (Wright et al., 2024; Wright & Greenberg, 2024). Drawing from the UN’s definition, the Canadian Women’s Foundation (n.d.) notes that gender-based violence

refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms. It disproportionately impacts women, girls, and Two Spirit, trans, and non-binary people. It includes sexual, physical, mental, and economic forms of abuse inflicted in public or in private as well as threats of violence, coercion, and manipulation.

(para. 4)

We examine queer sexual joy as a method that can reorient queer and trans people toward new forms of pleasure and away from the confines of heteronormativity that structure most appearances of gender-based violence.¹

To do this, we draw on findings from The Queer Sexual Joy Project, a mixed-methods study of 100 2SLGBTQ+ young adults aged 18–35 across Canada and the US that explored participants’ experiences of great consensual sex and queer sexual joy. We asked: what does it look and feel like to experience queer sexual joy, particularly as a challenge to and departure from the confines of compulsory cisheteronormativity? Through arts-based workshops, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and surveys, we found that queer and trans communities are “doing” consent and sex in counter-hegemonic ways that provide new avenues for examining relationality, care, and consensual sexual pleasure. Due to these results, this article contends with queer sexual joy as an epistemology to highlight an affective experience that grounds a basis for revising dominant approaches to sexual ethics. We propose that by taking queer sexual joy as a way of knowing, we may learn how queer and trans people are negotiating the performativity of gender and sex, their own bodily knowledge, and the epistemic injustices that have precluded this knowledge from being valued. We found that queer and trans people mobilize queer sexual joy as an epistemology

of script breaking that challenges cisheteronormativity and cultivates deeply pleasurable sex and relationships. Queer sexual joy as an epistemology, therefore, offers a crucial redirection to sociologies of sex, gender, and sexuality by evincing what sociologists might learn from the texture of queer and trans lives beyond the presence of violence.

To substantiate this argument, we first review literature on sexual script theory, focusing on feminist sociologists' articulations of how non-cisheteronormative scripts are relegated. Next, we review literature on the power of sexual joy as an affect that potentiates new cultures where subversive, joyful expressions by marginalized groups afford new ways of being. The last section of the literature review examines queer, trans, and feminist epistemologies and their relationships to the field of sociology, highlighting the promise of queer and trans epistemic knowledges—such as via experiences of queer sexual joy—for challenging hegemonic discourse.

We then explain the methodology of the project before examining three findings from the Queer Sexual Joy Project that demonstrate that queer and trans epistemologies not only promote more just, mutually pleasurable sexual cultures, but also nuance and challenge the overwhelming sociological production of queerness and transness as subjects beholden to misery. Notably, we use queer sexual joy as an umbrella term for trans sexual joy at times.² First, we identify how participants recognized, felt, and mobilized queer sexual joy as an epistemology, or way of approaching sex and romantic relations. Embracing the capacity to break scripts and subvert how gender is done, participants employed queer joy to find new forms of pleasure and to grapple with the fruitful potentials of disorientation. This disorientation opened new ways of relating and sexual practices that ushered in feelings of authenticity and deep joy. Next, we examine how queer and trans sexual joy facilitated 2SLGBTQ+ youth's rejection of cisheteronormative sexual scripts that reinforce the objectifying, dehumanizing sexual relations underlying rape culture (Beres, 2022; Wright, 2024). The practices that cultivated queer and trans young people's sexual joy highlight counter-hegemonic knowledges which prioritize reciprocity, play, and creativity. Finally, we examine how queer and trans sexual joy offers people solace from (some of) the violence of cisheteropatriarchy. While queer and trans communities are not utopias free from gender-based violence, within these communities, the practices associated with queer and trans sexual joy involved an ethics of care that participants described as helping to facilitate less harmful, deeply pleasurable sex which was distinct from their interactions, in particular, with cisheterosexual men. For example, alternative sexual communities, such as non-monogamous and kink communities, offered participants alternative models for sex and relationships that foregrounded thorough communication and nuanced consent.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Heteronormative sexual scripts as barriers to sexual joy

First introduced in 1973 by sociologists Simon and Gagnon, sexual script theory accounts for how interpersonal situations are mediated by discourse. As Ronen (2010) explains, Simon and Gagnon posited that preceding our interpersonal relationships are a set of scripts that provide “the ordering of representations of self and other” (Simon and Gagnon 1973, 97 qtd. in Ronen, 2010, p. 357). These scripts operate psychically, interpersonally, and culturally to teach individuals with whom and how they should have sex (Berntson et al., 2014, p. 3).

Since this introduction, sexual script theory has offered myriad analyses that reckon with how discourse trains individuals to approach sex and gender. Whether it be the heteronormativity of children (Myers & Raymond, 2010), dancing (Ronen, 2010), hookup culture (Pham, 2017; Reid et al., 2011), monogamy (Wilkins & Dalessandro, 2013), or transgender recognition and carcerality (Jenness & Fenstermaker, 2014), sociologists have employed sexual script theory to account for the discursive terrain that individuals negotiate when “doing” gender and at times endeavor to rupture when “undoing” gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). These scripts typically reify the bio-essentialist, Western colonial conceptions of gender and sex in which there are only two intelligible sexes (female/

male) and genders (woman/man) that map perfectly onto one another (128). This gender binary institutes certain sexual scripts that enforce normative expectations for masculinity and femininity which push men and masc people to objectify and dominate and propel women and non-binary people to submit (146).

The performance of these scripts reestablishes the hegemony and ubiquity of both cisheteropatriarchy and whiteness by naturalizing a hierarchy within which those with the least privilege are deemed sexually amoral and subject to harm without consequence (LeMaster, 2017; Yep, 2003). Within these cultures, white, able-bodied, “upper class,” cisheterosexual femininity and masculinity are articulated to be the most valuable, and the devaluation of 2SLGBTQ+, disabled, and racialized people result in these groups facing disproportionately high rates of gender-based violence among other forms of systemic violence (Wright, Zidenberg, et al., 2023). Symptomatic of the broader cisheteropatriarchal system is the “pleasure gap” or “orgasm gap”—the persistent imbalance in heterosexual relationships wherein cis women experience less sexual pleasure than cis men (Andrejek et al., 2022)—that frequently results in cisheterosexual women focusing on their appearance and their partners' pleasure at the expense of their authentic embodied pleasure (van Anders et al., 2022).

Given the substantial relation between heterosexuality and the pleasure gap, and that queer and trans people report overall higher levels of sexual satisfaction (Harvey et al., 2023), it is surprising that there is far less research on queer and trans sexual scripts. In the literature that does interrogate queer and trans sexual scripts, as Nordmarken (2019) critiques, these actors appear predominantly either as mere exceptions to heterosexuality or as imagined, theoretical subjects who demonstrate the potential to subvert hegemony. Reckoning with queerness and transness as mere anomalies or as the progenitors for degendering society, the sociological scholarship on queer and trans sexual scripts rarely pursues analyses that consider broader, empirical understandings of queer and trans life. It rarely asks what this script breaking does for queer and trans people and what that meaning provides for their own lives, failing to grapple with the “effects of gender minorities' practices on meaning-making processes of social interaction” (43).

Intending to challenge this pattern, Nordmarken studied how trans and queer communities mobilize particular “linguistic pronoun practices” (2019, p. 62), to momentarily disrupt, rather than dismantle, dominant sexual scripts. In this brief disruption, Nordmarken finds that queer and trans people explore new avenues for community and open space for others to also challenge scripts (2019, pp. 61–62). As Nordmarken recounts in a later paper (2023), one reason that many people choose to wade into script breaking is their own happiness. Granted that queer and trans people may engage with their queerness and transness because they seek joy in and through this alterity, this paper turns to learn from queer joy.

2.2 | The value of sexual joy for more just, ethical sexual cultures

While all affects are historically contingent (Ahmed, 2004), joy is broadly recognized as a feeling associated with pleasure, well-being, excitement, and fulfillment. As Simmons (2019) notes, this powerful nexus of emotions renders joy a powerful instigator for social change in the ways in which it “opens up the most possible future affects” (29). Simmons recalls that for Spinoza, “joy occupies a privileged place as the most powerful, potentially leading to the greatest changes to the individual” because it enhances and widens the capacity and capaciousness of the individual (29). Izard (1991) similarly describes joy as “a special kind of link or bond [that fosters [a] keen sense of belonging, or of oneness with the object of joy and with the world” (138). By embodying this connection, our sense of self and the way we perceive the world shifts because it facilitates a feeling of transcendence or freedom (138). This impact of joy on a person opens them to potentialities for creative action, which Cvetkovich (2003) identifies as being “the basis for new cultures” (30). Joy potentiates new cultures.

Nevertheless, possibilities for affect to produce new cultures and the tenor of such cultures are severely impacted by their affective constitutions. As Bertelsen and Murphie (2010) note, cultures surface as territories, “as spaces of concreteness in a sea of affects,” wherein affects accumulate and congeal over time until they appear

natural and hypostatized (29). The traditional sexual scripts for cisheterosexual sex, for instance, invoke affective refrains that reify normative sexual cultures. A cisheterosexual man coercing a woman into sex after buying her dinner may experience joy because he believes this exploitation to be “right” or “proper” due to the cisheteronormative belief that men are owed sex and that women's bodies should always be accessible to men. Elsewhere, as Kehily and Nayak (1997) argue, homophobia leaves cisheterosexual men particularly emotional avoidant, fearful that any sentiment would be perceived as a signifier of homosexuality (Dean, 2011).

In other words, to return to Bertelsen and Murphie's (2010) concept of territories, we can understand that cisheterosexual norms may create affective territories where the possibilities for non-heteronormative joy to transform are suffocated. By offering an alternative to this bind, queer sexual joy, we posit, can trouble this affective hegemony in its inherent challenge to traditional scripts which disrupts normative sexual cultures. As Robinson and Schmitz (2021, p. 11) argue, a focus on queer joy is significant in its capacity to “center LGBTQ youth” and how they “expos[e] the dominant structures that need changing.”

Thus, due to this potentiality of joy to widen our orientation to the world, this paper mobilizes queer sexual joy as a means through which to investigate what queer and trans epistemologies can teach us about the possibilities for collectively imagining fuller, vaster, more just sexual cultures.

2.3 | Queer sexual joy as an epistemology of script breaking

The study of epistemology concerns how one knows something and the contingencies to that form of knowing. As Brian Wigginton and Michelle Lafrance describe, epistemology refers to “theories of knowledge that influence what and how we can ‘know’, and who can know” (2019, p. 4). Though a centuries-old, well-studied field in philosophy, it was not until the 1980s that epistemology entered into feminist scholarship. Popularized by Harding (2004) through standpoint theory, feminist critiques of epistemology reject the supposed objectivity of knowledge to proffer a situated form of knowing to recognize marginalized voices (Hall, 2017). Alongside feminist theories of reflexivity and locatedness that have been central for feminist scholars of color (e.g., Kulpa & Silva, 2016), feminist epistemology has become the source of widespread discourse and study (Ewick, 1994; Tanesini, 1999). Indebted to this lineage, as early as 1997, Jon Binnie advocated for geography to reckon with queer epistemologies to explore how embodiment enters research and how to research embodiment. Acknowledging the need for scholarship to reckon with bodily “mess and goo,” Binnie suggested that a queer epistemology prioritize contending with camp and irony, as well as the subversiveness, fluidity, and spontaneity of discourse (1997).

Binnie was clearly influenced by Judith Butler's notion of performativity that elucidated how the repetition of discourse inaugurated and constituted power. As Butler recounts, performative acts are “forms of authoritative speech” that “in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power” (1993, p. 17). For instance, when a priest says “I pronounce you man and wife,” one is now married (1993, p. 22). Citing the power of the Church, the speech act itself inaugurates one's entrance into a new form of heterosexual relationality. In Butler's theory of gender, performatives constrain and construct gender, such as when a doctor announces, “It's a girl!” (1993, p. 22). Thus, Butler argues that “Gender is performative insofar as it is the effect of a regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized under constraint” (1993, p. 21). For Butler, gender is the outcome of the citation and reification of the historical scripts of heteronormativity and that which it objects. Structured by a power that both precedes and exceeds the subject, it is through discourse that gender is both stabilized and ruptured. It is through discourse, whether it be through the citation of laws or through pathologization, that homosexuality is comprehended as deviant and heterosexuality as paradigm. But it is also through discourse that one can mine and mime these regimes to expose their faults and contradictions to open new possibilities for gendered being. Therefore, Butler would offer that through this discursive “nexus,” the performativity of language grants opportunities through hyperbole and camp to “expose[] both the binding power of the

heterosexualizing law and its expropriability" (1993). A queer epistemology therefore would grapple with how queer people deploy sexual scripts to resignify the confines of heterosexuality.

Queer performative epistemologies have been reworked in fields such as literature (Johnson, 2011), geography (Rodó-de-Zárate, 2016), and education and linguistics (Nelson, 2012), but queerness as a way of knowing has rarely been the site of sociological concern. In the first sociological scholarship on this question, Valocchi considers how "individuals may subvert the normative alignments of sex, gender and sexuality" (2005, p. 753). One method to open up sociology to "the instabilities in this hegemonic sexual formation" as Valocchi suggests (2005, p. 753) is through countering what Hall describes as the epistemic injustice that occludes queer ways of knowing (2017).³ Trans studies scholars have similarly proposed that trans epistemologies would value trans voices (Alexander, 2019; Nicolazzo, 2021; Radi, 2019).

Together then, queer epistemologies broadly are circumscribed by ways of knowing that value (1) performativity, (2) bodily knowledge, and (3) epistemic justice. In one of the only articles to contend with queerness as such, Nordmarken identifies a "queer gender epistemology" found within trans communities; as they "disreg[ard] their perceptions of each other's bodies, actors accomplish gender pronouns linguistically, override hegemonic gender attribution norms, and reorganize gender accountability" (2019, p. 38). Within this paper, we endeavor to expand upon Nordmarken's project by continuing to think about how "gender minorities disrupt gender attribution" (46). We turn to queer young adults to consider how queer sexual joy reorients them from the sexual scripts that they have been taught socially and institutionally. We do so by integrating an insight by Hall (2017), who notes that because queer ways of knowing cannot be built upon identity alone, instead, they might be better conceived of as forms of "affective attunement" to the world (163). Affect—refusing the staticity of identity—offers a capaciousness that attends to the subterranean below language and below hegemony (queerness). Thus, an epistemology of queer sexual joy grapples with a wider variety of experiences than those merely identitarian, to explore "embodied involvement in the world that enables one to know otherwise" (Hall, 163). To know otherwise does not promise a politics without problem though: like any form of script breaking, there is no surety of anything besides difference. A queer epistemology prioritizes this hazardous path because the liberatory potential is worth the risk.

Taking queer joy as a method to produce knowledge, this article queries what can be learned if we mobilize queer sexual joy as an affective way of knowing. Queer sexual joy produces a lens to consider the interlocking forms of knowledge production established through performativity, bodily knowledge, and epistemic justice. Our respondents repeatedly testified that queer joy served as the epistemology through which they learned to break scripts and found the language to speak about bodily fluids, gender dysphoria, the touch of the paddle against their flesh, and the delight of multiple rounds. By asking queer and trans people how they thought about queer joy, this study fundamentally attends to how queer and trans people are speaking themselves into existence, correcting the epistemic injustice that would occlude such knowledge.

Therefore, through these components, queer joy as an epistemology serves as crucial redirection to sociologies of sex, gender, and sexuality by offering joyful counter-stories from queer and trans communities that combat the "trope of misery" through which these groups are usually depicted (Shuster & Westbrook, 2022, p. 5; Wright et al., 2023a, 2023b).

3 | METHODOLOGY

The Queer Sexual Joy project is a mixed-methods project that explored US and Canadian 2SLGBTQ+ young adults' experiences of great consensual sex and queer sexual joy. Data for the project was collected from March 2022 to June 2023 using two surveys ($n = 69$), participatory visual arts-based workshops (e.g., cellphilming, creating short films on phones) workshops, two focus groups, and eight, semi-structured one-on-one interviews. In total, 100 2SLGBTQ+ young adults aged 18–35 participated in the project. Participation in each section of the study was not

duplicated in another section. Recruitment of participants was completed online, primarily on social media but also through community partners' listservs, through snowball sampling.

The different research modalities used in the study each brought something rich to the project. The initial survey was a preliminary piece of research designed to inform the rest of the study. Broadly, we asked what participants loved about being queer and trans, what their experiences of queer and trans sexual joy looked and felt like, and, for those who self-identified as survivors of gender-based violence, we asked about experiences where their "sexual access needs" (if they had any) because of sexual harm were supported—across straight and queer experiences. The data was so rich that we reissued the survey after adding a few additional questions, such as one about trans joy, and expanding the collection of demographic information.

Giving participants the chance to write some open-ended answers through the survey allowed for us to cast a wider net during participant recruitment; not all who are interested in being part of research can attend interviews or workshops. For instance, the survey provided greater accessibility among participants who have language processing disabilities and are overstimulated in focus group or participatory visual research workshops.

The focus groups and visual research workshops shared similar structures, but the artistic element to visual data collection brought a different crowd (those who were willing to create art), as not all queer and trans youth are comfortable or interested in making art with a group of people, pointing to the need to have multifaceted approaches to research for greater accessibility and reach. For the arts-based workshops, we began with a group conversation on the project's topic, participants then responded to a prompt, such as "what queer joy offers us," to create art, and then we discussed the significance of the art.

Participatory visual research was included in the study as a collage, zine, or 30-s video can make a significant political impact, particularly in our digital age (Burkholder et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2017). Arts-based research also allows for participatory archiving of queer and trans produced artifacts, which disrupts the way that queer and trans experiences are often erased and left out of archival processes, particularly the lives and history of racialized and disabled queer and trans people (Ware, 2017).

All stages of the project gathered demographic data about participants. Participants were spread evenly across the 18–35 age range, with representation of each age. Among the 100 participants, 13 were from the U.S. and 87 were from Canada.

Participants were asked two questions about sex and gender identification and were given a list of categories as well as an option to self-identify for each question (self-identified terms are followed by an asterisk.) Participants identified their sexuality as: queer 59% ($n = 58$), pansexual 12% ($n = 12$), bisexual 12% ($n = 12$), lesbian 9% ($n = 9$), gay 4% ($n = 4$), asexual* 3% ($n = 3$), Two-Spirit 1% ($n = 1$), ($n = 1$), T4T* (trans for trans/a trans person romantically and/or sexually interested in other trans people) 1% ($n = 1$). Only 26 participants identified as cisgender (4 cis men and 22 cis women), leaving nearly 3/4 (74%) of participants in the study identifying otherwise, with the largest proportion (63%, $n = 63$) selecting non-binary (e.g., non-binary they/them or non-binary she/they). Two percent of participants identified as Two-Spirit ($n = 2$), 1% as trans masculine* ($n = 1$), 5% as trans women ($n = 5$), and 3% as trans men ($n = 3$).

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

Disability and/or neurodiversity were examined in the second survey and proceeding qualitative research stages. Of the 66 participants who were asked, 54 (82%) identified as having a disability and/or being neurodiverse. The second survey explicitly asked respondents ($n = 55$) about different kinds of disability, and notably, 43 (79%) identified as neurodiverse. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to expand upon, disability and neurodivergence were highly represented in this study, reflecting research noting the interconnections between 2SLGBTQ+ identities and neurodiversity (Yergeau, 2018).

The qualitative data collected in the study was analyzed using a code set which the research team developed iteratively using a grounded theory approach that identified emergent themes from the data as it was collected (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Memos were taken over the duration of data collection and throughout data analysis. Coding of each transcript was done on Dedoose individually and cross-checked by at least two researchers. Analysis remained iterative as new codes were added, re-coding the full set of data as needed. The thematic findings from the project were drawn from data analysis across all four research modalities utilized in the study (survey, arts-based workshops, interviews, and focus groups). Drawing on analysis of coding, memos, and continued conversations about ongoing and new themes, substantial themes emerged, such as those we now turn to examine. The three themes we discuss below were highly represented across all four research modalities and were central topics of conversation in interviews, focus groups, and workshops. Thus, while we draw on specific qualitative data to present the voices of individuals from the study, the themes we discuss were prevalent in all sections of the study.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Queer sexual joy as an opening to the world and the self

The first major lesson that participants reported was that queer sexual joy itself was an epistemology that catalyzed a greater sense of self and a wider orientation toward the world through script breaking. Cisheteronormativity institutes identities, desires, and ways of relating to others that discursively produce being cis, straight, white, and able as that which registers as “good” and “normal” (Ahmed, 2004). As a result, embodiments outside of these norms can feel and appear to others as a form of deviance, burdening trans and queer people with the difficulty of embracing a stigmatized sexuality and/or gender. There are obstacles to embrace one's truth, as Jude, a 20-year-old white, queer, non-binary participant stated, “I feel like as queer people the cisheteronormative status quo is something that's extremely ingrained in us.” To move beyond this basis, participants indicated that they had to unlearn the dominant sexual scripts. These scripts expect that sex will take place between a cis man and cis woman in a monogamous setting where the sex will follow a prescribed order of events, usually modeled after mainstream porn. The events involve oral sex (which is not required to be reciprocal), penis-in-vagina penetrative sex, and sex finishing when the cis man ejaculates. As Wren, a 35-year-old white queer, non-binary, disabled participant, explains “...in cisheteronormativity, the scripts are that the woman's job is to generate the man's sexual energy and if she's depleted in the process, that's normal, that's fine.” These scripts reinforce rape culture as they objectify women for the pleasure of cis men (Harvey et al., 2023).

As participants were able to unlearn or challenge these scripts, they reported how these acts facilitated the development of other, less oppressive ways of relating. As Jude said: “I feel like in queer spaces you are able to free yourself from the look of the straight gaze, and that engenders a freedom ... Queer and trans embodiment disrupts the status quo.” Jude found joy—as all participants did—by finding a sense of freedom in script breaking through queer sexual joy.

Describing sex with their non-binary partner, Wren said “We make our own scripts and that feels very joyful...I get to be who I am.” Another participant, Darby, 30-year-old Portuguese, queer, disabled, cis woman, explains: “It's liberating when you're entering a space with a partner to be experimental because the script doesn't really exist for you.” Darby and Wren described a freedom expressed through exploring their sexuality with other trans people who they felt understood their gender. Wren felt especially seen when they could break out of the gender binary during sex, and they described it this way:

With one of my partners who is trans non-binary, I connect on gender so well. They are perceived in the world as a non-cis person and I am perceived as a cis person, but the two of us have a really

aligned gender-lens and so I feel so seen by them. This has allowed me a deep sexual connection. There's a definite link between being seen and our sexual connection. I feel so much freer, such that I can play with gender roles in sex with them because I'm not feeling at risk of being invisible, whereas in some sexual situations I feel like, 'Oh I don't feel kind comfortable playing with more feminine aspects of myself because I'll just be erased as a result.'

What Wren identifies here was central for many of our participants: queer joy served as an epistemological archetype that opened up new opportunities and new ways of relating.

Rejecting the gendered scripts ingrained in the gender binary allowed some participants to experience euphoria and a deep sense of empowerment. Aubrey, a 22-year-old, white lesbian, non-binary, disabled participant, said:

I feel a lot of gender euphoria with the partner I'm with because there's no label of femme, butch, masc, it can be changing. It's very fluid, and I don't feel rigidity where it's like well because my partner is masc, I have to be femme...Something I've realized recently with the help of my partner is that I don't need male validation at all. That's very empowering for me... Because I don't need to please, I don't need to cater to all these inherently societal heteronormative ideals of 'You have to please men first.'

Like other participants, Aubrey was not met with misery when breaking away from cisheterosexual structures but, rather, found deep embodied joy and a sense of personal empowerment. Aubrey explained that being in a queer relationship allowed them to move beyond patriarchal sexual scripts which tell people who experience misogyny that men's pleasure should be centered in sex. These scripts imply that women and non-binary people have to "put on a performance," effectively alienating them from their own sexual desires and sexual pleasure. This is echoed in the work of van Anders et al. (2022), who argue that the objectification of women within heteronormative sexual scripts result in many women focusing on their appearance and their partner's pleasure rather than their own embodied experience during sex with men. By shifting away from gender binaries inherent to cisheteronormative sexual scripts, including prescribed masc and femme dynamics in queer and trans communities, participants wielded queer joy as a way to encounter new forms of relationality that shifted them toward greater authenticity.

For some, this involved navigating complexities related to their ethnicity. Luciana, a 24-year-old Latinx, bisexual, cis woman, spoke about unpacking gendered messages she got growing up. She said: "I am Latina, specifically I come from Peru. And in my family, queerness is kind of taboo, not really talked about. From childhood I'm told, 'You're going to have a nice husband, you're such a pretty girl.'" Not being constrained by needing to please men and show up in the world in a particular gendered and sexualized way, in queer relationships she discovered a version of herself that allowed her to love herself and others more. She said:

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

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

4.2 | Queer joy as expansiveness: play, creativity, and reflexivity

Once open to these new potentials, the freedom available to participants meant that they learned from queer joy a sense of playfulness. Participants described joyful queer sex as offering expansiveness in terms of experimentation, non-judgment, humility, openness, and embracing “weird” or embarrassing moments with humor. Sharing the impact of this, Nox, an 18-year-old, white bisexual, disabled trans man, explained that in building comfort with a sexual partner, there’s a “lightness” in not feeling like he is performing for someone else, which leads to greater play and creativity. As he described,

Communication is key [to sexual joy] and having someone that you can be comfortable being weird with is awesome. Sex is not like porn. Gross things happen, funny things happen, and that doesn't have to kill the mood. You can laugh, move on, and keep having good sex. That can be a joyful kind of intimacy because it's not from a place of judgment.

Nox's call for sex that creates space for levity and joy to afford connection between partners aligns with literature that has theorized the propensity for joy to be a connecting and contagiously positive force that strengthens bonds and belonging (Izard, 1991; Simmons, 2019). For those who are multiply marginalized, like queer disabled people, this space of levity and creativity may be especially important due the heightened barriers that may be faced in not being as familiar with sexual vocabulary due to a dearth of sexual education (Santinele Martino, 2017). Rather than being held to normative sexual standards, queer sexual joy in its capaciousness can foment “agency and creativity by reconstructing sex and sexualities in ways that go beyond normative forms” (7–8; Davies, 2023).

Similarly, for Chidi, a 27-year-old Black, Two Spirit person, script breaking helped them find further acceptance and comfort with how their body was gendered during sex, which was deeply validating and pleasurable:

I can show up in a queer relationship who I am authentically without having a script or assumptions placed on me. It's been the most joyful experience, specifically in my gender fluidity as a Two Spirit person. My parts change sometimes, like sometimes I want breasts, sometimes I want a chest. And my partners have been very open to that or toys that I'm using that provide gender affirmation for me at times. That openness that happens in queer sex versus when I have had sex with cis het men, there's just a level of openness that makes me so comfortable with who I am and it's profoundly joyful.

Chidi here acknowledges that they have learned from queer sex to be more comfortable with themselves, which was key to how other participants discussed their relationship to playfulness, openness, and expansiveness.

Participants also discussed how they shared or co-created sexual joy with partners through experimentation and fantasy, a process that was facilitated through an openness to creativity due to script breaking. Participants approached sex not as a static production, but as an interdependent creative process of mutual exploration grounded in intersubjective recognition of needs and boundaries (also see Wright & Manuel, 2024). The creativity inherent to sex imbued with queer and trans joy was reflected in cellphilm workshop participant, Jodie's (27, mixed-race, queer, disabled, non-binary) film (Figure 1) which featured a series of sex toys they and their girlfriend use as well as a series of words Jodie associated with queer sexual joy: innovative, full of consent, sexy, fun, wonderful, special, and “can be full of pussy.”

Pearl's (25, white, cis, queer, disabled) joyful queer sexual experiences engendered an expansiveness that gave her more options for expressing herself and connecting with partners. She said, “I love having total freedom to do what feels good for me and my partners that's not confined by societal expectations—that sense of freedom, I think, is really important.”

For Wren, the expansive and liberatory experience of queer sexual joy was connected to exploring their identity, body, and polyamorous relationship structures:



FIGURE 1 Stills from Jodie's cellfilm.

My experiences of queer and trans sexual joy feels so beautiful to me in part because of the contrast [to sex with cisheterosexual men as part of monogamy]. Sex being so expansive and not so focused on anatomy is part of what brings me great joy. I talk with partners about 'doing sex' rather than 'having sex,' because it feels like...something we're creating together, and there's an expansiveness where it's not about a particular anatomical destination, and that's true no matter what the body parts are involved. I have multiple partners and to just do sex without a lens of anatomy or a sense of destination brings me so much joy. It feels much more expansive, free, liberatory, much less constrained, and, ultimately, safer. I feel I get to be who I am...We make our own scripts and that feels very joyful.

As Wren explained, expansiveness comes from rejecting normative scripts and creating their own while engaging in an intentional, mutually pleasurable, playfully creative space with their partners.

For some participants, finding a space of expansiveness to imagine their gendered and sexual identities outside of hegemonic scripts and to embody sexual joy was informed by liberatory theorists. Participants described sexual liberation as connected to broader political ideals, reflecting the works of many queer scholars, especially queer scholars of color, on the political potential of joy (Ansloos et al., 2021; Ramirez, 2024; Tristano, 2022). For example, Naseem, 23-year-old South Asian, queer, disabled non-binary participant, reflected on the dynamism of queer sex and connected it to the ideas of the liberatory educator Paulo Freire:

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

Deva, a 26-year-old West Asian, queer, disabled, non-binary participant, added that:

My queerness isn't just sexual queerness, it's political queerness. This is the language of Rinaldo Walcott who talks about queerness being a vanguard of opening minds. I think a lot of queerness is

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

These quotes highlight what many liberatory thinkers have expressed—that the links between personal and political liberation are crucially forged through embodied and subjective joy (Belcourt, 2020; Lorde, 1984; Nicolazzo, 2021). As Lorde (1984) wrote, similarly of the erotic, it is moving because the “deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible” (89). Thus Lorde (1984) says, “recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world” (91). Queer sexual joy models a reflexive approach to greater intimacies with ourselves and others that result in more deeply pleasurable embodiments.

The concepts invoked through this section that were attached to queer sexual joy—such as expansiveness, embodiment, play, intention, creativity, and respect for mutual pleasure—challenge the enactment of cisheteropatriarchal power—such as through logics of aggression, domination, and objectification—that perpetuate gender-based violence (Beres, 2022). They offer counter-hegemonic knowledges that prioritize reciprocity, play, creativity, and sexual joy as praxis. In addition to the affective experience of sexual joy delineated above, an epistemology of queer joy challenged cisheteronormative sexual scripts and fostered alternative imaginaries for sex that defies the disembodied performances demanded of cisheteronormativity.

We now turn to examine queer joy as a practice of instituting an ethic of care.

4.3 | Queer joy as a path toward reconceptualizing relationality through an ethic of care

In addition to breaking dominant scripts, an epistemology of queer joy can be understood as one that institutes deeply caring community actions as integral to sexual health and embodied joy. While we saw this appear in previous sections, in this section, we illuminate more specifically the caring relations that emerge from this way of knowing. Participants spoke of finding safety and care by defining their boundaries which instituted feelings of self-ownership, and participant's perspectives on non-monogamy or polyamory demonstrated how some queer and trans people are drawing from countercultures to find communication and safety to cultivate sexual joy.

As participant Wren recalled explaining to their 8-year-old child, “sex is care between people. Sex is expressing care with our bodies.” This quote reflects one of the overarching findings related to how participants created and sustained queer and trans sexual joy: through an ethic of care. Participants articulated how care produced safety and sexual joy on multiple levels, most notably through care for self and care for community.

Frankie, a 28-year-old, Black, pansexual, disabled, non-binary participant, discussed how being in a loving relationship helped them develop more care for themselves, which, in turn, helped them identify their standards and boundaries for sexual relationships in the future. Frankie reflected that “The bar is high now. This is not how I felt about myself years ago, and it's a real sign that I recognize now, like no, consent is important, it's necessary, and there's no negotiation when it comes to my consent and my needs, you know?” For Frankie and other participants, expressing care for self by identifying and centering their boundaries was an essential part of creating the conditions of safety necessary for queer and trans sexual joy. Moreover, as 2SLGBTQ+ youth are subjected to sexual violence at disproportionately high rates compared to their cis heterosexual peers (Wright, Zidenberg, et al., 2023), for Frankie and other survivors in the study, navigating consent in nuanced ways with queer partners was liberating, deeply pleasurable, and this practice rejected the reductive, transactional approach to consent often taught in sexuality education (Wright, 2022; Wright & Manuel, 2024).

Further, for study participants, experiencing moments of pleasure was rarely only about personal gratification but rather “compersion,” or sympathetic joy forged through mutual sexual connection. As Naseem described, “when someone is experiencing pleasure...I feel satisfaction and gratitude in my own body that they trust me...When that

happens, that's energy being created, that's love being created. And I get more aroused too." Through compersion participants described feeling not only physical pleasure but deeper gratitude and trust for sexual partners.

These experiences were often linked to polyamorous or non-monogamous relationships, which may "question[] the idea of love as a limited resource that only becomes authentic if it is confined to one person" (De las Heras Gómez, 2019, p. 646). These practices have different qualities depending on the context, and they are not exclusive to queer and trans communities. Yet, they can at times be considered representative of "a political philosophy" that rearranges "care and life-sustaining work outside the exclusive romantic couple and traditional family," effectively changing "the way we establish familial relationships" (649). As such, these community practices connect to queer kinship structures and politics given the way that "chosen" family and friendships have "emotional and material relevance" for 2SLGBTQ+ people (649). Participant Kai, 30-year-old, mixed-race, queer, non-binary, disabled participant, explained:

When I started to explore the queer polyamorous community, I encountered an expectation to have communication skills, especially when you feel discomfort, or want to set a boundary. We have to share and work through things, instead of things coming up more defensively or in a harmful way. Not to say that harm doesn't happen in the polyamorous community, but in my experience, if harm does come up, there's more support and willingness to understand and work through feelings of harm or any kind of physical harm. We're chosen family.

The expectations around communication and boundary setting in queer polyamorous and kink communities that Kai identified can be understood as community standards of care that create the conditions necessary for safety, even when harm occurs or sexual acts include elements of risk.

Similarly, Darby identified "safety planning" and "harm reduction"—two models that emerge out of community-based care practices—as essential for creating safety in sexual encounters that facilitate sexual joy (Bauer, 2021). Some literature on polyamory has suggested that compared to monogamy, polyamory requires more self-awareness, autonomy, mutuality, and communication within relationships (De las Heras Gómez, 2019), which lend themselves to safer sex practices. While exploring the differences between these relationship styles is beyond the scope of this paper, it is notable that most participants in the workshops, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews identified as practicing non-monogamy and linked it to their queer political orientation that prioritizes clear communication and care during and outside of sex.

As explicitly identified by several participants, the community standards and practices of care woven into non-monogamous communities are central to modes of relationality that make queer sexual joy possible. Wyatt, 27-year-old white, queer, disabled, non-binary participant, illustrated the relationship between care for self, others, and community, and queer sexual joy in their non-monogamous relationships when they shared:

A big theme in my life right now has been centering a positive relationship to myself, knowing what my needs are to trust myself, and knowing when to say no. This has empowered me to connect with the kind of community I want, and to show up in ways that I want to. I've found a lot of community accountability is about being in good relation with both myself and others... If I'm showing up and unable to take care of myself, that reflects [my] values and, you know, not necessarily being able to take accountability... I want to trust that people will set boundaries with me or that when I set boundaries, that other people will follow those, and setting boundaries comes from being in connection with myself.

As Wyatt describes, creating a caring relationship with themselves means that they can show up in more caring ways for others, which in turn means that they can be more accountable to their community, producing safer, more positive sexual experiences for them and their partners. For Wyatt, as for other participants, an epistemology of queer joy

requires a caring attentiveness to one's own and others' needs in relationships. Through interdependent relationships that prioritized communication and care, embodied sexual joy that created deeper intimacies flourished.

5 | CONCLUSION

Sex is complex. Both a site of harm and path toward pleasure, it is no salve for structural change or substitute for other forms of resistance, but our study has proven that it does offer a mode of learning through which participants recognized new paths toward self-actualization, communal care, and political solidarity. Queer sexual joy—in its depth and plenitude, in what it offers as a means for pleasure and praxis, and in the capaciousness it creates to be moved affectively—serves as an epistemology that breaks scripts and transforms the ways in which people orient themselves in the world. Focusing on joy allows us to see the ways that sexual joy is diminished by various barriers in society but also how joy can be transformative, and particularly queer joy, as it creates space for seeing the world anew through new pleasures and its contagious quality.

If this paper has asked what can be learned from queer sexual joy, we have shown it facilitates an orientation toward script breaking that engenders a felt freedom, play and creativity, as well as alternative forms of communal care, reciprocity, and relationality which undermine cisheteronormativity. Through breaking cisheteronormative sexual scripts, participants created space for more authentic sex and relationships that were marked by personal and collective empowerment, levity, safety, and comfort. The expansiveness of queer and trans ways of knowing cultivated alternative sexual imaginaries where an ethics of care and reciprocity resulted in less sexual harm and more embodied pleasure and joy. Some of these spaces were marked by the counter-hegemonic practices of non-normative sexual communities such as non-monogamous and kink communities, whose expectations for deep communication and nuanced consent have much to teach dominant sexual cultures which are rife with cisheteronormative logics of objectification and conquest.

We have evidenced that queer and trans sexual joy is not simply 2SLGBTQ+ sex, it is a particular kind of affective engagement that creates expansiveness, where constraints from dominant sexual scripts loosen in ways that feel liberating and deeply pleasurable. Looking forward, more research is needed to examine the lessons that forms of joy that intersect with queer and trans joy, such as Black Joy (Mitchell, 2022), Indigiqueer joy (Ashcroft, 2022), and crip joy (Wright & Manuel, 2024), offer for sexual ethics and creating sexual cultures that are more just and mutually pleasurable.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the sensitive nature of research on sexual violence, the data for this project is not publicly available.

ETHIC STATEMENT

This project was approved by the MacEwan University Research Ethics Board #102193.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ We do not believe that queer or trans joy is not also capable of capacitating gender-based violence, but rather that due to its disorienting power, it may provide opportunities for subjects to be disoriented from the heteronormative regimes that structure this violence.
- ² As the field of queer joy studies is new and burgeoning, more research is needed into the differences and similarities between queer and trans sexual joy.
- ³ Queer and feminist epistemologies have also themselves been identified as the site of epistemic injustice in their overwhelming whiteness, such that Kulpa and Silva (2016) argue that we need to decolonize queer epistemology.

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