

Introduction to the special issue “Mobilising queer joy: Establishing queer joy studies”

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**JJ Wright** 

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Abstract

Our introduction to the special issue “Mobilising Queer Joy” reflects an urgent need for queer joy studies amidst a sociopolitical climate that feels increasingly ruinous. We reject the ‘joy deficit’ in sociological research that fixates on homogenous, misery-filled visions of 2SLGBTQIA+ existence, and which is severed from the profound beauty of queer love, queer and trans joy, gender euphoria, and the strength and depth of 2SLGBTQIA+ community care and chosen families. In addition to introducing the six articles in the special issue from authors in Canada, the Philippines, Australia, and the US, we aim to establish queer joy studies by articulating the affective power of queer joy for collective resistance and social transformation. Queer joy is more than a kitschy slogan on a tote bag or splashed on the side of a big bank’s Pride float; it is a collective experience that allows us to feel more alive and connected to our personal capacities and power. The queer joy we are interested in is dangerous to empire and colonial powers. It does not deny the relationship with ambivalence, rage, and grief, and instead mobilises these affects to confront injustices in our existing social order. Some of the questions we ask include: How does queer joy act as world-making and dream mapping of new, more sustainable futures? How might we further theorize and mobilise queer joy as a disruption to settler colonial, carceral logics? How might the transformative power of queer joy be amplified to fragment and challenge the rise of fascism and populism that seeks to exterminate it?

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In the past 5 years, around the world, there has been an explosion of anti-queer, anti-trans rhetoric, legislation, and hate crimes, which are fuelled by populist politicians seeking to advance conservative and far-right anti-democratic agendas (Liu et al., 2024; Tudor, 2023). By stoking fear of queer and trans ‘others,’ populist affects are mobilised to scapegoat and make anti-queer hatred ‘common sense.’ We see this, for example, through the assumption that the growing population of queer and trans youth are the result of social media and contagion, wherein logics of compulsory cisheterosexuality situate being cisgender and heterosexuality as natural and normal and queerness and transness as aberrations (McRuer, 2003). In this sociopolitical climate, it is perhaps unsurprising that queer affects—queer and trans joy, in particular—have gained popularity and traction, with the term “queer joy” popularly seen online, in advocacy campaigns, and on merchandise (Weisler, 2023). Queer joy, however, is not a kitschy slogan on a tote bag, nor just an intentional response to rising populist affects that espouse hate. Queer joy holds transformative power more broadly: as an embodied affective experience that catalyzes new forms of anti-colonial relationality (Wright and Falek, 2024), as a pedagogy (Wright et al., 2024), and as a method for research and community advocacy (Burkholder and Wright, 2024; Wright and Burkholder, 2025). Spurred by the desire to expand the articulation of queer joy both as an analytic and an embodied experience, we came together to create this special issue for *Sexualities* to help foundationalise a new field within Queer and Trans Studies: Queer Joy Studies. The issue contains six articles from scholars from Canada, Australia, the Philippines, and the US that extend theorizations of queer joy and provide frameworks for understanding the shape of queer resistance in the current historical moment.

The need for Queer Joy Studies is urgent given that queer joy directly confronts conservative politicians and pundits’ strategic disinformation about 2SLGBTQIA+¹ communities, particularly concerning assertions that queer and trans lives are abject and undesirable ones to live. When journalists and politicians cite the promotion of ‘gender ideology’ in schools and on social media as the reason for a growing queer and trans population, they imply that no one should want to be 2SLGBTQIA+ and that the lives of those in queer and trans communities are marked by mental illness, self-hatred, and misery. In Alberta, Canada, where JJ writes from, the Premier of Alberta, Danielle Smith, released a 6-min video on Twitter/X in early 2024 where she announced a slew of new homophobic and transphobic policies that limit the rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ Albertans but particularly youth, policies which were couched in her ‘care’ for queer and trans youth who, she said, are largely suffering from mental illness (Smith, 2024). In the UK, the government-commissioned Cass Review, a report on youth seeking gender-affirming healthcare related to gender identity, suggested, among other things, that mental health issues co-occurring with ‘gender dysphoria’², may cause youth to become transgender, implying that being trans is a mental illness (Cass, 2024). While oppression and violence

certainly shape the mental health and lives of queer and trans people, homogenous, misery-filled visions of 2SLGBTQIA+ existence are severed from the profound beauty of queer love, queer and trans joy, gender euphoria, and the strength and depth of 2SLGBTQIA+ community care and chosen families. 2SLGBTQIA+ communities do have disproportionately high rates of mental health distress, but this distress is not intrinsic to these communities and emerges from a political context of queerphobic and transphobic discrimination, prejudice, and violence. Indeed, if given the choice, many queer people would choose to be queer, even in a context where being queer is met with the promise of struggle due to cisheteropatriarchy (Ward, 2022).

Unfortunately, a deficit-based framework for understanding marginalized communities dominates, including in research, which this special issue speaks back to. The “joy deficit” in sociological research on queer and trans people’s lives (Shuster and Westbrook, 2022: p. 1) means that there are few studies on the positive aspects of being queer and trans and few studies on the counter-hegemonic knowledges that emerge from the “subjugated standpoints” (Haraway, 2013) of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities which may reveal resistance and thriving in spite of the status quo. This absence mirrors the lack of joyful representation in mainstream media. Yet queer and trans communities know, and feel, how joyful and expansive queer and trans experiences and lifespans are (Tristano, 2022). Jack Halberstam (2011) reminds us about the potentiality of queer failure—we see queer joy as a practice, a failure to be demoralized despite the world burning. And so, demonstrations of queer joy become testaments of a powerful counter-narrative: to be queer and trans is to be joyful and thriving—even in a climate of rising anti-2SLGBTQIA+ hatred.

What do we mean when we call on and for queer joy?

Importantly, experiences of queer joy are not a singular experience even though joy is a feeling felt in one’s body. Rather, queer joy, like joy more broadly, is a collective experience. In their book *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times* (2017), Montgomery and bergman draw from Spinoza’s theorization of joy to explain that joy is not merely an embodied emotion but, rather, “an increase in one’s power to affect and be affected. It is the capacity to do and feel more” (pp. 29-30). As joy requires us to embrace uncertainty because of its voracious force (and Spinoza sees joy as the most powerful of affects), joy is “a space of emergent orders, values, and forms of life.” With this, joy is connected to the possibility to see things otherwise. We assert that queer joy, in particular, queers our perspectives on what is and what could be—it is a tool to imagine more just futures. Joy also connects us with our personal capacities and power.

Our understanding of queer joy is informed by Black lesbian feminist, Audre Lorde’s theory of “the erotic”, which she describes as our life force and intuition which is not simply sexual but rather a holistic power that ruling powers wish to silence and exterminate less we come to comprehend our structural oppression and organize against it (1978). Queer joy, as a form of erotic power, thus expands our capacity to feel alive, capable, and connected to others in a way that queerly subverts hegemonic discourse and structures. With this, it is important to note that not all forms or formulations of queer joy

are liberatory. Queer joy is not liberatory simply because it is queer, just as t-shirts emblazoned with ‘queer joy’ or ‘the future is non-binary’ or ‘Black Lives Matter’ made by indentured child labourers are emptied of their liberatory power through their reproduction of global inequities. Moreover, we can imagine Pride parade floats sponsored by big banks being adorned with the text “queer joy” at the same time that these corporations invest in arms manufacturers who are paying for genocides and supplying homophobic dictators’ violent regimes. The texture of the theorization of queer joy we are interested in advancing is one that is dangerous to empire and colonial powers. It takes seriously Lorde’s “erotic” as an intuitive and subversive affect. This queer joy empowers people’s capacities to undermine oppressive ruling orders and frees up our imaginations to dream of more caring and connected, less violent and divisive worlds. Writing about queer Indigenous joy, Billy Ray [Belcourt \(2020\)](#) states that “in a world in which we have been corralled inside an emotional grammar of despair, our joy is a conspiracy, something difficult to discern but nonetheless humming with aliveness” (6). Queer joy is a joyous conspiracy to feel more alive, together. This joy builds solidarities and provides ways of confronting our existing social order.

When we call on queer joy, we point towards the many identities and sexualities that exist within and beyond the 2SLGBTQIA + acronym. Queer joy must be considered in relationship to other forms of joy it intersects with and is constituted by, such as trans joy ([Westbrook and Shuster, 2023](#)), Indigiqueer joy ([Ashcroft, 2022](#)), Black (queer) joy ([Persaud and Crawley, 2022](#)), crip joy ([Wright et al., 2024](#); [Wright and Manuel, 2024](#)), and fat joy ([Evans et al., 2021](#)). This intersectional approach is reflected in the articles featured in the special issue, which explore queer joy from theoretical and methodological approaches that attempt to counter racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, patriarchy, classism, and sexism in an effort to work toward social change.

Furthermore, we do not see the proliferation of queer joy as a process of stuffing away that which is not always positive or feel-good about queer experiences, including the reality of lateral violence in 2SLGBTQIA + communities in the form of racism, transphobia, misogyny, ableism, and classism. Coalition-building across differences requires a politics of “incommensurability” that necessitates discomfort and recognition that one’s felt experience of freedom may impinge on another’s freedom ([Tuck and Yang, 2012](#): p. 4). We think alongside queer poet Chen Chen, who in [Spring 2024](#) offered us a provocation on Twitter/X: “queer joy, yes. Queer grief, yes. Though lately what propels me to the page is queer rage.” Our understanding of queer joy makes space for ambivalence, rage, grief, as well as pleasure and joy ([Morris et al., 2023](#)). Indeed, queer rage can, at times, work in tandem with queer joy wherein rage about existing injustices can fuel advocacy and change-making that makes social justice and queer joy more of a possibility ([Torres, 2024](#)).

Queer joy as desiring queerness and queer worldmaking

When there is increasingly widespread queerphobic and transphobic discourse circulating in the global affective economy, the space that queer joy takes up to challenge these hateful discourses acts as queer worldmaking. In these spaces of resistance, queerness and

transness, rather than being pathologized or rejected, can be desired. We wonder: What would it look and feel like to live in a world where queerness and transness in children, youth, and adults was welcomed, wanted, hoped for, and desired?

We see queer delights, embodiments, and moments of daily pleasure (Britzman, 1995) as that which provide alternative worldmaking, countering what Snediker (2006) suggests is queer theory's inclination toward associating queerness with sadness, fragmentation, and the urge or pull toward self-destruction. Queer joy asserts that exclusive rights to joy cannot be claimed by those systems and individuals which emulate conventional norms around gender and sexuality. Zaino et al. (2023) argues that the act of queer and trans worldmaking embraces and progresses toward abundance: exploring how we might crave more, pursue more, and aspire to more" (p. 8). Duran and Coloma (2023) affirm that queer joy represents an important departure from painful encounters and losses. Queer joy, then, embodies ways of being—emotions, intentional acts, dynamic forces, progressions, movements—that fosters a celebration and a reshaping of our queer existence. Queer joy instigates possibilities for the future, suggesting that we can constantly embrace more, experience more, reject more, and desire more than what conventional norms offer (Wright, 2024; Zaino et al., 2023).

In this special issue, we are interested in how queer and trans joy disrupts the status quo and forges space for life and futures amidst a social landscape that may increasingly feel ruinous. We ask: How does queer joy act as world-making and dream mapping of new, more sustainable futures? How has queer joy sustained queer and trans communities across generations? What are the ways that joy has been mobilised not just for survival but for thriving amidst oppressive regimes of homophobia and transphobia?

Organization of the special issue

This special issue elevates narratives about, and explores the scholarly importance of, queer joy for resistance through activism, theory, and research. The papers in the special issue explore different geographical locales including the contexts of Canada, the US, Australia, and the Philippines, and the papers include perspectives that expand understandings of queer of colour joy, queer crip joy, AFAB (assigned-female-at-birth) queer joy, and queer joy across three countries in the context of COVID-19.

The first article in the special issue is Michael Tristano Jr's "On Performing Queer of Color Joy: Lingering Longer." In this essay, Tristano explores the nuances and complications of queer of color joy's potentiality. Through an engagement with the notion of performance, the concept of queer of color joy is understood as harboring manifold possibilities. Tristano engages in performance ethnography centered on *Version*, a recurring dance event catering to queer and trans individuals of color in Baltimore, Maryland, USA, and he elaborates on how queer of color joy navigates intricate power dynamics to maintain its integrity. Specifically, he examines how performances of queer of color joy intersect with notions of whiteness, Blackness, and capitalism. Additionally, he extends the theoretical framework of queer of color joy by investigating its lingering effects. Drawing inspiration from the concept of 'after the party' (Chambers-Letson, 2018), Tristano illustrates how queer of color joy continues to manifest beyond the

confines of Version: on the streets, past 2:00 a.m., and amidst wafts of smoke. He contends that this lingering quality enhances the decolonial potential of queer of color joy by fostering queer anti-colonial relationality, thereby nurturing the life experiences of queer and trans individuals of color.

This article is followed by a piece by Ian Rafael Ramirez, “Forming Brown Commons through Queer Joy in Butiki, Baboy: A Pride Conversation Series.” Ramirez explores how queer joy—by subverting a well-known Filipino children’s rhyme “Butiki, Baboy”—creates opportunities for cultivating brown commons and experimenting with alternative modes of existence. Drawing on the theorizing of José Esteban Muñoz (2009), Ramirez investigates how a ‘brown commons’ is defined by the diverse yet collective experience of enduring and flourishing amidst life’s challenges. Ramirez contends that queer joy emerges within the sharing of stories of adversity, discrimination, and violence, and suggests that we engage with and embody queer joy through the ways in which our bodies interact with others who have been marginalized. The reinterpretation of Butiki, Baboy provided a collaborative space for nurturing queer joy—a sentiment often marginalized by intersecting systems of power that undermine queer of colour peoples’ rights and humanity.

Kai Jacobson and Megan Ingram’s article, “Both Because Of and In Spite Of: Towards the Reclamation of Queer Crip Joy” seeks to query the ways that queer, disabled, and neurodivergent individuals are often cast as symbols of pain, suffering, shame, and revulsion in heteronormative and ableist contexts. They highlight that a growing number of queer crip scholars, artists, and activists have reclaimed previously pathologized and degraded experiences as sources of pleasure and joy. This queer crip perspective on joy is significant because it does not simply position joy as an opposite or antidote to pain; rather, it embraces joy and pain as interwoven and mutually constitutive. Consequently, queer crip joy is not merely a simplistic “happy object” but, rather, a complex amalgamation of intimacy, pleasure, pain, validation, rejection, and relationality—a reflection of the very connections that enable us to be emotionally impacted. Presented as a dialogue, this article delves into the diverse manifestations and potentials of queer crip joy as a locus of resistance against heteronormativity, compulsory able-bodiedness, and neuronormativity. Specifically, the authors draw from their investigations into gender euphoria, experiences of being trans and autistic, and the emotional landscapes of disability to engage in conversation with scholars such as Sara Ahmed and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha.

The fourth article in the special issue, “It Means Freedom”: A Qualitative Exploration of Joy among Black Queer Folx”, is written by Byron Brooks, Kaylah Denis, Hisham Nsier, Jordan Victorian, Jonathan Lassiter, and Darnell Motley. The authors posit that the existing scientific research literature about Black communities and public health has predominantly concentrated on negative outcomes and sexual health risks. While crucial, this focus has limited the exploration of the positive aspects of Black queer experiences, such as joy, which encompasses feelings of freedom, safety, and comfort. The authors undertook a study on joy among a sample of 250 Black queer individuals residing in the United States, recruited from Prolific, an online crowdsourcing platform. Participants were asked three questions: (1) What does Black queer joy signify to you? (2) What brings

you joy? and (3) When and where do you experience joy? Drawing from participant feedback, the authors conceptualized Black queer joy as a sense of authenticity rooted in the freedom to self-define and express oneself. Participants also highlighted that they experienced joy through their intersectional identities as Black queer individuals and by connecting with others who share similar backgrounds and identities. This research expands current understanding of joy and lays the groundwork for developing culturally relevant measures of joy within the Black queer community.

The fifth article in the special issue is Lucy Nicolas, Corrinne Sullivan, and Sarah Callahan's article, "'An Abundance of Cakes': Assigned Female at Birth Queer Joy and Queer Ethics Across Generations," which explores the experiences of two generations of AFAB queers in Australia regarding lateral violence within LGBTQ+ communities. The paper challenges the perception that tensions within LGBTQ+ communities around terminology (e.g., queer) and intergenerational differences are fissures that tend to preclude the possibilities for solidarity and joyful community relationships. The authors uncover narratives of a queer ethic of openness, fluidity, and empathy across diverse intersections and generations, illustrating the continuous process of world-building within queer communities. Their research highlights future-oriented and utopian themes, particularly within the broader queer community (contrasted with the narrower focus on LGB). After examining instances of lateral violence, participants share accounts of spaces, environments, and communities where they experience various forms of queer joy, spanning intergenerational, gender diverse, anti-racist, and non-hierarchical intersections. Joy is articulated as a "vital resource" to guide queer worldmaking and the possibilities that queerness opens up for reimagining social relationships.

The final article in the Special Issue is Cheery Attia and Sarah Flicker's "The Affective Toll of COVID-19 on Queer Joy: A Study of Young People in Toronto, Melbourne and New York City." In this article, the authors explore how amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, many young queer individuals experienced isolation and adverse mental health effects due to the cancellation of events like proms, travel plans, and graduations. Despite the feelings of despair and loneliness, online social spheres emerged as vital spaces for community building, forming relationships, identity shaping, and support networks. Attia and Flicker delve into the emotional impact of COVID-19 on the experiences of joy of 270 young queer individuals across three cities: Toronto (82), Melbourne (90), and New York (98). The authors seek to unravel the nuanced nature of queer joy in contrast to normative interpretations. They investigate how queer youth discovered joy not only within traditional frameworks but also through avenues like friendships and online dating. Viewing joy through the perspectives of racially diverse, sexually expansive, and gender non-conforming youth enables educators, parents, and other influential figures in their lives to bolster their autonomy and respect their willingness to take risks to find joy.

Conclusion

We know that the very real despair faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ communities is contrasted by ongoing resistance in the form of queer and trans joy. We live and feel this in our own everyday lives. This joy is also reflected from queer community archives: New York's

LGBT Community Center National History Archive, San Francisco's Dr. John P De Cecco Archives & Special Collections, Toronto's The ArQuives, and from smaller archives in which we ourselves catalog our queer joy, rage, and sorrow, such as in spaces like diaries, group texts, and social media posts. We see queer joy present in our communities when folks organize, provide mutual aid, do drag and fuck with gender norms, and come together for potlucks and solidarity marches. We draw on strength from our 2SLGBTQIA+ communities and envision queer joy in the future, and are inspired by Joshua Whitehead's conception of Indigiqueer temporalities when he asks: "[W]hat better way to imagine survivability than to think about how we may flourish into being joyously animated rather than merely alive?" (p. 2). How might we further theorize and mobilise our queer joy as a disruption to settler colonial, carceral logics (Rudolph, 2023)? How might the transformative power of queer joy be amplified to fragment and challenge the rise of facism and populism that seeks to exterminate it? And finally, how can making queer joy more visible make flaccid those grammars of oppression that fail to see the beauty and collective power of our queerness and transness? We continue to imagine what queer joy studies offers to theory, to praxis, and to "being joyously animated rather than merely alive."

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Notes

1. 2SLGBTQIA+ refers to Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and other sexual and gender minorities. We use this acronym as it is the dominant acronym in Canadian Queer and Trans Studies, however, we recognize that in different geographic locations different terms are employed, such as in Australia with the use of LGBTSBIAQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Sistergirls, Brotherboys, Intersex, Asexual, and other sexual and gender minorities), with SB being Indigenous terms.
2. We put gender dysphoria in quotes here not to minimize the distress of the experiences people label as gender dysphoria but rather to highlight that the pathologization of gender dysphoria obfuscates the sociopolitical context of homophobia and transphobia that portend this distress.

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