Sexual Autonomy, for the Individual & Community

Michael Warner, in his book *The Trouble with Normal*, makes the claim that the campaign for gay marriage and other efforts towards the ‘normalization’ of queerness is detrimental to sexual autonomy. He advocates instead a ‘society of the non-normative’, where everyone is queer and nobody is “normal.” I’ll look to Michel Foucault, a major influence of Warner’s, to push us deeper into an exploration of queerness, normality, and autonomy. While I support sexual autonomy and queer sexual practice, by both Warner and Foucault’s definitions, Warner’s insistence against the “normal” is neither desirable nor feasible. It is not desirable because Warner’s proposal at best allows for a collectivity of sexual autonomous individuals. There is no possibility for community because norms are necessary for the formation of community. Even if this is still appealing, it may not even be feasible to imagine a society where queerness can exist without normality to define itself against. The question then becomes, how can we imagine a society that promotes sexual autonomy and allows for communities of identity? Here, I look to Maxine Greene and her writing on educating for freedom. Even though she writes about freedom in a broader sense, to include more than just sexuality, the arguments
are analogous. We can better understand how to be free using the lens of sexual autonomy, and we can learn how to build a sexually autonomous society through Greene’s education for freedom. Her pedagogy lies in teaching students to work in groups, together, on projects for social change, and encouraging those from oppressed groups to critically reflect on power.

First, I will explore Warner’s pursuit for a society of sexually autonomous individuals. I will explain why that notion is appealing to him, and what he means exactly when he uses the word ‘autonomous’. I will explain how he distinguishes sexual autonomy from sexual freedom. Then, I will show how he believes we should reorient our thinking about sex to become sexually autonomous.

Warner begins his book with the question, “Shouldn’t it be possible to allow everyone sexual autonomy in a way consistent with everyone else’s autonomy?” For Warner, sexual autonomy comes when people govern their own sex lives. This autonomy gets interrupted all the time both directly, such as when society prohibits or regulates particular sexual practices, and indirectly, such as when we embrace one way of being sexual as the only acceptable way.

Throughout history, the indirect ways of impinging on sexual autonomy have created a culture of shame surrounding sex. Sex has been a source of great embarrassment in Western society for centuries. Today, in America, there are fewer sexual practices prohibited by law than ever in our history. The shame surrounding sex, however, still acts as a constraint on our capacity to be truly autonomous. Warner wants to address shame directly as a way of understanding how we are still sexually constrained.

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2 Warner 1
Warner is careful to distinguish sexual autonomy from sexual freedom. He associates movements for sexual freedom with those who want to disregard shame altogether, to pretend as though it doesn’t exist. The ‘free love’ movement in the 1960s is an example of one such movement. The idea that you could love or have sex with any one, with no repercussions, smacks of hedonism and isn’t a productive way of working towards sexual autonomy, according to Warner. Warner gives the example of Diogenes, an Athenian philosopher in the 4th century B.C. who masturbated in the marketplace as a commentary on the hypocrisy of shame. Neither Diogenes nor the social experiments of the 1960s were able to maintain their vision for shame-free sex in a lasting way. Warner does not believe that ignoring shame through campaigns for ‘sexual freedom’ will make it go away. Shame is rooted too deeply in our consciousness for that. Rather, he advocates that we look at shame directly, and use it as a kind of homing device to see where our sexual autonomy is being compromised. “The difficult question is not: how do we get rid of sexual shame? The answer to that one will inevitably be: get rid of sex. The question, rather, is this: what will we do with our shame?”3 It is in this latter question that the more responsible campaign for sexual autonomy is rooted.

If sexual autonomy is not sexual freedom, then what is it? Warner never says explicitly. He does, however, explain that sexual autonomy is not a static state. Rather, it is an active process of uncovering and discovering different forms of sexuality. At no point can society reach a plane where everyone is comfortable and shame-free, where they can pat themselves on the back for a job well done and never worry about autonomy again. Rather, for Warner, autonomy is the perpetual creation and exploration of new kinds of desire.

Sexual autonomy requires more than freedom of choice, tolerance, and the liberalization of sex laws. It requires access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do

3 Warner 3
not know their desires until they find them. Having an ethics of sex, therefore, does not mean having a theory about what people’s desires are or should be. If the goal is sexual autonomy, consistent with everyone else’s sexual autonomy, then it will be impossible to say in advance what form it will take. Even bondage can be a means of autonomy—or not.4

Warner’s quest for sexual autonomy relies on the principle that sexuality is, itself, endlessly creative and generative. This autonomy will always be in motion because there will always be as-yet undiscovered avenues for pleasure. Once this principle is established, a sexually autonomous society requires two things, according to Warner.5 One, sexual practices should not be directly restricted by laws and regulations. Choice should be maximized and tolerance a standard practice. Implied is the notion that everyone’s sexual preferences are different, and it is therefore nonsensical to be judgmental about another’s preferred sexual expression. Two, people should always be in search of new kinds of pleasure. This is because desire is formed after people experience new kinds of pleasure, not the other way around. We are born with particular objects of desire; these objects are historical constructs. We learn how to aim our desire. While we may be born with some kind of inherent sexual drive, the aims of that drive are not inherent. Rather, desire is born when we try something new and like it. This conception of desire is very different from the way our society has imagined it in the past.

For a long time, according to Warner, our society has constructed sexual desire as if it were a single, universal urge. Most often, the form of this ‘universal’ drive is heterosexual, married and procreative, although even this standard has not been consistent. For example, the notions that sex should be both consensual and pleasurable for the woman as well as the man are

4 Warner 7
5 Warner 7
recent additions to the traditional framework. Because sexual desire was painted as universally identical, everyone could be judged according to the same standards. This culture of judgment is what Warner calls ‘Moralism’. Moralism is a mode of external determinism, in which certain sexual preferences and practices are mandated for everyone. It is the opposite of ‘sexual freedom’, though both movements work against sexual autonomy. Whereas sexual freedom ignores shame, and thus allows it to continue its influence covertly, for moralism, shame is another form of law. Moralism is unquestioned adherence to social norms and customs.

The problem with this mindset, according to Warner, is that the moralisms of sexuality are inconsistent. They always claim to represent values that are timeless and ‘natural’, yet those values have changed a great deal over time. He reminds us that masturbation, a practice that is widely accepted by Western culture today, was once considered a perversion.

The early-eighteenth-century tract Onania declares that masturbation is a sin “that perverts and extinguishes nature: he who is guilty of it, is laboring at the Destruction of his Kind, and in a manner strikes at the Creation itself.” Reading this tortured logic, it’s easy to wonder: what were they thinking? More important: why were they so driven to control something that we now recognize as harmless, and by definition not our business? To most readers, I suspect, the irrationality of past moralisms is reassuring: we’re smarter than that now. But it could just as easily alarm us, since pronouncements about what kind of sex is or isn’t good for others are by no means a thing of the past. Religious groups no longer say much about God’s punishment of Onan for masturbation, but they still invoke biblical authority against gay people, sadomasochists, fetishists, and other alleged sex offenders.

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6 Warner 11
7 Warner 4
8 Warner 14
These inconsistencies act as sufficient reason for Warner to reject sexual moralism as a general practice. More than that, moralism acts as a kind of radar for the newest queer trends. Sexual autonomy is the deliberate struggle against conforming to moralism’s sexual standards. A sexually autonomous individual will become accustomed to questioning traditional practices and seeking out new practices. Moralism is incompatible with Warner’s theory of sexual autonomy because it posits desire as inherent.

An important part of Warner’s conception of sexual autonomy is acknowledging that sex is so much more than the duration of penetration or moment of ejaculation. Anyone who has sex knows that a good sexual experience makes the most of foreplay: often, the more drawn out the better. Even the weeks, months or years spent getting to know someone contribute to the sexual encounter. We can begin to look at sex as something more than time spent without clothes on, as simply anything that gives you pleasure, as a part of sex itself. Warner’s formula is that desire follows the creation of new pleasures, and new pleasures come about as we learn more about the body and become innovative with our practices. Sexual autonomy increases by refusing to limit ourselves in the way we imagine sex, desire and pleasure.

New fields of sexual autonomy come about through new technologies: soap, razors, the pill, condoms, diaphragms, Viagra, lubricants, implants, steroids, videotape, vibrators, nipple clamps, violet wands, hormones, sex assignment surgeries, and others we can’t yet predict. Some anatomical possibilities that were always there, such as anal pleasure and female ejaculation, are learned by many only when the knowledge begins to circulate openly and publicly. The psychic dimensions of sex change as people develop new repertoires of fantasy and new social relations, like “white” or “construction worker,” not to mention new styles of gender and shifting balances of power between men and women. Through long processes of change, some desires too stigmatized to be thought about gradually gain legitimacy, such as the desire for a homosexual lover. Others lose... Sex, in short, changes.
As it does, the need for sexual autonomy changes... Civilization doesn’t just repress our original sexuality; it makes new kinds of sexuality.\(^9\)

Warner is constructing sex as a kind of mirror to the world. As the world changes, socially, technologically, politically, people change, and so does sex. Warner is arguing it doesn’t make sense to put value judgments on sex or make ethical appeals against certain practices; sex is not the source of the problem, rather, it is a reflection of the state of the world.

**Let’s Go Deeper**

In this section, I will push Warner’s notions of ‘queerness’ and ‘normality’ further by looking at writing by Michel Foucault.

Two decades before Warner, Foucault wrote about the possibility that reproductive sex is not at the root of all pleasure, and therefore the source of sexuality. Rather, it is a historical notion from thousands of years ago that still influences the way we think about sex today.

For millenia the tendency has been to give us to believe that in sex, secretly at least there was to be found the law of all pleasure, and that this is what justifies the need to regulate sex and makes its control possible. These two notions, that sex is at the heart of all pleasure and that its nature requires that it should be restricted and devoted to procreation, are not of Christian but of Stoic origin; and Christianity was obliged to incorporate them when it sought to integrate itself in the State structure of the Roman Empire in which Stoicism was the virtually the universal philosophy. Sex then became the ‘code’ of pleasure. Whereas in societies with a heritage of erotic art the intensification of pleasure tends to desexualize the body, in the West this systematisation of pleasure according to the ‘laws’ of sex gave rise to the whole apparatus of sexuality. And it is this that makes us believe that we are ‘liberating’ ourselves when we ‘decode’

\(^9\) Warner 11
all pleasure in terms of a sex shorn at last of disguise, whereas one should aim instead at a desexualization, at a general economy of pleasure not based on sexual norms.”

Foucault, like Warner, is working to reverse the logic that an inherent sexual drive is the source of all pleasure. This mindset is restrictive to sexual autonomy because it allows only a small amount of our access to pleasure to get the designations of ‘sexual’ and ‘legitimate’. Warner and Foucault would agree that since the time of the Stoics we have increased the number of possible ways to seek pleasure; slowly, certain stigmas and shame surrounding sexual practices are being challenged. The general mindset of today’s culture, however, is still one that places heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive sex at the center of all sexual behavior. Sexual autonomy won’t happen until we orient ourselves towards Foucault’s notion of ‘desexualization’, a movement that challenges the norms and hierarchies of sexual practice. This means not focusing on the act of sexual intercourse as the primary avenue for pleasure; Foucault is reminding us that there are lots of different ways to enjoy sex and life, and one is never categorically better than another.

Warner agrees with Foucault that we are not ‘desexualized’ as a society and that prevents us from becoming autonomous. Even though we are more liberal and open-minded about sex now then we were even fifty or a hundred years ago, there is always more work to be done, more avenues of pleasure to discover. Warner argues that we are limited now in ways we don’t even realize; sexual norms (read: sexual limitations) are passed down from antiquity.

We live with sexual norms that survive from the Stone Age, including prohibitions against autoeroticism, sodomy, extramarital sex, and (for those who still take the Vatican seriously) birth control...What we inherit from the past, in the realm of sex, is the morality of patriarchs and clansmen, souped up with Christian hostility to the flesh (“our vile body,” Saint Paul called it), medieval chastity cults, virgin/hcore complexes, and other deritus of

ancient repression. Given these legacies of unequal moralism, nearly every civilized aspect of sexual morality has initially looked deviant, decadent, or sinful, including voluntary marriage, divorce, and nonreproductive sex.

Warner begins with the claim that we are not sexually autonomous beings. Sexual autonomy is active and continuous: it is both the search for new forms of pleasure and the query into one’s own sexual biases and inhibitions. Moralism and the movement for sexual freedom are two attitudes that preclude sexual autonomy: the former doesn’t allow for newly created sexual practices (non-heterosexual, non-monogomous, non-procreative) to have as much legitimacy as ancient ones, and the latter doesn’t allow for people to engage with their own sexual inhibitions in a meaningful way. ‘Freedom’ for Warner implies the ‘full tank of gas and an open road’ mentality, a world without obstacles or restrictions. This isn’t ‘real’ freedom according to Warner. Even though everything we know about sex is learned, these beliefs are still rooted deeply within us and cannot be simply forgotten or ignored.

There is a tension in Warner’s conception of autonomy between acknowledging that we, as subjects, are formed completely by the sexual mores of the times, and still holding on to the belief that we can be genuinely creative in our sexual practices. The creativity is a vital piece of Warner’s campaign for collective sexual autonomy, but it is not easy to reconcile with claims that he makes about the formation of the sexual subject. “The best historians of sexuality argue that almost everything about sex, including the idea of sexuality itself, depends on historical conditions, though perhaps at deep levels of consciousness that change slowly.” If everything we know about sex comes directly from our cultural context, how can we possibly challenge sexual norms by creating new practices? It seems impossible that Warner could, on the one hand, claim that sex is endlessly creative and diverse, and on the other hand, insist that everything

11 Warner 10
about sex is culturally constructed and dependent on historical conditions. He is simultaneously dismissing standard sexual practices as a historical construction, and dismissing that we can become autonomous by ignoring the shame that comes with deviating from these practices.

This tension is an echo of similar issues raised by Michel Foucault. Foucault would agree with Warner that we are formed by society to think about the ideas of the ‘natural’, that the designation is mostly meaningless. In the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that sex has always been too varied and complex to reduce it to a simple equation for the ‘natural’.

There is no single, all-encompassing strategy, valid for all of society and uniformly bearing on all the manifestations of sex. For example, the idea that there have been repeated attempts, by various means, to reduce all of sex to its reproductive function, its heterosexual and adult form, and its matrimonial legitimacy fails to take into account the manifold objectives aimed for, the manifold means employed the different sexual politics concerned with the two sexes, the different age groups and social classes. Foucault is making a claim that sex cannot be reduced to the ‘natural’—its heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive form—because even within that framework there are an incredible amount of variations based on contextual circumstances. Even though claims about ‘natural’ sex have been made for centuries, the sex itself has changed a great deal. The ‘natural’ way to have sex for the Victorian-era upper class has very little in common with the ‘natural’ way to have sex for religious conservatives today. The point that both Foucault and Warner make as they try to dismantle the conception of the ‘natural’, is that sex is always so much more complicated then penile-vaginal intercourse. There are rituals, techniques, social codes, customs of dress, dialogue and behavior; all of these are a part of the way that we have sex.

Concepts of ‘natural’ sex and ‘normal’ sex have been closely related, one used to reinforce the other. Moralists oppose sex that is abnormal because it is unnatural; the normal arises out of the natural. Warner comments on the fragility of that relation; to construct a whole
framework for normal sex, which is meant to be appropriate for everyone, out of a single sexual act.

The received wisdom, in straight culture, is that all of its different norms line up, that one is synonymous with the others. If you are born with male genitalia, the logic goes, you will behave in masculine ways, desire women, desire feminine women, desire them exclusively, have sex in what are thought to be normally active and insertive ways and within officially sanctioned contexts, think of yourself as heterosexual, identify with other heterosexuals, trust in the superiority of heterosexuality no matter how tolerant you might wish to be, and never change any part of this package from childhood to senescence. Heterosexuality is often a name for this entire package, even though attachment to the other sex is only one element.12

Concepts of the normal and the natural are very much enmeshed in each other, and both espouse externally deterministic notions of sex: we are all born with the same, specific sexual drive and social customs and institutions are built around this drive. The normal is a thick cushion that protects the illusion of the natural. It’s what makes us complacent and gives us satisfaction in judging the sex lives of others. The normal protects one very particular kind of sexual practice from shame at the expense of all the others; it is what keeps us from sexual autonomy.

**Tension Building**

In this section I will get into Warner’s argument about how to build a sexually autonomous society. The key for Warner is ‘queer’ sexual behavior. I will unpack what Warner means by queerness, and try to imagine what a society of queer individuals would look like. I will complicate Warner’s non-normative society by showing how ‘queerness’ and ‘community’ are antithetical, and look to Foucault to show how it may be impossible to eliminate the ‘normal’

12 Warner 37-38
as we know it today. Finally, I will look at Warner’s opposition to identity politics and determine whether or not his protests are legitimate.

Warner lays out a proposal for how we can imagine a sexually autonomous society. His solution is a society of the non-normative: individuals avoid normality at all costs by emphasizing queerness. It is through this double-consciousness, deliberate queer behavior while simultaneously de-tangling oneself from the clutches of normality, that we can be sexually autonomous. The first step to understanding Warner’s proposal is to unpack what he means when he writes about queerness. Throughout the book he uses the term in an unspecific way, more often defined negatively (the space ‘outside of’ normal) than positively, to “suggest how many ways people can find themselves at odds with straight culture.”

Here, the definition of queerness lies in its distance from the normal. To be queer is to deviate from normality, from ‘straightness’, and there are infinite ways to do this. Practicing a queer lifestyle is the way that we become sexually autonomous. Queerness is sexual autonomy in action; the words are, in a sense, synonymous for Warner. “Sexual autonomy has grown, not just by regressing to infantile pleasure (however important that might be), but by making room for new freedoms, new experiences, new pleasures, new identities, new bodies—even if many of us turn out to live in the old ones without complaining. Variation in this way is a precondition of autonomy—as much as it is also the outcome of autonomy.”

Variation is a critical part of what it means to be queer and sexually autonomous. Variation is a precondition of autonomy because it indicates that people are not making assumptions about the way they are supposed to behave sexually, that they are experimenting with what they find pleasurable and making space for new desires to form. They are, to say it another way, not taking cues from normal sexuality. This leads to an

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13 Warner 38
14 Warner 12
incredible diversity of sexual practices and attitudes that are all different and yet all queer. Though queerness is a word that indicates a certain kind of sexual behavior that is very much aligned with sexual autonomy, queer people have nothing in common in their practices except that they deviate from the norm.

There is a second way that Warner defines queerness: to indicate a culture that admits the relationship between sex and shame, and embraces it. “In what I am calling queer culture, there is no truck with bourgeois propriety. If sex is a kind of indignity, then we’re all in it together.”

What unites queers is their simultaneous, collective acknowledgment and dismissal of the shame associated with unusual sex. If shame is a buffer that protects the illusion of normal, natural sex, queerness is to eschew the normal and, therefore, the protection it provides from shame, in favor of sex that is different and abnormal. The ‘culture’ of queerness is one that encourages deviation from the normal and supports those who are brave enough to do so. “A relation to others, in these contexts, begins in an acknowledgment of all that is more abject and least reputable in oneself. Shame is bedrock. Queers can be abusive, insulting, and vile toward one another, but because abjection is understood to be the shared condition, they also know how to communicate through such camaraderie a moving and unexpected form of generosity. No one is beneath its reach, not because it prides itself on generosity, but because it prides itself on nothing. The rule is: Get over yourself. Put on a wig before you judge.” Shame, which can be understood as a measure of the distance between your own sexual practices and the norm, is the uniting force for a queer community.

There is an interesting relationship here between the queer individual’s relationship to the norm and his relationship to other queers. On the one hand, there are as many different kinds of

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15 Warner 20
16 Warner 35
queers as there are queers themselves; you won’t find two queers with identical sexual attitudes. Even if their practices are similar—say, the sex they have is monogamous, heterosexual and missionary—you can be assured that those queers took very different paths to arrive at their own sexual rituals. Not to mention, the relationship each has with his respective partner is unique. Queerness is an internal exploration of pleasure; queers don’t assume that they will have the same sexual preferences as anyone else. For that reason, queerness is unique.

Warner’s ‘queerness’ points toward a fundamentally individualistic lifestyle. Here, I transition into my argument. Queerness is antithetical to the formation of community and the cohesion of society. Queerness is based on the individual’s relationship to herself and her body, outside of the influence of others. Therefore, queerness and normalization are antithetical—and community is not possible without some degree of normalization. A community is a community precisely because it has norms. Without norms through which you can communicate and relate to one another, it seems impossible to imagine how you could have politics, let alone friends. Warner does not adequately acknowledge this mismatch between queer sex and community membership; nor does he recognize the pleasures that come with submitting to the normal and being able to relate to other people.

Furthermore, it seems that queerness and normality are more connected than Warner lets on. Foucault’s writing about the relationship between power and resistance in his *History of Sexuality* is helpful for understanding how normality and queerness are deeply interconnected. For Foucault, resistance is inconceivable without power. “There is no locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable... They are the odd term in
relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite.”

Foucault’s ‘power’ and ‘resistance’ are analogous to Warner’s ‘normal’ and ‘queer’. In the same way that the definition for queer necessarily requires a reference to the normal, resistance cannot happen if there is no power. There is no ‘pure resistance’: all revolutions and movements happen in response to power. This is significant because it calls into question whether a society of the non-normative is possible. What could it mean to be ‘queer’ when there is no normal? It seems as though Warner is painting a picture of a society of individuals that do not relate to one another: a collectivity of sexually autonomous individuals but not a true community. How can communities form if there is no common thread of identity?

Foucault would argue that, not only is it not possible to be queer without a ‘normal’ to define oneself against, we are not even capable of imagining a world without the normal. This argument follows from his writing about the pervasiveness of power. He writes that power is in everything: the way we interact, what we know, what we do, how we think, how we speak, and on and on. “Between techniques of knowledge and strategies of power, there is no exteriority, even if they have specific roles and are linked together on the basis of their difference.”

We cannot get outside of power, because it is so deeply rooted in the way we exist. Power is not the result or side effect of existing practices or institutions; rather, these are the result of power. To extend this theory on power to Warner’s claims about the normal, there are no sexual practices that aren’t formed by the normal. We cannot imagine sexuality uninfluenced by the normal.

Queerness as an identity needs the normal in order to constitute itself.

It is not possible to identify as queer and be part of a community. This makes Warner’s supposed ‘society of the non-normative’ something of an oxymoron. Perhaps there is another

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18 Foucault, HOS 98
way to understand queerness so that Warner’s claims are not at odds with Foucault’s theory on power. If queerness is a struggle, rather than a state of being, maybe that is more fitting. It is somewhat difficult now, however, to be able to distinguish queerness from ‘sexual autonomy’. Both are active processes, more closely resembling a verb rather than a noun. How, then, can queerness be the path to sexual autonomy if it is, essentially, equivalent to sexual autonomy? The confusion of terminology here points to the difficulty of writing to promote change through a postmodern lens. What does it mean to struggle against something that is so much a part of you? How can you write to influence others when everyone’s struggle is different?

This brings us to the bulk of Warner’s argument: Do ‘identity politics’, a politics that form around communities of identity, hurt or help the queer movement? Warner defines identity politics as those politically oriented groups that campaign for inclusion in the social and political mainstream. They advocate for normalization as a way to increase their freedom as a community. For example, Warner sees the movement to legalize gay marriage as an effort toward normalizing the queer lifestyle. The Human Rights Campaign, one of the largest gay political organizations, works towards to ensure that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are “ensured equality and embraced as full members of the American family at home, at work and in every community.”¹⁹ The HRC would argue that legalizing gay marriage increases the autonomy of the queer individual because it increases his choices regarding partnership: this is what it means to be a “full member” of the American family.

Warner contends that legalizing gay marriage will not increase the autonomy of queers; in fact, it will restrict their autonomy. His claim is that identity politics hurt the queer movement because they make it harder for those who abstain from marrying to be queer. The choice is,

normalize or suffer. The pleasures that come with normalization are experienced at the expense of the non-normative. To work to normalize (or ‘equalize’) only certain ways of being queer is to abandon one of the principles of the queer movement: all modes of sexuality are equal. Warner writes,

Is marrying something you do privately, as a personal choice or as an expression of taste, with no consequences for those who do not marry? Is it a private act, a mere choice, like an expression of taste? That would only be true if marriage were somehow thought to lack the very privileged relation to legitimacy that makes people desire it in the first place, or if the meaning of marriage could somehow be specified without reference to the state. As long as people marry, the state will continue to regulate the sex lives of those who do not marry. It will continue to refuse to recognize our intimate relations—including cohabitating partnerships—as having the same rights or validity as a married couple. It will criminalize our consensual sex. It will stipulate at what age and in what kind of space we can have sex. It will send police to harass sex workers and cruisers. It will restrict our access to sexually explicit materials. All this and more the state will justify because these sexual relations take place outside of marriage. In the modern era, marriage has become the central legitimizing institution by which the state regulates and permeates people’s most intimate lives; it is the zone of privacy outside of which sex is unprotected. In this context, to speak of marriage as merely one choice among others is at best naive.²⁰

Normalization and queerness are at odds with each other. Inherent in the process of normalization is the polarization of sexuality: Either an act is normal, and acceptable, or it is not. Queerness cannot survive in a culture of the normal. Warner claims that identity politics are detrimental to queerness because they reinforce a culture of exclusion and judgment.

Foucault is ambivalent about whether identity politics are helpful or hurtful in expanding queer autonomy. On the one hand, he believes that no one should value his membership to a community of identity more than he values his own queerness. Throughout his writing,
particularly in the later *Ethics*, Foucault reiterates the importance of continuously rediscovering one’s sexuality, in pushing the boundaries of pleasure and imagining new possibilities for sexual invention. He believes that this individual, artistic drive should never be overshadowed or limited by an individual’s membership in a particular sexual community. He says, in response to a question about the usefulness and significance of sexual identities: “If identity is only a game, if it is only a procedure to have relations, social and sexual—pleasure relationships that create new friendships, it is useful. But if identity becomes the problem of sexual existence, and if people think they have to ‘uncover’ their own ‘identity,’ and that their own identity has to become the law, the principle, the code of their existence; if the perennial question they ask is ‘Does this thing conform to my identity?’ then, I think, they will turn back to a kind of ethics very close to the old heterosexual virility.”

Here, Foucault values sexual identities to the extent that they allow for the expansion of ones pleasure relationships, but gives them a lower priority than the connection to one’s own, individual pursuit of pleasure. Queer sexual practice, the continuously evolving process of learning about pleasure and knowing oneself, is to be prized about communities of sexual identity.

On the other hand, Foucault writes about how identity politics are useful for opening up a space for liberation. Foucault is an advocate for the normalization of alternative ways of being. He believes sexual autonomy is found by working within existing institutional structures, and that certain degrees of political freedom are necessary to even have the space for queerness.

It is important, first, to have the possibility—and the right—to choose your own sexuality. Human rights regarding sexuality are important and are still not respected in many places. We shouldn’t consider that such problems are solved now. It’s quite true that there was a real liberation process in the early seventies. This process was very good, both in terms of

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21 Foucault *Ethics* 166
the situation and in terms of opinions, but the situation has not definitely stabilized. Still, I think we have to go a step further. I think that one of the factors of this stabilization will be the creation of new forms of life, relationships, friendships in society, art, culture, and so on through our sexual, ethical, and political choices. 

Despite Foucault’s prioritizing of the individual’s relationship to his own queerness above his relationship to communities of sexual identity, he still clearly encourages a politics of queer identity. How can he approve of both queerness and identity politics when Warner believes that the two are at odds with one another?

Foucault believes we must advocate for queerness within existing structures of normalization. The normal, as we live presently, is a fact of life. We cannot escape it. What we can do, however, is work together to change the normal, so that it becomes continuously more inclusive and accessible. He writes,

> The important question here, it seems to me, is not whether a culture without restraints is possible or even desirable but whether the system of restraints in which a society functions leaves individuals the liberty to transform the system. Obviously constraints of any kind are going to be intolerable to certain segments of society. The necrophiliac finds it intolerable that graves are not accessible to him. But a system of constraint becomes truly intolerable when the individuals who are affected by it don’t have the means of modifying it.

Foucault is suggesting that sexual autonomy is found through normalizing the struggle for queerness. As a society, we must get used to creating space for burgeoning trends and modes of sexuality and supporting these communities as they try to modify the normal. How can we become better at doing this?

**Coming together**

22 Foucault *Ethics* 164
23 Foucault *Ethics* 147
In this final section, I try to reconcile the possibility of simultaneously being queer and part of a community. I look to educational philosopher Maxine Greene for a better sense of how to do this. Greene writes about ‘educating for freedom.’ Although the language is different, her intentions align somewhat with Warner and Foucault. I try to understand her definition of freedom in the context of what we’ve learned so far, and then show how she deviates from Warner and Foucault by including community as an integral part of what it means to be free. I will then look at her requirements for a pedagogy of freedom, and see if reading post-modern theorists like Warner and Foucault is sufficient to educate for freedom. I will argue that it is sufficient in some ways, but not others. Finally, I will imagine a way that we can normalize queerness, integrating our notions of autonomy and community.

What makes a community? According to Greene, “the only foundation for a sense of community is shared hope and the trust created by such sharing.”24 A community of queers would be a group of people that support each other in their deviation from the norm. ‘Deviating from the norm’ is the common thread of identity all queers share, and it is what binds them in their community. If this were the case, would it be possible to have a society of the non-normative, where everyone is queer and there is no normal? What would create the community? It is difficult to conceive of how communities could form in a society of the non-normative, because what it means to be ‘queer’ is negatively defined against what it means to be ‘normal’, and vice versa.

Greenegives a proposal for how to normalize queerness and foster a culture of autonomy. Her campaign is to ‘educate for freedom’. Although Greene uses the term ‘freedom’, she does

not use it disparagingly, as Warner does. Greene’s notion of freedom is more closely aligned with Foucault’s: any transformation of the social must be brought to bear within existing dynamics of power. Freedom must be struggled for within a particular dynamic, not outside it. Freedom is not found in stasis and complacency, nor is it found in total escape. “When people cannot name alternatives, imagine a better state of things, share with others a project of change, they are likely to remain anchored or submerged, even as they proudly assert their autonomy. The same, paradoxically or not, is true when people uproot themselves, when they abandon families, take to the road, become strangers in desperate efforts to break loose from pre-established orders and controls.”25 This ‘middle road’ conception of freedom can be compared to Warner’s ‘autonomy’. In the same way that Warner’s autonomy lies in its relationship with shame, somewhere between ‘freedom’ (pretending shame doesn’t exist) and ‘moralism’ (not questioning the foundations of shame), Greene’s freedom is found between being submerged in culture and uprooted. Both Warner’s ‘autonomy’ and Greene’s ‘freedom’ require an investment in present conditions and an awareness that things could be different.

Greene’s conception of autonomy is not connected to sexuality, like Warner’s. Even though Warner’s book emphasizes the pursuit of sexual autonomy, however, it is possible to imagine the debate extending to other ways of being in the world as well. ‘Queer’ living could include the way that we eat, dress, bathe, speak, sleep, dance, walk, etc. The idea is to live creatively, to continuously seek pleasure in new ways of being alive in the world. Foucault’s notion of the ‘gay’ life is analogous to Warner’s conception of queerness, but more encompassing. Foucault’s “mode de vie [way of life]” encourages the “creation of new forms of life, relationships, friendships in society, art, culture, and so on through our sexual, ethical, and

25 Greene 9
political choices.”  The queer principles that Warner applies to sexuality, Foucault applies to a whole way of being. I am going to make the claim through Warner and Foucault that in the same way being sexually queer leads to sexual autonomy, general queer living, through Foucault’s *mode de vie*, can lead to autonomy in general. Therefore, even though Greene doesn’t write about issues of sexuality specifically, her ‘education for freedom’ can still be used to cast light on sexual autonomy in addition to ‘general’ autonomy. I look to Greene to help us understand how an individual can live queerly and with autonomy, and also be part of a community. First, we must understand two counter-examples she gives to the autonomous life.

Greene explores two modes of being in the world that depart from her notion of freedom. In both cases—to be ‘submerged’ and ‘free-floating’—the potential for freedom has been abandoned. These two are in many ways diametrically opposed. On the one hand, to be ‘submerged’ in a given culture, you absorb and internalize all its kitsch without critique. Greene uses ‘kitsch’ as a reference to the ultimate ‘fan’, eternally supportive and uncritical. All American flag pins and holiday sweaters, those submerged in kitch see the world as fixed, and so fit themselves into the system accordingly. They are committed to their culture, without any critical perspective and understanding of themselves in relation to their surroundings. Greene writes, “kitsch is integral to the human condition. Its true function is to serve as a folding screen for death, or to mystify by putting a smiling face on things. It is not enough, however, to recognize it as an illusion or a lie, if the achievement of freedom is our concern. It might lose its authoritarian power, but we might be left in the ‘lightness of being,’ with our figurative ashes blowing in the wind.”  The ‘lightness of being’ that Greene is referring to is the life of the perpetual traveler. He or she never settles down and becomes invested in a community. She cites

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26 Foucault *Ethics* 164  
27 Greene 10
the ‘hippies heading for Haight-Ashbury’ in the ‘60s when the word ‘liberation’ was thrown around without much thought or care to the word. They were ‘leaving home for the sake of getting out of town and getting parents out of the way.’ Greene is sympathetic to Foucault in that she believes this kind of liberation is not really possible. Abandoning one situation for another, without thinking or acting critically towards either, is to stay ‘trapped’ inside power relations. Both submergence and free-floating are survival techniques within an oppressive culture, but they are certainly not compatible with Greene or Foucault’s notion of freedom. One must be able to feel obstacles in order to overcome them, and it is through this continuous process of overcoming that freedom can come to be.

Greene cites the French Resistance during World War II as an example of people coming together to create conditions for freedom. It was important that they worked towards freedom collectively, because they were able to create a shared language to describe the situation to be overcome. “By naming the atrocities and the repression as obstacles to their shared existential undertakings, they focused attention on them as factors to be resisted, to be fought, perhaps to be overcome... They came together to reject a state of things they had decided was intolerable. They would not have felt it to be intolerable if they had no possibility of transformation in mind, if they had been unable to imagine a better state of things.”

Greene emphasizes the importance of community for the realization of freedom. She claims that many of these Resistance fighters, in writing after the war, wrote that ‘freedom had visited them for the first time in their lives.’ This supports Greene, Dewey and Foucault’s concept of freedom as not a gift or privilege, but as a feeling that operates under certain conditions. “It suggests that freedom shows itself or comes into being when individuals come together in a particular way, when they are authentically

28 Greene 15-16
present to one another (without masks, pretenses, badges of office), when they have a project they can mutually pursue. When people lack attachments, when there is no possibility of coming together in a plurality or community, when they have not tapped their imaginations, they may think of breaking free, but they will be unlikely to think of breaking through the structures of their world and creating something new.” For Greene, community is what keeps the individual pursuit of freedom from the realm of ‘free-floating’ detachment. The shared pursuit of freedom is a way of pushing boundaries while feeling safe and supported.

Greene’s notion of freedom takes into account both the importance of queer, creative, imaginative resistance, as well as the pleasures of being a part of a community. She has two fundamental principles for her pedagogy of freedom beyond community: development of critical consciousness and diversity of experience. Greene relates the development of critical consciousness with diversity of experience, and emphasizes the importance of both for the pursuit of freedom.

Consciousness, it so happens, involves the capacity to pose questions to the world, to reflect on what is presented in experience. It is not to be understood as an interiority. Embodied, thrusting into the lived and the perceived, it opens out to the common. Human consciousness, moreover, is always situated; and the situated person, inevitably engaged with others, reaches out and grasps the phenomena surrounding him/her from a particular vantage point and against a particular background consciousness... On the ground of the pre-reflective landscape of understanding, the individual develops or learns to take a variety of perspectives on the world... each time he/she is with others—in dialogue, in teaching-learning situations, in mutual pursuit of a project—additional new perspectives open; language opens possibilities of seeing, hearing, understanding.

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29 Greene 17
30 Greene 21
Living within a community and having relationships with others has a way of threading the individual experience into the lived world, enmeshing a single consciousness with many others, increasing opportunities for learning and creativity. Greene hopes to develop a view of education for freedom ‘that will take into account our political and social realities as well as the human condition itself.’

We now know the kind of pedagogy that is necessary to educate for freedom, or, to use Warner’s language, the pedagogy that will make possible the normalization of queerness. This begs the question: Is reading Foucault and other post-modern theorists enough to educate for sexual autonomy, according to Greene’s conditions for a pedagogy of freedom? Yes and no. On the one hand, reading Foucault inspires people to think about power, knowledge and sexuality as historical contingencies. He exposes marriage and other sexual norms as effects of power. In Beyond Postmodern Politics, Honi Haber reflects on how Foucault’s texts interact with oppositional politics, aka, the politics of identity:

Foucault frees us to ask of politics a whole series of questions not traditionally considered part of its domain, and since the ‘tradition’ is the tradition of white propertied males, he frees us to consider politics from the perspective of the marginalized other. Foucault’s program is coincident with the program of oppositional politics precisely because it is crucial to oppositional politics that the realm of the political not be predetermined—it must always remain open to debate and fundamental, even ‘conceptual’ change. Foucault’s genealogy aids oppositional politics because he participates in liberating the act of questioning.

Only by acknowledging that everything we know is shaped by dominant ideologies, are we free to imagine the perspective of the dominated. It is this kind of questioning that fulfills Greene’s

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31 Greene 21
first fundamental principle: the development of critical consciousness. It is this kind of deliberate reflection on present contexts that allows us to conceive of other ways of being.

On the other hand, it could be argued that Foucault does not properly value the role of community in oppositional struggles. Haber comments on the absence of community in Foucault’s writing:

> Despite his opening up the political space, and freeing ‘us’ to ask correspondingly new and provoking questions of it, he never adequately opened up a space for this ‘questioning us.’ This, despite his active role in prison reform and gay liberation. Though he did indeed work to help dissonant communities resist or revolt, the possibility of this community formation is significantly absent from his theory… At its worst, Foucault’s poststructuralism keeps him from allowing for subjects sufficiently coherent to form communities of active resistance and transformation. At best it could be argued that while he did not exclude the possibility of the formation of community, neither did he take into account the seminal role of self-disclosure in community and community formation for the possibility of oppositional politics.³³

Without reflecting on the critical importance of community to identity politics, Foucault’s silence speaks volumes. It reveals that, as a White male who participates in the ‘patriarchal, colonizing order’, Foucault has probably not had much experience as a member of an oppositional struggle. A major component of Greene’s pedagogy is learning through interpersonal relations. It is not easy to work with one another. All of us have, at one point or another, struggled to stay motivated with a group project. There is the person who feels like her perspective isn’t taken into account, the person who feels obligated to do all the work, the person who doesn’t show up to group meetings. Working with people is difficult, and communicating across differences of opinion with respect and honesty takes practice. We’re not very good at it most of the time. In order to get better at it, the teacher and the classroom must have a

³³ Haber 111-112
commitment to the value of the community learning together, as much as the individual’s growth in learning. Foucault seems unable to make this commitment.

For this reason, Nancy Hartsock believes that Foucault’s writing is not useful for identity politics or educating for freedom, and may even be damaging. Because Foucault writes ‘with’ not ‘against’ power, Hartsock would say that his writing actually serves to perpetuate the status quo by not challenging present manifestations of power. When power is everywhere, simultaneously, and the focus is always on how the individual experiences and exercises power, “domination is very difficult to locate.”

Hartsock criticizes Foucault because she believes his early writing, circa *History of Sexuality*, doesn’t take into account structural, persistent forms of domination; for example, men over women and whites over blacks. This absence in his writing, according to Hartsock, represents a certain breed of blindness that comes from occupying a position of privilege in the world. Foucault, a white man, is made complacent because of his status. His writing lacks urgency. Hartsock cites a commentator who writes that, “One’s concept of power is importantly shaped by the reason why one wishes to think about power in the first place.”

Foucault, personally, has little reason to challenge power because it has most often worked in his favor for his identity group.

Perhaps the problem with using Foucault in order to educate for freedom is not his post-modernist approach to power, but rather his position relative to power. Even within Foucault’s own writing there is variation. We see him rely more on community when he is writing from a position of oppression as opposed to a position of power. In the *Ethics*, a collection of interviews published at the end of his life, Foucault is more involved and connected to the gay political

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35 Hartsock 167
movement, and as a result we see a belief in community activism come through in his language
(the bolding is my own):

M.F. That in the name for respect for human rights someone is allowed to do as he wants, great! But if what we want to do is to create a new way of life [mode de vie], then the question of individual rights is not pertinent. In effect, we live in a legal, social, and institutional world where the only relations possible are extremely few, extremely simplified, and extremely poor. There is, of course, the relation of marriage, and the relations of family, but how many other relations should exist, should be able to find their codes not in institutions but in possible supports, which is not at all the case!

G.B. The essential question is that of supports, because the relations exist—or at least they try to exist. The problem comes because certain things are decided not by law-making bodies but by executive order... In Holland, certain legal changes have lessened the power of families and have permitted the individual to feel stronger in the relations he wishes to form. For example, inheritance laws between people of the same sex are the same as those of a married heterosexual couple.

M.F. That’s an interesting example, but it represents only a first step, because if you ask people to reproduce the marriage bond for their personal relationship to be recognized, the progress made is slight. We live in a relational world that institutions have considerable impoverished. Society and the institutions that frame it have limited the possibility of relationships because a rich relational world would be very complex to manage. We should fight against the impoverishment of the relational fabric. We should secure recognition for relations of provisional coexistence, adoption... Rather than arguing that rights are fundamental and natural to the individual, we should try to imagine and create a new relational right that permits all possible types of relations to exist and not be prevented, blocked, or annulled by impoverished relational institutions.36

These three “We should” petitions appeal to a community that Foucault himself feels connected to. It is when one feels ignored or forgotten by power that the importance of community becomes

36 Foucault Ethics 190
apparent. This shows the importance of using literature that represents a diversity of experience, particularly literature from marginalized identity groups.

We can normalize queerness by educating for freedom in a way that elevates voices from oppressed groups and focuses on community building. If a diversity of personal experiences are given the opportunity to critically reflect on power, the literature will encourage the cultivation of critical consciousness as well as underscoring the importance of community. We must normalize translating queer perspectives in the classroom so that they can be understood and integrated into the mainstream. We must learn to be open-minded to fresh perspectives and different ways of being in the world, and become used to creating space for their formation and emergence. Finally, we must get better at working together and communicating with one another, so that we can become autonomous on the level of community and not just as a single individual.