Howlett, Caitlin. "The International Implications of Domestic Sex Education Policy."
Against Sex Education: Pedagogy, Sex Work, and State Violence. London: Bloomsbury
Academic, 2021. 89–110. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350178472.0008>>.

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The International Implications of Domestic Sex Education Policy

All forms of state violence have implications across borders, especially insofar as subjective straightening around nationalist norms impacts foreign relations. For this reason, I turn now to a consideration of the way sex education is situated in relation to the United States' own situatedness within global economies and politics. Up until this point, this project has largely been concerned with how the United States positions sex education at the federal level and its biopolitical impact on those subjects living within its borders, but its own domestic policies nonetheless implicate its foreign relations, too, and this chapter aims to begin a conversation around the nature and quality of this process. The United States' use of sex education as a form of state violence, I will argue, suggests something important about the status of sex education, and its future as a site of liberation, around the world: it cultivates subjects that are seen as inherently in need of protection *everywhere*, thus legitimizing the use of violence around the world as not just necessary, but even progressive, advanced, and democratic. Further, it devastates in the process by also cultivating subjects who are depicted as deserving their criminalization, often to deadly ends. As sex worker Kanyia Walker writes for the ACLU,

A lot of us choose to get into sex work because the money is good and it is an environment where we can surround ourselves with other trans people. But some of us just don't have any other options because of discrimination in the legal job market. . . . We cannot survive and thrive if our lives are policed and criminalized.¹

This chapter, therefore, centers the relationship between sexual subject formation domestically and sexual subject formation internationally by exploring three "global points of exchange" that allow for the exchange of

ideologies across national borders: (1) policy—or an exploration of national sex education policies themselves; (2) the capitalist political economy—or a consideration of some of the economic practices that align sexual subjectivity with neoliberal aims; and (3) sexual labor trades themselves—or the production of a borderless industry of sexual labor, each with its own pedagogical lesson for us. In doing this, I hope to offer a reinterpretation of federal sex education policy in the United States as participating in violence well beyond its own political borders. The lessons here call for a need to come to terms with the nonviable separation between sex work and sex education to which the United States desperately clings.

State Violence Both Ways

The previous chapter briefly outlined how sex education enacts and bolsters certain forms of state violence that mark its own complicity in and with such violence, with a concentration on the way these processes and systems function within the permeable and politicized borders of the United States. There are, however, many important reasons for extending this understanding of the relationship between sex education and state violence to include global, transnational relations. The intimacy with which the United States positions its foreign affairs alongside the control of its own population has been essential to its development. Particularly after 9/11, the relationship between national security, terrorism, and domestic policing has been increasingly tightened and, at the same time, normalized, so as to make these phenomena almost indistinguishable and interchangeable within everyday political life. Manipulating racialized sexuality has always been inherent to these processes and continues to be as the relationship between the United States' domestic and foreign policies has become more closely aligned under global capitalism. Alimahomed-Wilson and Williams argue that "the privatization of state violence has become a driving force in today's global economy," such that not only does global capitalism change how social control is achieved domestically, but that such control itself fuels the insidiousness of capitalism and neoliberalism's reach across the world.² If federal sex education policies participate in and drive the extension of state violence into schools, acting as a site of normative subjectification that upholds racist and sexist conceptions of

sexuality, gender, and the family, then its relationship to international politics is also in need of consideration. How do sex education's ties to state violence implicate it as part of the United States' global presence?

Again, there is a long history in the United States of crafting the citizen-subject in a way that aligns with foreign interests, especially related to "promoting democracy," preemptive war or war-like attacks, and intervention into other nations' government and wars. That is, the requirements for both citizenship and humanity within the United States' jurisdiction often cohere so as to create the very population that is righteously worth protecting in the face of variously defined threats. What is enacted through policy, legislation, or law within US borders, then, is also itself guided by the desire to cultivate something, or a population that is, morally defensible. In many cases, if not all, it is violence that is produced by this work: the citizen-subject that policy, legislation, and law are developed to cultivate is promised only through policing, surveillance, control, and criminalization, and, at the same time, the promise of such a cultivation is itself justification for protecting that subject from foreign powers, specifically by extending state violence across borders and foreign-ism within them.

Few aspects of human life exemplify these processes than do those that relate to racialization and sexualization. In *Freedom with Violence*, Reddy details how, central to the development of concepts of race, gender, and sexuality in the United States, especially during the twentieth century, was the process of attaching access to rights and recognition to policies and practices that legitimized and carried out the dehumanization of others. Reddy, in paying careful attention to the way the policing of sexuality and race happened during this period of US history, explains how the policing of identity and subjectification was regularly justified through the promise of specific forms of freedom. His analytic for understanding this paradox of freedom and violence, "freedom with violence," traces the way liberalism has historically operated to provide a kind of "bourgeois freedom" to disguise its commitments to logics that I have argued are central to state violence in the United States: white, patriarchal supremacy, racism, colonialism, and capitalism.³ On this account, these logics also cohere with a narrowed view of what constitutes reason and rationality, as Reddy shows how the desire for such a freedom was framed and presented as rational and directly in opposition to the nonrational other who, at this point, is positioned by the state as all but asking to be treated violently.⁴

In short, the United States' depiction of citizen-subjectivity, exemplified by its development within sex education policy, might be seen as one of its greatest biopolitical resources (besides its capital, at least), which is used to impact policies of all kinds around the world in many different ways. The rest of this chapter is dedicated to exploring three of them.

Global Points of Exchange

Though there are likely many additional ways to think about the relationship between sexual subjectivity as it occurs domestically and internationally, the three I have chosen to explore here are especially relevant to considerations of the role of sex education in perpetuating violence against sex workers. In order to capture the borderlessness of these relationships, as well as to emphasize the transactional nature of them, I discuss the impact of United States' own domestic policies regarding sex education on sex education policies elsewhere in terms of "global points of exchange." These "points" represent moments of ideological transmission that facilitate the alignment of sexual subjectivity with state desires, particularly around erasing all discussions of sex work from sex education. I recognize the instability and fluidity of these ideas and practice categorization only for the sake of analytic clarity. The points of ideological transmission I will discuss are (1) policies around sex education and sex work; (2) interconnectedness via involvement in the global capitalist economy; and (3) the status of sex work itself.

Policy Exchanges

Federal sex education policies in the United States have had inconsistent impacts on national sex education policies in other countries, though the reverse is also true, if not somewhat less significantly so. Whereas some country's policies might be seen as being pulled more *into* the United States' framework for approaching sexual subjectivity in schools, some can be seen as pushing *away* from its proposed norms. As a result, some have crafted sex education policies that either only take the more progressive aims of comprehensive sex education policy proposals seriously or simply offer different programs by virtue of their distinct historical contexts. A project this

size cannot account for all sex education policies everywhere, so I have chosen to explore three nations that offer a glimpse into the exchanges around sexual subjectivity and the lessons these exchanges offer for our considerations of violence. The nations are China, Nigeria, and Brazil. In each case, the impact of sex education policy discourses from the United States is clearly displayed, the existence of sex work is of national concern, and the former remains generally unconcerned with the latter. While in each case there are differences derived from each nation's own relationships to capitalism, colonialism, and the United States itself, as well as different understandings of the implications of sexual normativity for the development of the nation-state, the general dissonance between the status of sex work and workers and the aims of sex education is what is most important to this project.

I have purposefully left out an especially important set of Western countries in making these choices, however. These include Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland, Spain, Germany, Australia, and Switzerland, to name a few. I want to acknowledge the essential work on sex education, both academic and otherwise, in and about these nations, as well as the many ways in which these nation's policies have been informed by the institutionalized practices of sex education in the United States. Many of these nations also represent rich spaces for exploring what is possible outside of the context of the United States, especially given the far more "progressive" nature of many of these nation's policies on sex work (it is legal, at least in part, in each of the countries I just listed). In making this choice, I do *not* mean to suggest that there is less to say, or fewer important things to say, about these global relations. What I *do* mean to suggest, however, is that there are other nations, ones often left out of Western-centric debates over how sexual subjectification plays out in educational spaces, for which these relations are quite different and especially informative given the concerns with violence at stake in this project. There is so much work to be done within this space, and I know that what is offered here barely scratches that surface.

One thing that China, Nigeria, and Brazil all have in common as it relates to sex education is that their national policies, no matter how contentious, are derived from or measured internally according to the UNESCO standards for comprehensive sex education. First introduced in 2009, UNESCO offered "technical guidance" "to assist education policy matters in all countries design accurate and age-appropriate curricula for children and young people aged

5-18+.”⁵ Guided by what UNESCO director-general Audrey Azoulay describes as a human rights and gender equality framework, these guidelines now center comprehensive sexuality education in order to disseminate information about “the physical, social and emotional challenges” youth face during puberty, and to “tackle” issues of access to “contraception, early pregnancy, gender-based violence, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV and AIDS.” Further, these guidelines emphasize the importance of intervening in the spread of HIV and AIDS and also the explicit importance of addressing “the large body of material of variable quality that young people find on the internet, and help them face increasingly common instances of cyberbullying.” These guidelines were updated in 2018, funded in large part by Sweden and UNAIDS. In the section titled, “The Evidence Base for Comprehensive Sexuality Education,” UNESCO describes its sources of information as consisting of two reviews: one done by Douglas Kirby and another review of research done by two researchers from the University of Oxford Center for Evidence-Based Intervention.

Dr. Kirby is considered one of the most important researchers on sex education of the past fifty years. The research that has been most influential is that which he has done on birthrates, age of sexual initiation, HIV/AIDS, teen pregnancy, and condom use, research which was directly called upon in the creation of Obama’s Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative and PREP program, discussed earlier. Personally, my engagement with Kirby’s work has led to an appreciation of the consistent *ambivalence* he derived from his research. That his findings have been so globally implemented has led to a tendency to erase what is more complicated about them: that the impact of most comprehensive sex education programs is not nearly as efficacious as he wanted it to be. Writing about Kirby’s impact on the field of sex education around the work, Leslie Kantor and colleagues describe some of Kirby’s own frustrations with his research findings and detail the fact that much of his research found *weaknesses* in programs, *not* strengths.⁶ Though he worked hard to translate his findings into programs that might address these weaknesses, it is important to note that it was his own suggestions for such improvement that “changed the field” of sex education and not the success of those suggestions. This is important because, given that UNESCO relies so much on (though not exclusively) one American researcher, as having been essential in upholding the very standards that I am arguing ought to be challenged, the proliferation of these logics throughout the world itself ought to be challenged, too. This

research and these measures of success, and the values they aim at, are not themselves unworthy, and the project of addressing a pandemic like HIV/AIDS should not be underappreciated. What I worry about is that in disseminating this framework, which uses conclusions derived largely from the context of the United States, there has also been dissemination of the normative assumptions about the human that the United States also depends upon. More specifically, in each of the countries discussed here, these guidelines shape contemporary debates around the purpose and necessity of comprehensive sex education while also fundamentally ignoring those who are most likely to be impacted by the problems it claims to address: sex workers.

Very recently—in October of 2020; set to go into effect in June of 2021—the National People’s Congress Standing Committee of the People’s Republic of China announced the implementation of “age-appropriate sex education for minors,” again based on UNESCO’s guidelines. As in the United States, though, the status of a national policy for sex education in China is contentious. In China, one of the reasons for these contentions is related to its communist past, especially Chairman Mao’s commitment to the necessity of regulating sexuality for the sake of social harmony.⁷ Another reason is because of its own history with eugenics. In her account of the history of sex education in China for the past century, Alessandra Aresu writes about how the “origins” of national discussions about sex education within the area of Chinese control themselves date back to the early 1900s. She further discusses how the idea of sex education at this time was seen as a “catchall” term for anything that worked to “regulate sexual activities” including those that aimed to “keep sexual relations within the monogamous marital couple,” “the elimination of premarital and extramarital sex,” promote “premarital chastity,” and eliminate “‘evil habits’ and practices, such as masturbation, prostitution and sodomy,” with extra emphasis on the “social evil” and “source of contamination” that was prostitution.⁸ As in the United States, these aims were deeply connected to eugenicist concerns with creating a strong, moral society. However, again, there are important breaks in this shared discourse, even despite the reliance upon UNESCO’s guidelines. For example, a member of UNESCO Beijing, Li Hongyan, has acknowledged that there is likely to be backlash to these policies specifically because of the attitude of concern for what “could be seen as promoting individuality” in the country.⁹ As it relates to eugenics, though it has recently been rescinded, China’s “one-child” policy has shaped discourse

around the implementation of a national sex education curriculum profoundly. Despite the fact that there remains a heated debate around how successful the policy was in controlling population growth, there is concern about how successful the termination of the policy will be in changing people's behaviors given its power as a discourse for understanding family and reproductive issues in the country. This is especially the case given that China still has the second largest number of adolescents in the world, with approximately 230 million citizens between the age of ten and twenty-four.¹⁰ In this way, UNESCO's Western-oriented projection of what constitutes "sexual education" remains at some odds with Chinese culture, though the push for comprehensive sex education continues, often on the very basis that China ought to modernize its curriculum.

In Nigeria, the issue of sex education is embedded within a different set of concerns, though still advocated for based on UNESCO guidelines. In 1999 the Nigerian government approved sexuality education as a national project and has continued to wrestle with what it should look like. Shiffman et al., however, have shown how insidious the impact of "international norms" has been on the country. They write that "Sexuality education in Nigeria represents, *prima facie*, a hard case for theories claiming strong influence of international norms of national policy-making."¹¹ Taking into consideration the influence of religion in Nigeria—primarily Christianity and Islam—they show that, despite this, the presence of NGOs in Nigeria beginning in the 1980s and the influx of international donors were essential in the national government taking on the project of sex education and have continued to bolster a growing population of "domestic champions" of sex education. Also notable is the impact of an encounter between a Nigerian advocate for sex education and a speaker from the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) in the early 1990s. Shiffman et al. describe the impact of this meeting in the following way:

She subsequently initiated a process that led to the development of Nigerian guidelines. With funding and technical support from SIECUS, and additional funding from the MacArthur Foundation, she organized the National Guidelines Task Force in 1995, which included NGOs, medical associations, UN agencies, officials from the Federal Ministries of Education and Health, researchers, media and religious representatives. Many had been working independently on adolescent reproductive health. This was the first explicit

effort in the country to build a policy community surrounding sexuality education.¹²

If the controversy over sex education today has had any impact on this national curriculum, it has been in making consistency and thoroughness of the curriculum almost impossible to implement. These debates often center the very concern for “Western imposition” that is reflected in Chinese discourse on the necessity of a national comprehensive sex education program and again suggests that this imposition, ideologically grounded in the values asserted by the US government and other American institutions, has had a profound influence in shaping what constitutes a legitimate way of life in Nigeria.

In Brazil, the debates around a national sex education curriculum revolve around a different American ideal: abstinence. In large part due to the dominance of Catholic values in the country, and, most recently, driven by Brazil’s president, Jair Bolsonaro, sex education in Brazil has been consistently diluted in recent years. Though not perfect, the policies of sex education prior to Bolsonaro and the increased power of religious conservatism over the past decade are missed by many. The undermining of sex education is often blamed on a series of events beginning in 2010, wherein former president Dilma Rousseff halted the distribution of sex education materials in Brazilian schools. The materials most at issue were what are referred to as “anti-homophobia kits,” which were condemned by evangelical Christian groups that threatened political backlash should these materials make it into children’s hands.¹³ This was a pivotal moment in securing conservative power in the discussion around sex education in the nation. Despite ample pushback from Brazilian organizations supporting comprehensive sex education, again utilizing the standards set by UNESCO, the national government has consistently rejected these recommendations and maintains the value of abstinence education as the only decent path forward as a nation.¹⁴ Nearly ten years later, in 2019, it was reported that Bolsonaro would support national legislation to cut back on funding for, and limit the influence of, sex education across the country, a move that eight cities took on their own in the years between Rousseff’s actions on sex education and Bolsonaro’s own announcement.¹⁵ Bolsonaro and his administration have continually repeated common American refrains around abstinence since. For example, in 2020, the minister of human rights, family, and women, Damara Alves, announced the government’s allegiance to a new campaign, “I Chose to Wait,” and said, “Our young people, by and

large, are having sex as a result of social pressure. You can go to a party and have lots of fun without having sex.”¹⁶ That this language directly parallels that of abstinence in the United States is no accident.

There are more lessons to be gleaned from this short consideration of the relationship between national policies and their own import for understanding systems of institutionalized violence across borders than what I will highlight here, though I certainly hope to be part of this research in the future. This is especially important to me because there is very little, if anything, that offers a comparative analysis of sex education policy’s between nations in this way, and I believe that there is inherent value for doing this work, especially as we face an increasingly globalized and neoliberal political economy that will inevitably remain dependent upon the regulation of sex, gender, and sexuality for its own sustenance.¹⁷ Here, however, I will simply offer two tentative conclusions as they relate to this project. First, what is most striking to me in exploring these connections are the ways in which those logics that frame what is considered by many in the United States to be the *least* desirable kinds of sex education remain at play and even of value in different nations on different continents around the world. Despite any critiques of the concepts of abstinence, moralizing about female sexuality, reliance upon human tropes that justify racist or xenophobic lessons and practices, and even the relationship to capitalism that are prominent within discourse on sex education in the United States, it seems to be that the most profound impact these discourses have had in other nations is *not* the bringing to bear of those critiques but the *preservation* of those ideologies, and the biopolitical distinctions between whose lives matter and whose do not that they maintain, themselves.

Beyond this, though, is the stark reality that is revealed when these ideologies are considered alongside the fact that in every country discussed here, sex work is on the rise and sex workers are organizing to gain rights based on assertions of the validity of their existence and the legitimacy of their labor. In China, while sex work remains officially illegal, it is thriving and becoming more desirable, specifically because of the dominance of factory work in job creation, which is either unappealing or insufficient for many young women today. Sex workers in China are therefore also constructing meaningful kinship networks to support each other as the state continues to stigmatize and criminalize them. In many ways, then, sex work is essential to the survival of significant portions of the population. For example, in her

research on sex workers in China, Yeon Jung Yu highlights the emergence of moral systems used by sex workers in Hainan Island to argue that, given the pressures put on young people to support their families, the value of sex work is largely underappreciated and misunderstood. In reflecting upon the “apparent contradictions” within the moral codes structuring the relationships between sex workers, she writes, “These are not really contradictions—they are sensible components of a morality that is specific to this community . . . the women I lived with were, on the contrary, highly concerned with upholding their moral code.”¹⁸ In this way, sex work provides these women with an essential social network that allows for more consistent income and more financial stability than can often otherwise be attained, both of which are of course essential in a capitalist world.

Additionally, in Nigeria, where sex work is also technically illegal, there has been in development a thriving sex work community that has also begun to organize to advance their rights. The Nigeria Sex Workers Association, colloquially known as the Precious Jewels, has as its mission: “to empower and strengthen the voices of sex workers, advocate for their health, social and human rights including those living with HIV and those using drugs, through collaborations, networking and partnerships.”¹⁹ Also, in 2019, a High Court in Nigeria ruled that sex work was not punishable by the law. Similarly, in Brazil, sex workers are organizing and making strides in demanding rights and protections, even at their own peril. The marginalization and criminalization sex workers face in Brazil have been exacerbated by the anti-LGBTQ practices and beliefs that circulate the national government, and the consequences have been devastating, with the murder of LGBTQ sex workers, especially trans sex workers, becoming, as in the United States, a regular occurrence. In preparation for the 2016 Trans Day of Visibility, it was reported by Transgender Europe that the murder rate for trans people in Brazil was the highest in the world, suggesting that what happens to sex workers is a reflection of the environment around sexuality at large.²⁰ Despite this, because of the status of poor non-Western women around the world, sex work in Brazil is similarly considered by sex workers as essential to survival and appealing given the lack of sufficient alternatives for securing income. In *The Conversation*, Amanda De Lisio and Michael Silk quote one woman involved in sex work in Brazil as describing her relationship with her peers as one of a “family,” and a family that helps make sure her own “real” family is cared for:

"I work today to give my children a better future, not to leave my daughter in public school. Healthcare is the same. I pay for education and health insurance otherwise my daughter would be without them."²¹ In each of these countries, sex work is both essential *and* remains a site of tremendous gender-, race-, and sexuality-based violence. That these sex education policies continue to erase the experiences of sex workers as part of the imagined community for which it claims to provide support and education mirrors the erasures that the United States depends upon in maintaining its own legitimacy as a system for sexual straightening. The absence of attention within sex education policies that claim to care about citizen's health and well-being to those most deserving of attention both reproduces the very erasure that the United States' own sex education policies have cultivated and creates and normalizes an illusion of care that might instead be understood as violence.

I want to be extremely clear about one thing, here, given the predominance of concerns about "exploitation" and trafficking that circulate educational spaces: my discussion of the experience of sex workers should *not* be understood as making a generalizable normative evaluation of sex work, nor am I making a claim that the violence facing sex workers is going to be addressed adequately or even inherently well by guidance from sex worker movements. I think it is all far more complicated than this, and there are many ways in which taking a firm stand on the moral nature of sex work would inevitably be a certain kind of neocolonial feminist argument itself in this case, given my own position as a cis-female White academic in the United States. The normative point I am making here is about the facade of concern put on by sex education policies, even comprehensive ones. If we care about our communities, this care must always include even the most marginalized, and this always includes sex workers; instead, sex education continues to marginalize sex work and sex workers to the point of erasure. This *is* its biopolitical purpose. Any concern for addressing violence must attend to this gap in consideration for who constitutes the "community." It says something about the nature of the violence that I am arguing is present within US federal sex education policy and reflected in other nations across the world, that, no matter how little it is funded, no matter how thoroughly it is critiqued, the erasures produced in the United States are produced through its dominance in defining what constitutes "good" sex education in other nations. Second, though, exploring federal sex education policies in this way suggests its role in globalization itself. It is not new to point

to the way US policies and practices do this in general, but it is new to see sex education as part of this phenomenon and to consider what this means for attempts to save or shift the very project of sex education itself. It matters that the discourses circulated in federal policy here shape discourses elsewhere and that, together, they sustain, if not everywhere then at least in many *somewheres*, the very forms of biopolitical violence that those concerned with aligning sex education with nonviolent purposes and aims claim to disavow.

Systemic Interconnectedness within the Global Capitalist Economy

Federal sex education policies also have an explicit interest in defending particular kinds of kinship formations and sexual relations. As was most developed in the previous chapter, the standard for normalcy, that is the nuclear family itself, normalizes punishing those who do not meet this standard. While the United States has a seeming “two steps forward, one step back” approach to expanding rights and protections to those who fail in this way, the “forward”-ness of the narrative around racialized sexuality and sexual relationships reveals the progress narrative embedded within this normalizing quality of sex education policy. The Progressive era’s commitment to the defense of American progress becomes, in more recent policies, a commitment to modeling this progress for the rest of the world. Contradictorily, forward progress, as defined in US policy, is interpreted as a call to “bring” progress elsewhere and to intervene where progress is being stunted. Jasbir Puar’s work, for example, details how the extension of rights to gay and lesbian subjects in the United States has resulted in “homonationalism,” an ideological investment asserting the normative value of being a “gay-friendly” nation as a legitimate justification for foreign intervention and violence. She writes, “[Homonationalism] is rather a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of projection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality.” This projection of its own progress onto foreign affairs creates a “narrative of progress for gay rights [that is] built on the back of racialized others, for whom such progress was once achieved, but is now backsliding or has yet to arrive.”²²

Further, Puar connects the stakes of this progress narrative to neoliberalism and its own ableist requirements by asking, “Which bodies are made to pay for

‘progress’? Which debilitated bodies can be reinvigorated for neoliberalism, and which cannot?”²³ This question, I think, may as well be understood as the quintessence of federal sex education’s violence: as demonstrated in many recent events, the cost of inclusion is allowing oneself to be judged on the basis of economic performance, and, too, being a citational reference for the need for foreign presence and violence. Puar points to the torture at Abu Ghraib in the 2000s as exemplifying this, but I would add that the continued presence and influence of the United States in the Middle East, the Philippines, and Central America is in each case at least partially justified by the seemingly unquestionable interest in “protecting” women (and children) and queer people from “dangerous” “regimes.” On this, even, or perhaps especially, when couched in language around feminism, M. Jacqui Alexander, among others, notes that Western feminism’s relationship to progressivism often causes a similar “paradoxical gesture of flattening out and assimilating difference on the one hand, while freezing and reifying it on the other” when it attempts to evaluate conditions of inequity and inequality by its own standards elsewhere.²⁴

The previous chapters also detailed the relationship between federal sex education policies in the United States and the criminalization of nonnormative subjects and experiences domestically. The quality and consequences of criminality assigned and honed by such policies to foreign subjects and experiences create a specific understanding of the internal “opponent” or “enemy” of the state and easily reduce those who appear as somehow foreign. On this, Mark Unger argues that the United States has a long history of casting LGBT individuals as “foreign agents,” and I believe this quality remains in place today.²⁵ Again, homonationalism relates foreign-ness to normative failure, thus situating domestic federal policies on sexuality as *expanding* the category of criminality it imposes on its own inhabitants to those beyond the traditional legal jurisdiction of the US state. Likewise, given the pervasive concern within the United States around mass incarceration and its relationship to race, gender, and sexuality, it is telling that these so-called criminals are assigned foreign-like traits by white, capitalist society; they lose citizenship rights, labor rights, human rights, and agency in general. The concept of the criminal as it is produced within the United States creates a blueprint for what is to happen to those who betray its norms, sexual, citizen, or otherwise, and thus, despite the performance of homonationalism, also points to the hypocrisy of that performance itself.

Even though the phrase “family first” is commonly used to further what is now overwhelmingly bipartisan (even when it claims to be partisan) interest in preserving the nuclear family, thinking about this narrative in relationship to subjectivity and the blurred lines between domestic and foreign policy aims sheds new light on the way federal sex education policies participate in the creation and maintenance of the conditions under which the United States can explain away its presence in almost every corner of the globe. In a recent guest editorial in *Political Geography*, Smith et al. (2019) offer a response to the Trump administration’s “zero-tolerance” policy of separating parents and children at the border between Mexico and the United States that has vital relevance to the issue of sex education policy. They argue that

one way through which the (white) US nation-state is territorialized is the mechanism of denying childhood and kinship to racialized peoples in the name of “protecting” the white family. Performative apathy and cruelty enacts the border onto racialized bodies, excluding migrant children and families from the nation, and sanctions violence by naturalizing their subordination in a racial hierarchy.

I argue, following this, that federal sex education policy can be read as part of the United States’ common practice of using the idealized, racialized, heteronormative family unit to reconstruct the boundaries of humanity maintained by the state today. These authors also argue that the denial of humanity as justified by the denial of kinship rights is connected to long-standing colonial practices of institutionalizing the right of the state to steal Native and Indigenous children from their own families. The denial of the legitimacy of slave’s own family units and debates around the adoption rights for LGBTQ+ families are also examples of this continued practice. If we align this point with the concern for “innocence” that plagues contemporary sex education policy, “family-first” narratives that employ a narrow definition of the family against other forms of kinship also participate in further laying the foundation for streamlining public discourse around national security and foreign threat with that which threatens the stability of the American family. The state’s own fantasy about the inherent moral virtue and natural authenticity of the family founds its own delusions about global superiority and righteousness. If family is first, but only if it looks like a typical American one, then the side effects or consequences of defending it are necessary and justifiable, no matter how violent.

Lastly, in each case, there is an important relationship to democratic governance that ought to be reflected upon. While it is not central to this project, democracy is nonetheless implicated in each of these maneuvers made by sex education in relation to the United States' foreign policy agendas. The "promotion," "spreading," "bringing," "gifting," and "defending" of democracy by the United States, and in other nations, has been a long-standing goal of the government. Though it has been the subject of critique by academics and politicians, among others, for just as long, the assumed and often uncritical status of democracy as the ideal form of governance has, over and over again, justified anti-democratic practices. On this point, Mark Ungar poignantly shares that the attempt to "democratize" the world has actually "left many non-democratic practices intact. Amidst continuing political uncertainty and economic change, one of the practices many new democracies are either unable or unwilling to alter is state violence."²⁶

Sex Work Industry

As with all other aspects of life on planet Earth, the nature of sex work has changed in the past century in ways that make its relationship to sex education different than I have argued it was in the early twentieth century. The implications of these changes are still emerging, and the meaning of them is always evolving, but those already doing the work of making sense of the current nature of sex work have convincingly challenged the stability of the category of sex work as reducible to prostitution and/or as inherently exploitative through their scholarly labor. As mentioned in the Introduction, the very definition of sex work has since been expanded largely as a result of the transformations caused by changes in technology, communication, and transportation that occurred in the twentieth century. As a result, scholars and activists generally understand sex work as a category of labor that includes the exchange of any and all kinds of pleasure and intimacy for any and all kinds of economic and/or material benefits.

In the United States alone, then, and in the same moment the federal government continues to invest in sex education programs that prioritize abstinence, monogamy, the family, and the resulting financial stability that is promised by the successful embodiment of these qualities, the industries around sex, sexuality, gender, and sex work, which cut across all races, classes, and

abilities, are thriving. Sex education therefore helps to uphold these industries by ignoring them, as doing so creates the conditions under which any sexual activity ignored or erased also becomes desirable, whether that is because it is made to be taboo, “exotic,” immoral, or merely illicit. Elizabeth Bernstein’s careful analysis of the global sex work industry details this phenomenon as it occurs at a global level. She defines the global sex work industry as “a brave new world of commercially available intimate encounters that are subjectively normalized for sex workers and clients alike,”²⁷ and a “broadly encompassing designation for all forms of sexual labor.”²⁸ As with the others, Bernstein highlights the privileging of prostitution as the ideal type of sex work as significant because it is one which allows for the playing out of moral disagreements most easily in public discourse.²⁹ However, prostitutes mark but one kind of work within this global force, and focus on prostitutes in particular hides the far reaching and powerful industry that is at work in the background of such activity:

By all accounts, the sex industry has far exceeded its prior bounds to become a multifaceted, multibillion dollar industry, produced by and itself producing developments in other sectors of the global economy, such as hotel chains, tourism, long-distance telephone carriers, cable companies, and information technology, and creating burgeoning profits from right- and left-wing entrepreneurs alike.³⁰

Any one of these industries could be explored more deeply in order to understand the relationship between the United States’ policies that are criminalizing sex work and its commitment to violence within and beyond its borders. However for the sake of this project, and because of its powerful presence, I want to briefly explore the emergence of sex tourism.

The emergence of a global sex work market within tourist industries is, once again, a product of the merger between settler colonialism, capitalism, and racialized patriarchy. Sex tourism, defined by Wonders and Michalowski, is “a protean term that attempts to capture varieties of leisure travel that have as a part of their purpose the purchase of sexual services.”³¹ Writing about the “significant contributor” to tourism, that is sex tourism, Ros Williams, following the path set out by Fanon, argues that sexual relationships between colonizers and the colonized, across borders and classes and races and ethnicities, are part of colonial logics.³² Williams shows that the global tourist industry has become dependent upon an “oppositional” relationship, inherent to colonialism, between the tourist and the “indigenous” population with

which that tourist seeks contact.³³ Kamala Kempadoo's work on sex work in the Caribbean, for instance, highlights how colonization has shaped sex work in those islands. Her own work identifies the way in which an economy around sex and sexuality developed alongside the colonialist "pursuit of riches," which situated access to bodies and sex as essential to the establishment of colonial power.³⁴ Williams explains how this presumption of access became a profitable source for the tourism industry, especially the typical white, heterosexual, wealthy North American or European subject,³⁵ and profitable for sex workers that fulfill some aspect of the colonial imaginary of that tourist.

The modern industry of sex tourism also has its roots in a moment all too familiar to this project: the world wars. In fact, in her work on the global sex tourism industry, Jillian Grouchy directly asserts that the contemporary industry may have been born in the same moment as I have argued federal sex education policy to have been developed, writing that during these wars, soldiers "needed places to relax and recreate after a long walk and trajectories in camps," creating new markets for bars and brothels.³⁶ The recognition of this demand as a market demand, regardless of its appeal to the federal government, seems to have set the stage for using sex work to market certain spaces and locations and similarly associating deviancy with relaxation and pleasure. Grouchy notes, too, that the motivation for sex workers across the world still revolves around the idea that it "keeps them out of the poverty line," and "they create a livelihood from the industry," a narrative that mirrors the same expressions by prostitutes in the early twentieth century in the United States.³⁷ Sex tourism reflects, then, the neoliberal state's understanding that this industry can be itself a source of economic gain; the centrality of sex work to an industry that is otherwise advertised as one of the only ways to find relaxation and happiness points to the state's willingness to capitalize from the very industry it so often criminalizes.

The existence of this industry, and its presence around the world, suggests that despite any formal attempt at *ending* sex work in and by the United States, it has, in fact, only continued to thrive. Though sex education in a select few other nations has certainly come to reflect the popularity and pervasiveness of sex work, including the necessity of advocating for sex workers and the need for their labor to be decriminalized as part of other movements for social equity and justice, the United States continues to legislate in ways that only cause *harm* to sex workers by using such politics to make biopolitical

determinations about acceptable ways of being. Most recently, this has been exemplified in the passing of the FOSTA-SESTA laws, which have quite successfully reduced all sex work to sex trafficking, further entrenching the industry and those who work in it in a discourse of theft, exploitation, and the decimation of innocence reminiscent of the “white slavery” discourse from over a century ago. The dissonance, both moral and cognitive, that the federal government continues to operate with is, therefore, telling in understanding its use of sex education as a tool for state violence.

In reflecting upon these tensions and contradictions and silences, it becomes evident that there is a way in which sex work and sex workers do as much, if not more, pedagogical work in our society than sex education. We learn from the way the United States and other nations handle sex work that the increasing visibility of those fighting to show the legitimacy of sex work and to defend sex workers’ right to exist can only be met with narratives about violence, disease, and shame. However, if we do not buy into this, we learn something about sex education, too; even in its more comprehensive forms, it remains disconnected from the lives of millions around the world and, for this reason, continues to do more work to erase these millions than it does to address violence. It is also important to consider what is taught to us about sexual subjectivity given the fact that this erasure seems to *maintain* the industry of sex work—it makes it more taboo, more enticing, more profitable, and more interesting. In this way, sex education helps make the very conditions of its existence necessary.

Illusive Erasures and Their Lessons

How do we reconcile these global patterns and practices alongside policies like the ones for sex education in which the United States continues to invest and reinvest? More than mere hypocrisy, there seems to be value for the state in maintaining this stark pedagogical discrepancy. That is, there are lessons to be learned in reflecting upon the presence of this dissonance.

First, the *nationalism*, or demand for national subject formation, inherent to federal sex education policy, erases the floundering nature of political land borders themselves within an ever-more-present *global capitalist structure*. In this erasure, or in maintaining strict boundaries between “here” and “there,” “us” and “them,” sex education ignores the extent to

which it is precisely sex and sexuality that have been central to the rise of capitalism, the emergence of neoliberalism, and the rise of global capitalism as arguably the most dominant political force at this moment in history. The United States' imperial desires also rest upon these discourses around sex and sexuality. However, a "truth" the emergence of this sex tourism industry reveals is that the possibility of empire is undermined by global capitalism; the tensions between nation building and capitalism are at play, then, in sex education, insofar as the refusal to admit to its deep, inextricable relationship to capitalism may lie in a fear of, or confusion around, the declining ability for any one nation to maintain distinct global authority and power.

Second, the demand for *sexual normativity* creates an industry around *deviancy* that is profitable to the very people who demand deviancy be eradicated. The example of marriage is useful here. While marriage is idealized in sex education, it is often precisely the instability of the institution that makes sex work so appealing to so many, from all perspectives. It is also telling that the difference between sex work and marriage is, on many accounts, not all that clear itself. Even federal sex education policies reveal this. Emma Goldman, Gayle Rubin, and many since them have also argued that marriage is fundamentally a form of economic exchange and labor; following this, sex education supports one form of sex work while demonizing another, a move that is almost invisible because of, and also further sustained by, the moralism implicit to its economic concerns. In noting this, I do not mean to flatten all sex work into one common experience, and it is also not the case that the issues surrounding sex work are the same across countries. What I do mean to do is to identify the industry of sex work as powerful in shaping sexual subjectivity, making the demands for sexual normativity posited in sex education policies across the world antithetical and even laughable to a growing number of people and their lives. Further, if sex education cannot talk about sex work, this dissonance is only likely to grow, which could either destabilize the narratives that attempt to legitimize sex education or force sex education to acknowledge what it has been trying to do all along: eradicate sex work. Or, it could do both.

Third, and perhaps most important, late capitalism and its desire to profit from every aspect of existence has its own imperial nature, and the federal public education system in the United States, along with all other public institutions, remains caught in a battle over the purpose of politics and government itself

that this creeping globalism causes: Is the role of government to protect *life* or to protect *profit*? This is an epistemological question just as much as it is a political or economic one. That is, at stake in this question is also a concern for how the ideas of “education,” “rationality,” “reason,” and “intelligence” will be defined, as are the very criteria upon which moral determinations will be made. The erasure of this tension within sex education policy serves as a reminder of the depths of this problem throughout all of education itself and gives us an answer to the question—can sex education policy reform resist state violence?—that motivated this project to begin with: almost certainly not.

It could be helpful to think about these erasures in terms of anxiety. For how long can these contradictions and erasures last, or for how long will the illusions they provide persist in the desired ways? Can neoliberalism successfully erase the presence of any kind of resistance to the naturalization of capitalist determinations of moral goodness? Or will the concept of education, somehow, become too antagonistic to its aims? And isn't this why sex education, and any real significant structural changes to it, is so terrifying to both the state and its subjects? Despite my critiques of contemporary sex education scholarship, one point from them rings true here: sexuality is what cannot be predicted and cannot be controlled; it cannot be detached from the sensuous desire for more, from what is exciting and life altering and impossible, and it certainly cannot be fully constrained by neoliberalism. To allow for sexuality in its fullness to exist in education is to invite in the biggest threat there is to education's own ability to exist itself: those whose existence is proof of its destructive nature. Doing this makes education vulnerable to its own undoing and reveals its complicity in the very biopolitical straightening that sex education makes possible. So, what do we do?

In closing this chapter, I want to add that there is a cruelty to always only chopping away at the worst of what we can see. And yet, somehow, like Sisyphus, we continue to push this bolder up the hill. And it is perhaps because, as Camus famously argues, Sisyphus's mythical representation often romanticizes the meaninglessness attached to this way of life, that we ourselves keep assuming that contentment can be found in the process. So long as love, of the other, of the family, of the country, remains the political North Star of sex education reform, the only hope we can have for the future is that it will be a place where more people can experience the love some have found in these idealized forms of kinship and reproduction.

This cruelty is reminiscent of what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism.” Berlant writes that objects of desire are really “clusters of promises” that only optimism about those promises can sustain.³⁸ But, when the promises are either destined to be broken, or if the optimism that is attached to those promises is “sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic,” the optimism is a cruel one.³⁹ She adds,

What’s cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might well not endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being; because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and look forward to being in the world.⁴⁰

In the next chapter, then, it is the cruelty of maintaining an optimism around the idea of sex education that is interrogated. It is the cruelty of remaining hopeful about an institution that refuses education for and about those who, in their own words, are “smart and curious,” who “like to learn about ourselves, our community, and the world around us,” that motivates the demand for something else.⁴¹