

# Fagchild Tools: Softening the Body Politic and Sexualizing Paul Ryan in a Pussy-Grabbing Era

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This article cautions against the strong impulse in the #MeToo movement to desexualize politics. Informed by queer theory, the article argues that the public desexualization imperative, represented by indignation toward President Donald Trump’s pussy-grabbing antics and the concomitant, albeit justified, movement to expose decades of his sexual harassment of women, casts a shadow across queer citizens that chills sexual expression in democratic discourse and public life. The public desexualization imperative presents a double bind that creates, on one hand, public spaces that are less threatening and discriminatory to women and, on the other, public spaces that — from a queer white cisgender man’s perspective, one whose only “marking” is his sexuality — erase queers’ valued differences. The author uses personal narrative to describe and apply tools (conceptualized as fagchild tools) that help navigate tensions between women’s equality movements and queer efforts to gain fuller, more open sexual citizenship. The article focuses, first, on softening the body politic (implicitly a white cisgender heterosexual male body) to provide sociopolitical space for sexual pluralism. Second, the article uses the sexualization of House Speaker Paul Ryan to argue that making space for queer sexualities may require accommodating the expression of nonqueer sexualities, including those that most of us find offensive.

**Keywords:** Fagchild, queer theory, sexual citizenship, #MeToo, queer sensibilities, Paul Ryan, softening, LGBTQ politics, public desexualization

**T**his article is a cautionary tale about the strong impulse in the #MeToo movement to desexualize politics. Informed by queer theory, the article argues that the public desexualization imperative, represented by indignation toward President Donald Trump’s pussy-grabbing antics and the concomitant, albeit justified, movement to expose decades of his

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sexual harassment of women, casts a shadow across queer citizens that chills sexual expression in democratic discourse and public life. The public desexualization imperative presents a double bind in which it creates, on one hand, public spaces that are less threatening and discriminatory to women and, on the other, public spaces that — from a queer white cisgender man’s perspective, one whose only “marking” is his sexuality — erase queers’ valued differences. The author uses personal narrative to describe and apply tools (conceptualized as fagchild tools) that help navigate tensions between women’s equality movements and queer efforts to gain fuller, more open sexual citizenship. The article focuses, first, on softening the body politic (implicitly a white cisgender heterosexual male body) to provide sociopolitical space for sexual pluralism. Second, the article uses the sexualization of House Speaker Paul Ryan to argue that making space for queer sexualities may require accommodating the expression of nonqueer sexualities, including those that most of us find offensive.

## TRUMP’S PUSSY-GRABBING ANTICS

During the 2016 presidential campaign, the *Washington Post* released a 2005 recording of Donald Trump exiting a bus just before being greeted by an actress on the soap opera on which he was making a cameo appearance. He says to a fellow television personality,

I better use some Tic Tacs just in case I start kissing her. You know I’m automatically attracted to beautiful — I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab ’em by the pussy. You can do anything.

In response, an indignant left invoked the “emblem of the child” (Edelman 2004) to try to throw Trump under the bus. Outraged at having to explain to children what a pussy is and what it means to grab one, the body politic invoked the protection of children to avoid talking openly about sexual politics, scarcely acknowledging that children get hang-ups about sex when adults construct hang-ups about sex. As a parent of a seven-year-old, I am confident we can explain to children ideas of bodily respect. Indignation surrounding children’s concerns, however, are not the central concern here. Indignation may have been warranted over the tone Trump set for how women are treated as sexual objects, but, to his credit, Trump forthrightly acknowledged his mistake: “I said it, I was wrong, and I apologize” (Johnson 2016). Whether one considers his

apology sincere is a political matter, but his sincerity is irrelevant to my joy over “pussy-grabbing” having entered the political discourse. To wit, his comments empowered the #MeToo movement, the impact of which is still unfolding. The downside, of course, is that Trump’s chauvinism, masculinity, and patriarchy did not prevent him from being elected. I was as angry as anyone because of the election results, so I find myself in a precarious position defending his speech.

Trump’s supporters dismissed his comments as locker room talk, but in fairness, I have heard similar comments in locker rooms. I have made similar comments. What pleases me is that these pussy-grabbing antics entered public discourse so we can openly scrutinize and debate them rather than pretend they do not exist. Against the backdrop of the public desexualization imperative, which makes it taboo to express sexuality in workplaces and democratic discourse, I argue that we should talk more about sex, not less. This view is informed by queer sensibilities and other fagchild tools.

## QUEER SENSIBILITIES AND OTHER FAGCHILD TOOLS

Queer theories can help oppressed citizens participate more fully in democratic life by identifying ways of coping with and transforming oppressive sexual technologies. I conceptualize queer theory not as a monolithic theory derived from a set of formal propositions but as sensibilities aligned with an ideological commitment to transgressing sociosexual norms and constructing sex and sexuality in places we are told they do not, should not, and cannot exist. Queer is a method that allows us to see and reconfigure anti-queer technologies operating ubiquitously throughout society so that queering, in one of its forms, disorients distinctions between sexual and nonsexual. Queer connotes a sensibility of the type Susan Sontag describes: “almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea” (1982, 106). Operating as a method and an ideology, queer sensibilities have overlapping edges with queer adaptations, where citizens invoke prior and present transgressive sociosexual touch points — contexts, affects, performances, politics, technologies, fantasies, fears, aesthetics, and literary works, among others — to imagine and reify possibilities in their personal lives as well as in democratic life. The tools that queers use to navigate

sexually pluralistic societies are also pluralistic. That is, there is no single, universal tool that can or should be used in all circumstances. Drawing upon personal experiences, I conceptualize these tools as fagchild tools.

A “fagchild” is a boy child whose sexuality is conflated with his effeminacy, a child called faggot on the school bus, a bullied child who does not fight back. Metaphorically, a fagchild stays near mothers, grandmothers, and sisters, often in the house where he learns to macramé plant hangers, curl hair, and sew Barbie clothes. A fagchild plays bookishly and artistically to earn accolades because sports gets him beaten up and crying on the shoulders of women. Surrounded by women, he mimics effeminacy. The more effeminacy he performs, the more people treat him like a faggot. The more people treat him like a faggot, the more effeminate he acts. The faggotry-effeminacy cycle replicates and self-reinforces. The fagchild knows he is different because he has a queer sexuality and a queer gender before he understands either sexuality or gender, much less their connotations, severabilities, and constructions. When he stares at heartthrobs in his sister’s *Teen Beat* magazine, his heart is not the only thing that throbs. When he meticulously folds a foil gum wrapper to make a shiny clutch for Barbie, he knows it is fabulous even if he cannot share it with anyone. The more faggotry he performs, the more he believes he is and always has been a faggot. At eight years old, already he has tools.

Fagchild tools are technologies, strategies, behaviors, political stances, affects, and materialities that help queers survive, navigate, reshape, and flourish in oppressive sexual cultures. Elsewhere I characterize queer sensibilities, outspeech, and anger as fagchild tools (Thomas 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). These tools are like sexualities, queer theories, and feminisms — always contextual, contingent, and relational. A fagchild uses many tools to adapt to and challenge sociosexual politics, including maleness, brownness (or whiteness or blackness), education, speech, money, penis, ability to conceal queerness, or ability to charm and seek protection from the women whose thinning gray hair he washes. He is always an actor, performer, and multicultural sexual being moving fluidly through queer and nonqueer spaces, always cruising for safety, alliances, pleasure, and ego. He cruises to make known his presence because his nakedness — at once a vulnerable body and a threatening one with a penis — exposes the limits of knowledge that many of us hold dear. He makes his presence known because sameness (frequently operating through equality lenses) is shopworn and constraining, and queerness is fresh and edgy. He writes because queer theory is as hot as

Paul Ryan and because the public desexualization imperative prohibits him from saying that Paul Ryan is hot, which is, in part, why he says it. But I am getting ahead of myself.

In order to place queer perspectives alongside the #MeToo movement, I offer a brief historical perspective of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) politics to remind us of queer issues not fully resolved. In his essay “The Politics of Silence” (1994), writer, poet, and AIDS activist Paul Monette encourages queers to tell our stories again and again to combat the erasure of queer histories through the forgetting and reimagining of them. I discuss briefly here the failed response to the AIDS crisis and the “success” of the marriage equality movement, both of which required queer citizens to conform to heteronormativity at the expense of sexual difference.

Anger guides my argument that certain queernesses and queer theories were being left behind in marriage equality discourses: same-sex marriage amounts to assimilation to heteronormativity (Thomas 2017b). In 2015, when the U.S. Supreme Court in *Obergefell v. Hodges* struck down as unconstitutional state laws prohibiting same-sex marriage, conservative queers celebrated at pride festivals and conservative nonqueers damned the decision, both as if heteronormativity and its machineries had not forced same-sex couples down this path. Celebrations and damnations occurred as if heteronormative legal systems had not declined to recognize relationships between men already dead from AIDS-related complications and their surviving companions, many of whom were also dying. Courts allowed parents and blood kin of the deceased to take control over gay men’s dead bodies, possessions, and apartments (Chauncey 2004). Celebrations and damnations occurred as if courts had not torn kids away from parents simply because mothers were not labeled birth mothers, first mothers, or real mothers. After *mama* was out of the picture because of death, separation, or incapacitation, legal systems placed her kids with grandparents and blood kin rather than allowing them to remain with *mommy*, who they had known since birth (Chauncey 2004). Eager to gain equality in society, homonormative queers willingly assimilated to the marriage model, which admittedly comes with considerable benefits. The power structures and narratives contorted so that conservative heteronormativists indignantly claimed “no queers allowed,” and homonormativists groveled for equal access. All the while, the burden of assimilation, as always, rests upon outsiders who want to be inside. Still, anger was no match against the colossal power of heteronormativity: its quintessential tool — marriage — prevailed.

The purpose is not to rehash the failed response to the AIDS crisis or the marriage debate but to situate contemporary sexual and gender politics as a time and place where anger continues to inform queer thinking. Anger is a familiar tool but admittedly not the best tool in all circumstances. I ranted, to no avail, at homonormativists who use marriage and other twigs in heteronormativity's faggot — monogamy, breeding, parenting, coupling, sexual privacy — to fuel mainstream gay and lesbian social movements at the expense of other queerness (Thomas 2017b). Homonormativists put marriage atop the agenda “while mean kids bully the fagchild because their fathers bully, terrorize, beat, and murder mothers, queers, and kids . . . while we pretend we are not vulnerable, that we will not die, and, disembodied, we will live forever in a future that never comes” (Thomas 2017b, 409). While homonormative queers drank the marriage Kool-Aid, the queerest of us swallowed the bitter, jagged marriage pill.<sup>1</sup> Just as I was softening on marriage — when I decided I could not change it and shifted focus toward violence and bullying — the United States elected a pussy-grabbing bully as its literal (and symbolic) head of state. The Trump pill — like the Reagan-era death pill for AIDS victims and the *Obergefell* Court's marriage pill — leaves a chalky, tearing sensation in the back of my throat.

The performance of the angry fagchild is not complete. I have many more reasons to be angry. I am angry with Trump for his puffery, false statements, and lies, but I am angrier with the people who voted for him, including white women (Junn 2017). I am angry at social science disciplines that produced scant few, if any, scholars who predicted his election and none who prevented it. I am angry with myself because I teach political science in Wisconsin, a swing state where votes most mattered. In my ivory tower, I rested upon the assumptions that patriarchy was diminishing and that matriarchy and queer sensibilities were on the rise. I am angry for being duped into believing love trumps hate and for believing political moderates would not elect a pussy-grabbing, money-grubbing, racist, Islamophobic, showboating, cocksure bully who titillates with nostalgia promising to make America great again. I am angry because I was wrong.

In the months after the election, my political efficacy took a big hit. I watched the slow unfolding of the investigation into Russian interference with the election and possible collusion with the Trump

1. In full disclosure, the author is a cis man married to a cis man. The benefits of marriage are enormous.

campaign.<sup>2</sup> Each day, it seemed, more information dripped out of Washington. I waited for evidence revealing collusion, so I would not have to acknowledge the legitimacy of Trump's election. More than ever, I believed, "When the status quo plays its trump card — if not this, what? — I enter the sexual citizenship discourse feeling like a one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest" (Thomas 2017b, 409–10).<sup>3</sup> My mental, physical, and emotional health eroded. The more I watched, the more I hated Trump and his supporters. Watching women march in hand-knitted pussy hats was a temporary anesthetic, but the marches did not soften his bluster or my hate. For personal well-being, I stopped watching the news.

I could become a bitter, jaded, hardened queen. Much of my anger and rage stems from being forced to hide my queerness and from fears of backlash and violence. During the AIDS crisis, I developed a keen sense of rage watching gay men die while the Reagan administration did nothing. Today, my anger and rage are based upon the normalization of Trump's verbal assaults on women, LGBTQs, blacks, browns, and Muslims, among others. My anger and rage are based upon the normalization of bullying, murdering, and mass shootings. In 2015, I railed against the massacre of nine black citizens in a church in Charleston, South Carolina. In 2016, I wept at a candlelight vigil for 49 queers massacred during Latin night at a dance club in Orlando, Florida. I knew then that if the mass slaughter of children in a Sandy Hook school made no difference, the slaughter of black and Latino queers would also fade in the body politic's memory. In response to the Orlando massacre, Evan Pensis (2016) locates rage alongside other methods of surviving hegemonic masculinity, which continually commits violent acts against queers, especially queer people of color.

This rage ricochets against all the ways of surviving that us queers and femmes and trans folks assemble in order to brace the daily task of living, of getting home safely or of escaping home safely. It grates against all the behavioral mediations and affective labors we devise in order to appear less gay, less faggy, less queer, less femme, more hetero, more passable or more normal in order to not offend or affront the national fantasy of (cis-)heteronormativity. I feel rage because this shooting does not stand

2. For a timeline of events related to the Russia investigation, see NBC News, "Russia Timeline: Key Players, Meetings and Investigation Details," January 25, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/first-read/russia-timeline-key-players-meetings-investigation-details-n840786> (accessed August 16, 2018).

3. Although my seven-year-old child and I recently read about Emmanuel Ofose Yeboah, a one-legged man from Ghana who rode a bicycle across his country and inspired nations, my sense of political efficacy substantially diminished after the election.

out as an anomaly to daily life for queer people, especially queer people of color ... it is a horrific and familiar continuity of homophobia and discrimination that bedrocks hegemonic masculinity in the United States. I brim with rage because the methods of public integration and inclusivity, both individual and collective, seem futile and aimless in light of this act of genocide. ... We must listen to this queer rage. We must let this powerful surge of fugitive faggotry guide us to seek out new forms of living and loving in our worlds, where being out will not jeopardize being alive — because forty-nine deaths are no more or less important than the murder of one when you fiercely love them all.

I know rage similar to what Pensis describes. My earliest fagchild tools were behaviors and affects that helped me appear less gay, less faggy, less queer, less femme, more hetero, more passable, and more normal. Later, I became angry at being forced to assimilate and hide my queerness and at watching social complicity and moral indignation murder gay men with AIDS, hate-filled murders of trans people of color, suicides of queer teens, and mass shootings in should-be-safe spaces — dance clubs, schools, and churches. My anger is nearly always rage. More and more, I use tools that help me appear gayer, faggier, and queerer, and less hetero, passable, and normal. Sometimes these tools involve in-your-face politics reminiscent of AIDS queers who refused to be silent and invisible.

AIDS activist and writer Larry Kramer counsels that we do not get more with honey than vinegar. I believe this is sometimes true, especially since one of my greatest fagchild challenges has been the perceived inability to defend myself. I have nearly 50 years' worth of internal conflicts squaring my pacifism with tropes of the limp-wristed fairy. I want to harden my position against Trump and his supporters, to shame them and knock them the fuck out of the way. But shaming, hardening, beating, knocking, and other forms of bullying and violence are, to borrow Audre Lorde's (1984) phrase, the "master's tools." I sense Kramer is correct in saying, "Anger is a wonderful emotion, very creative, if you know how to do it." Too, I want to heed Paul Monette's advice: "Go without hate, but not without rage. Heal the world." I am still figuring out how to use anger creatively and how hate and rage are separable, if they are.

A friend and role model, Kenneth Sherrill, professor emeritus at Hunter College in New York City and a pioneer in LGBTQ political science, once told me that Kramer is a gentle, soft-spoken person, unlike the angry ACT-UP activist I envision. Sherrill is also gentle, but his words, like Kramer's words and Monette's words, are honed tools that cut through political



malarkey. These queer men — white, elite, cisgender, educated — are not bitter queens. I do not want to be a bitter queen, so I write.

Writing this article helped me let go of the hate I felt for people who voted for Trump. In the early hours of the morning watching election returns (after I gave up hope that Hillary Clinton could win), I posted on social media, “I give up. Love does not trump hate.” In the months since the election, I decided it was in my best interest not to harbor hate. I do not want to hate, alienate, or shame Trump supporters because these master’s tools have been wielded against me. Instead, I fantasize that his supporters will acknowledge their ballot mistakes. Notwithstanding the power of shame, the chances of Trump voters apologizing increase if I stop flinging hate at them. The chances of reconciliation increase if I create space for them to acknowledge mistakes, rather than lambast them with I-told-you-so messages. I cannot change the election results, but alienating those who voted for Trump increases the likelihood they will dig in their heels and vote for him again. I consider softening. Softening will not stop me from criticizing Presidential buffoonery, but it might help me be less bitter and jaded. And it might create space for oppressors like Paul Ryan to get into bed with me.

## SOFTENING THE BODY POLITIC

Softening is about connecting with others, not through liberal equality that demands assimilation but through uncensored, unguarded — softened — connections in which citizens listen and are heard. Because I am a pacifist, softening does not align with the adage “walk softly and carry a big stick.” Instead, it means walk softly and carry an enormous toolbox full of sex-stained tools. When a fagchild unpacks his tools, people tend to step back, unsure if they will get soiled from being too close to messy sex. We avoid talking about sex beyond parody and innuendo, but sexual citizens, I have observed, are curious enough to watch from a distance. All sex-stained tools do not require anger and rage to connect with others. Sometimes the fagchild penetrates the body politic, the phallic body, by whispering into its ear, “Paul Ryan is wicked sexy hot.” People listen, and the fagchild knows he has “infected the body politic” with the “virus of irreverent democracy” (Phelan 2001, 132).

Softening means being less anxious about how people might judge my queer presence, which means no longer self-censoring sexual expression, knowing that chilled speech and cautious restraint favor the status quo.

Softening occurs when we listen to others' stories and share our own. Using queer autoethnography and storytelling, Jamie Heckert describes softening that occurs between research subjects and objects:

The most interesting stories were not born of a purely instrumental logic — they came from moments of connection. By this I mean those moments where I am able to set aside identities and ideologies, those forms of psychic armour that constrain as they protect. I grow softer, listening with empathy to stories from another person's world. And they grow softer in the telling, knowing that they are being heard, knowing that they need not defend themselves because there is no attack, no critique. (2010, 52–53)

The strength of these methods is setting aside objectivities and detachments we have been told must exist in law and social science. Storytelling and autoethnography invoke softening because they involve connection and attachment, not disconnection and detachment. These methods blur the lines between method and message, so that the stories we hear and tell are easier to listen to. President Barack Obama is right when he advocates listening to understand rather than listening to respond.

Softening the body politic may mean feminizing the body politic. Critics of the “feminization” or “softening” of the body politic are, as Shane Phelan (2001) notes, ones who hold fast to the phallic citizen as the model sexual citizen. Phelan suggests the “model” sexual citizen is associated with the implicitly white masculine (but not too masculine) body, because the hypermasculine body, such as the slave or his sons, threatens other men's masculinities and represents not enough time reflecting in the armchair (2001, 156–57). Softening the body politic threatens the phallic body, which historically has been a masculine body predicated on a penetrability it must always disavow (Kemp 2013). Phelan writes,

The trope of the body politic works powerfully to transform contests within society into attacks on society. Stigmatized groups may become threats to “the public health” and the “moral fiber of the nation,” imagined agents of disintegration. These threats are threats to the phallic status of the public body: the body politic is threatened by “becoming soft,” by being “susceptible,” “docile,” “passive,” “infected” — in short, by being either penetrated or vulnerable to penetration. (2001, 60; internal citations omitted)

Softening has a sexual dimension. The fagchild is a threat because he can objectify and penetrate phallic subjects. The fagchild has seen phallic citizens in vulnerable moments, as when they are naked in locker

rooms, soapy and wet. In these moments, phallic citizens react to hard queers, not only hypermasculine hard-bodied gym bunnies who spend more time on the weight bench than in the armchair but also the feminized fagchild unable to conceal his erection stimulated by sexually objectifying the phallic citizen. Confronted with hardness, they do what most animals do — freeze, fight, or flee — seldom realizing that humans have more than these three tools. We can soften — reason, listen, engage, and interact with other subjects — without perceiving the unfamiliar or the sexual as threat. Softening involves acknowledging that we are all vulnerable and that our vulnerabilities need not invite harassment or violence. Softening may mean convincing phallic citizens that we will not leave them behind the same way they have left others behind. Perhaps the phallic citizen too will soften.

### **PUBLIC DESEXUALIZATION IMPERATIVE AND SEXUALLY OBJECTIFYING PAUL RYAN**

The public desexualization imperative is a heteronormative tool that operates by relegating sex and sexuality to private spaces and concomitantly erasing queerness by setting heterosexuality as the unmarked default. Heteronormativity thrives when sexuality is erased from public spaces because it allows heteronormativity to perpetuate its false homogeneity. It becomes the burden of the invisible queer erasure or push boundaries to make, here, *his* presence known. Sexualizing Paul Ryan helps illustrate.

In 2012, vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan posed for *Time* magazine as a gym bunny, flexing his muscles on a weight bench and wearing his ball cap backward like a phat frat punk (Luscombe 2012). This publicity stunt positioned him as a sex object in political discourse, so I have little concern making known my politico-sexual proclivities. I am attracted to his dark facial hair, chest hair, and the treasure trail leading my wanton eye from his navel into his swim trunks, all indicators that he has dark, thick pubic hair (unless he manscapes). (For visual aids, search the internet for “Paul Ryan beard” and “Paul Ryan shirtless.”) Some will consider sexually objectifying Ryan distasteful or unprofessional, but my speech is my virility, my tool to construct sex in places I have been told sex does not and cannot exist. Overtly sexualizing Ryan is a political expression showing that trichophilia and voyeurism transcend partisan and gender politics. It is a fagchild tool showing, in part, that I can, at once, loathe

Ryan's conservative policies and lust after his body. Unabashedly, I want to grab his hairy crotch.

Consider my sexualization of Ryan alongside Trump's sexualization of women. The analogy is imprecise on a number of accounts: I am not running for president and being held to a higher (problematic) standard of desexualization; I am not a celebrity; I do not like kissing on the mouth. The obvious difference is the sex and gender of our object choices. Less obvious is incongruity between the amicable, accommodating reactions I received from friends and colleagues (mostly leftists) when I describe my sexual desires for Ryan and the damning reactions Trump received when his private comments were made public. When I confess that the only thing I desire about Ryan is his body (not his policies), it seems okay in contemporary sexual politics to objectify a model phallic citizen in order to give him a taste of what women have long experienced. It may be that if Americans hell-bent on equality provide political space for queer men to express desires to grab men's crotches, we might have to provide space for other citizens to express desires to grab women's crotches. Expressing a desire to grab is different from actually grabbing. Too, making space for people to express sexual desires does not mean we must vote for pussy grabbers.

I suspect many citizens would prefer that neither Trump nor I speak openly about our sexual desires, but this would not be the first time I have been encouraged to keep quiet. I am not a woman who has been oppressed by sexual objectification. I am a queer whose public erasure inflicts violence to my personhood by requiring me to compartmentalize sexuality. I must sever my public and private lives, so I can never fully bring my queer self into democratic spaces and enjoy full sexual citizenship. If the #MeToo movement continues on its current trajectory — toeing the line of public desexualization in furtherance of economic and political equality — queers risk functioning as second-class citizens as we are expected to check our sexualities at the door when we enter public spaces. Always, we will be only partially present. Making our sexualities known will continue to threaten the body politic in ways characterized as a hostile work environment. Outspeech is a fagchild tool that helps me appear faggier, a tool he will not be denied because the fagchild has had enough bullying and beatings for not hiding his sexuality.

Queer men are conditioned to deny objectifying straight men in order to temper threats to straight men's masculinities. When queers are in a locker room with, say, Paul Ryan, social norms dictate we not look at his body or admit sexual arousal. Popycock! If I am ever in the same locker room with

Ryan, I will stand next to him in the shower and give him a visual once-over (or twice-over). Speaking in a soft, faggy whisper so he must lean closer to hear, I will discursively penetrate his ear (the only bodily orifice that is always penetrated and never expels anything) and say in biblical parody: “Never fear, friend. I bring only fascinations for us both, fascinations of the strange and unfamiliar. Be not afraid to tell me why, Mr. Speaker, there is only one black person among hundreds of white persons in the selfie you took with Congressional interns.<sup>4</sup> Verily I want to hear the Speaker speak.” In my fantasy, he leans away, defends his political views, and soaps his tool. I watch (side-eyed) and rub my own soapy body.

Apart from my conditioned attractions to Ryan’s body (that is, apart from my arousal looking at him), I sexualize Ryan as the model phallic citizen because sex is about power. If I imagine sexual encounters with Ryan, I am aware of the power I allow him to have over me and the power I have over myself. This dynamic reveals that I can be, at once, penetrator and penetrated, oppressor and oppressed, festering and healing, thriving and dying. Moreover, I view sexual objectivity like air — omnipresent but largely invisible to undiscerning eyes. We breathe it, feel it, and sense it; but we are not allowed to admit it or talk about it. Sexually objectifying the Speaker and treating him like a piece of white meat reminds him that when he poses for a magazine, pumping weights in the gym and wearing a phat frat hat, he opens himself not only to women’s lust but also to queer sexual fantasies. My outspeech is a reminder that the women subjected to Trump’s pussy-grabbing antics are not the only people vulnerable to grabbing.

The double bind presented by the public desexualization imperative is the tensions it creates between women’s liberation and queers’ liberation, notwithstanding that the two categories overlap. Through a pragmatic feminist lens, Margaret Jane Radin (1990) counsels resolving double binds by choosing solutions that move us incrementally closer to our desired position or eliminating the system that created the double bind in the first place. Patriarchy is the system that needs to be eliminated. Until then, it is worth considering the desired position, closer to which we want to move. My desired position is a celebration of sexual pluralism so that queers can enjoy sexual citizenship fully, both formally and informally. Public desexualization works against this goal. The better

4. “Paul Ryan’s ‘White’ Selfie with Interns Shows Lack of Diversity in Washington,” *The Guardian*, July 18, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/18/paul-ryan-intern-selfie-capitol-hill-diversity> (accessed August 16, 2018).

solution is to create space for public sexuality. Doing so allows us to disempower sexualities that cause substantial harm to others beyond mere insult, while empowering less harmful (if still offensive) sexualities. Social tolerances mirroring the bedrock principle of the First Amendment is the starting point. In *Texas v. Johnson*, the flag-burning case, the U.S. Supreme Court made clear that the bedrock principle is that “government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds it offensive or disagreeable.”<sup>5</sup> Rather than censoring offensive speech, the Supreme Court counsels, we should confront it with more speech. A speech-based solution empowers citizens, encouraging them to speak up earlier and often, compared with public and private policies that leave little or no room for sexual expression or empowered conversations in which offending citizens have no opportunity to admit mistakes or apologize. A personal example illustrates.

Early in my academic career, a student (a cisgender woman) complained to the university (not legally) that I had sexually harassed her when I hugged her at a bus station. Prior to the hug, I was aware that the student had experienced sexual abuse from men in the past, so I had undertaken to mentor her, not only in her studies but also in her relationships with men. Perhaps a gay man could be a welcomed (sexually nonthreatening) role model. I believed it was commonly known I was gay, even if I never said as much. It never occurred to me that she would construe my hug as sexual. Nothing came of the complaint. In the words of a university administrator, it is hard to make a case for sexual harassment based on one hug. Still, the administration and my close friends advised me not to talk with the student, believing that nothing good would come from it. I reminded the administration that I was gay, but they reminded me that while my sexuality was relevant, it did not set aside dispositively the possibility that the student was sexually harassed. The administration was correct, of course, to look after the student’s interests in order to offset power imbalances. Reluctantly, I followed the advice and since have not spoken to the student. What I find most bothersome is that I can understand how this student construed my hug as sexual and harassing, but extant political and legal cultures did not provide space for me to apologize. I believe I wronged the student, but I also believe we could have worked past the blunder had we the opportunity to speak with one another. Instead,

5. *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397 (1989), 414.

sexual harassment policies shut down my speech. And it took me several years to emerge out of the pall into the light. I still hug students (mostly women, because my queerness is more threatening to men), but I redouble efforts to make known my sexuality and to ask individual students if I may hug them before I do it. In five of the last seven years, political science students selected me as professor of the year. I sense that hugging and talking openly about sexuality contributed to their making space for me and honoring my work. Yet I (a boundary-pushing queer) self-censor because I cannot truly know when I have crossed a line until it has already happened. Often, risks to my livelihood chill my speech.

Beyond increasing speech and interpersonal communication to manage sexual expression, we should actively work to desensitize the body politic to strangeness, queerness, and other sexual oddities, which, once known, do not appear so odd. This is an argument for queer normalization, despite theoretical cautions against it. In one of her early writings, Judith Butler claims that “normalizing the queer would be, after all, its sad finish” (1994, 21). Against logics arguing that if everyone is queer, no one is queer, I choose death by queer normalization over death by suffocation in a closet constructed by the public desexualization imperative. The normalization of sexual pluralism lends itself to fuller sexual citizenship only if we construct space for the tolerance, if not celebration of, the queerest sexualities. As an ostracized queer who has engaged in sexual practices many people would judge worse than Trump’s practices — orgies, anonymous public sex, chemsex, anal sex, voyeurism and exhibitionism in baths, restrooms, and locker rooms, to name a few — I want to provide space in political discourse for people to express desires to engage in unorthodox sexual activities. The queer normalization I seek is not assimilation to heteronormativity that further empowers the empowered, but the normalization of sexual pluralism where, at a minimum, citizens are free to bring queer and nonqueer sexualities into public spaces, even if these sexualities offend certain others.

I proceed cautiously in this argument understanding that sex and sexualities have been used to oppress women for far too long. What I hope to offer here is a perspective that asks us to consider the unintended consequences of the #MeToo movement’s impulse to desexualize politics: the chilling effect on queers whose mere presence — a sexual presence — may be viewed as threat.

## CONCLUSION

Fagchild tools can help us unravel tensions between queer theory's impulse to bring sexuality more fully into public life and certain feminist impulses to desexualize politics. There are many fagchild tools that may be helpful in resolving double binds in sexual citizenship, including the ones emphasized here: queer sensibilities, anger and rage, softening the body politic, outspeech, and sexually objectifying Paul Ryan. Every time a fagchild, transchild, straight-white-supremacistchild, queerchild, blackchild, girlchild, manchild, or womanchild is bullied, I remind myself that faggotry, masculinity, gender, sexuality, and race are all embodied political expressions. I want to construct space where the unsayable can be said, if I myself expect to be heard. This means sometimes I must listen even when what I most want is some people to shut the fuck up.

My queer experiences are laden with wrongs inflicted upon me by society and individuals. From the failed AIDS crisis to pressures to conform to heteronormativity to being forced to accept the legitimacy of the election of a sexist president. I have reason to be angry, but I am softening because I do not want to become a bitter, hardened queen. Softening, for me, involves creating space for both sexual expression and making mistakes. I am optimistic that we can find ways elevate women's sexual equality without sacrificing queers' sexual liberty.

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