

Source: Walter L. Williams unpublished review of *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival* edited by Natalie West with Tina Horn (Feminist Press, 2021) and *The Echoing Ida Collection* edited by Kemi Alabi, Janna Zinzi and Cynthia Greenlee (Feminist Press, 2021).

When I was a teenager in the Deep South in the 1960s, the favored term of insult among white Southerners was to call a white person “a nigger lover.” When I was a young adult in the 1970s, as the civil rights movement confronted bigots with charges of racism, sexuality had replaced race as the favored insult, with “cocksucker” being the most benign term. But by the 1990s the gains of the gay rights movement challenged bigots on their heterosexism, and as oral sex lost its stigma, bigots had to search for another insult of choice.

As gay rights and feminism both became more mainstream, both groups sought to position themselves within the confines of social acceptability by condemning transgender people. Feminists like Janice Raymond, in her book *The Transsexual Empire*, lobbed a broadside squarely against trans people. However, within a few years a budding transgender liberation movement, aided by butch lesbians and fem gay males, and building upon the gains of both the feminist and gay rights movements, mounted a wholesale counterattack against both cisgender gay men and feminists. The effectiveness of this counterattack shamed both feminists and gay men into re-thinking their dismissals. In one of the most astounding reversals of recent American social history, feminists roundly rejected Raymond’s condemnatory stance. In the early 21st century, feminists have become one of the strongest defenders of trans and nonbinary people.

One of the more unsavory aspects of social change is the tendency of stigmatized minorities to gain mainstream acceptance by condemning another group that is seen as being even more despised. In the 19th century, one route employed by Irish and other European immigrant groups was to adopt anti-black racism in identifying themselves along with Anglo Americans as “white.” After World War II Eastern

Europeans, who had experienced severe discrimination in pre-war decades, positioned themselves as “anti-communists” and “100% Americans” during the McCarthy era. Some of the fiercest resistance to black power came from these “white ethnics” who emphasized their whiteness.

Given this tendency it is, thus, regrettably not surprising that gay men and feminists would attempt a similar ploy in turning against those persons involved in intergenerational relationships. By the early 1960s the gay rights movement rejected the dominant term used in the 1950s Homophile Movement because of its similarity to the term “pedophile” which was the prime word used by reactionary bigots who opposed everything related to same-sex love. Even the term “Gay Liberation,” inspired by the radical liberation movements of the late 1960s, was replaced by the less confrontational “Gay Rights” term.

A dominant theme of American conservatism, from the witchcraft craze of colonial Massachusetts to the “Save Our Children” campaigns of the late 20th century, is the need to mount an attack against an evil “other” category that is despised and rejected. Though the subjects of such attacks differ, depending upon the strength of the stigmatized group in fighting back, there always remains a despised category.

One of the themes of anti-sexualism in American life is the attack on any form of erotic pleasure that is not directly associated with biological reproduction. Thus, organized campaigns against diverse behaviors such as masturbation, birth control, homosexuality, abortion, and sex work have a common theme of non-reproductive sexuality. Today, masturbation is not a topic of political discourse, even among evangelical christians, but in the late 19th century it was a major concern of both religion and government.

Proponents of erotic liberation may find such historical perspectives comforting, since they offer an escape from what the writer Gore Vidal called “the dictatorship of the present.” A certain amount of hopefulness can be gained by knowing that there were times in the past, indeed perhaps almost all

times in the past, or in diverse other cultures, in which such demonizing campaigns did not hold sway over humanity.

Current trends in feminist thought give evidence that the beginnings of such a change is starting to occur. The topic is sex work, but the arguments apply almost exactly to other stigmatized communities. The Feminist Press began its 2021 publishing year with an edited collection of the writings of the Echoing Ida Collective, a group of African American women and nonbinary writers who stress the erotic aspect of struggles for economic justice. The authors insist that marginalized people should be heard on their own terms, not only about exploitation, but also about joy, care and community. They see these perspectives as necessary building blocks for a better world through a radical erotic vision.

The second new 2021 publication of the Feminist Press is another collection titled *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival*, edited by Natalie West with Tina Horn. They argue that the road to a safer more inclusive and equitable future can occur only when the voices of the most marginalized and most stigmatized lead the way. The title *We Too* is a play on the #Me Too movement, from which the authors argue that trans and gender nonbinary people have been largely excluded.

In a break from its past, pages 32-37 of the June 2021 issue of the progressive magazine *In These Times* features a major interview with editors Tina Horn and Kemi Alabi, who critique #Me Too as focusing too much on wealthy, white cisgender celebrities as victims of sexual violence. Alabi says, “Those who are most targeted by sexual violence in this country are the least believed, the least protected. #Me Too ... risks further erasing those most vulnerable to sexual violence from the narrative.” Horn adds that while feminists constantly use “the word diversity. You’ve got to take that word out of your mouth if you don’t actually understand what it means.... [Being] more marginalized and more oppressed lead you to be dehumanized by people who wish other people harm.”

Included in the category of “people who wish other people harm” is the role of government officials in both law enforcement and in the judiciary, in actively sponsoring state violence, especially in the

criminal injustice system, wherein sexual minorities are incarcerated at greater rates, and for longer sentences, than heterosexuals. Just as with racial and ethnic minorities, sexual minorities populate American prisons in disproportionate numbers. Horn continues, “There’s a lot of division about sex work, even among people who consider themselves to be on the Left or progressive. There are many people who consider themselves feminists who want to abolish the sex industry and, somewhere along the line, decided that sex workers could not be experts in our own experiences.... I’m for a society where sexual entertainment of all kinds can and should exist, whether it’s one-on-one or mediated through technology. ... Sex work has to do with intimacy; it has to do with pleasure and sensory experiences of all kinds. And it often has to do with care, or with holding people’s secrets for them. This is all worthy human work to do.... We’re here, we’re doing it, we have been doing it. We have immediate needs now, just like other workers.... The sex workers’ rights movement wants full, global decriminalization of sex work, and we want it now. We Too is about labor.... The work we do is incredibly stigmatized. That stigma ... can lead to people being alienated from their families. People lose custody of their children, or are unable to secure housing—things that should be basic human rights.” As everyone from lesbian mothers who lose custody of their children, to minor attracted persons rotting away in the American gulag can attest, the exact same stigma can destroy lives.

Alabi adds that sex work is a serious central issue: “Some folks, on the Left in particular, point to class and capitalism as the ‘real’ target in a way that’s dismissive” of sexuality issues. “Power relationships exist for a reason: to disenfranchise ... folks who aren’t cisgender and heterosexual, to allocate poor outcomes for the folks who are at the bottom of the pyramid. In our current political climate, my fear is that there might be a desire to move back into single-issue struggles.... There’s no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we don’t live single issues.... [We need to be] intentional about broadening what gender justice means to be inclusive.”

Tina Horn makes an important conceptual contribution by stressing the human rights “for entertainment, for voyeurism... [which] play a huge role in a job that requires so much intimate emotional labor. Going to work means choosing to perform... what you know about sexuality, what you know about how to make people feel.” Alabi adds, “It’s important to center self and community care in a way that radically transforms how we do our work.... Audre Lorde discusses the erotic as neither frivolous nor a luxury, just like she talks about care. If we are really centering care and pleasure in our lives.... we must think systemically: How can we transform our whole economy to a care economy, to prioritize the type of relationship to self and one another that is restorative and connects us, as opposed to one that is alienated.”

These books aim to transform the progressive discourse on labor justice as more than just about a living wage. Alabi says, “As people who were not allowed to fully inhabit our bodies for our own aims and desired sensory experiences, these systems must also value our pleasure.... In the same way that healthcare, affordable housing, economic security, and reproductive justice are civil rights, pleasure is our birthright. We resist simply by owning our sexuality.... Our economic system requires estrangement and will police folks who are bucking that.... [We need to] reclaim our autonomy and then build systems that honor it.”

Horn adds, “If we have movements for sex workers, led by sex workers, then that political and activist movement work is going to be led by people who have gained insight into human nature through sexuality.... I would like to see a world in which the onus isn’t on the people who are demanding rights and moving for liberation to prove that we are respectable in cis-hetero-white supremacist-patriarchal terms to be ‘deserving’ of those rights. I think this is something that is an ongoing, serious issue in queer liberation and I’m sure this also extends to the Movement for Black Lives and many other liberation movements. So I would like to see a future in which we can all get free together and be liberated on our own terms.”

Right now, because the lunatic Right is spouting conspiracy theories that a supposedly powerful secret elite of pedophiles is kidnapping children for rape and torture, there is a great opportunity for a movement of caring people involved in freely-chosen intergenerational relationships to articulate a revisioning discourse. We need to articulate a moral code that is the total opposite of the exploitative stereotype about intergenerational relationships. Only by speaking up, from our own lived experiences when we were young, instead of hearing only from those who have no such experience, can an alliance for change be initiated. Only by seeking allies from among some who may have seemed to be in opposition can a movement of respect for pleasure and enjoyment as a basic human right be integrated into a discourse on the side of progressive change.

Mainstream thought criminalizes such loving relationships, in the same exact way it criminalizes sex work, with the spurious claim that no one below age eighteen can possibly consent to erotic enjoyment with another person who is above age eighteen. Beyond the arbitrary nature of that magical dividing line, which is older than the age at which erotic enjoyment has been recognized in practically every world culture besides our current one, in future generations such statements will no doubt be regarded as incredibly ageist.

A broader movement for the human right to pleasure must be based on the rights of youth as well as all others ages. Kemi Alabi suggests a rhetoric for such a movement by concluding, with “the demand to reimagine everything. It is, of course, about transforming the entire [prison-industrial] punishment system. But even beyond that, the vision is much larger. By listening to and learning from the present-day Black liberation movements for transformation, we can understand that it is urgent to reimagine how all this ... [can build] a radical imagination to transform all our systems.”

The best way to challenge stigma and to argue for change is to show how dropping such stigma can result in positive benefits for society. In an era when young people are spoken about rather than listened to, it is long overdue for a re-envisioning of the right of young people to erotic enjoyment.

Few movements to challenge stigma can succeed without allying with other movements. It is time to seek a new alliance of sex workers, pro-sex feminists, youth, and males of differing ages who are involved in loving same-sex relationships. The ideas introduced in these books, for expanding human rights movements to include a politics of pleasure and care, are long overdue.