

‘THE LEAP INTO THE VOID’: Sex, Education, and the Matter of Resistance

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Abstract:

This article, originally delivered as a lecture at the 9th International Seminar on Body, Gender, and Sexuality in Brazil, reflects on the escalating authoritarian attacks on higher education in the United States under Trump’s second administration. Moving beyond political critique, I interrogate the fundamental purpose of education, proposing that sexuality—understood libidinally rather than genitally—is central to the educational experience. Drawing from French philosophy and psychoanalysis, especially Foucault, Rancière, and Freud, I argue that education must be understood not merely as discipline but as transgression, driven by desire and the pursuit of independent thought. I revisit the history of safe sex education among gay men during the AIDS crisis as a case study in self-organized learning and resistance, eventually turning to the bareback subculture to explore the ethical and political dimensions of risk. Emphasizing the body as a site of both psychic and political resistance, I contend that authentic education always entails an ontological leap into the unknown—what philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle calls the “leap into the void.” Against the neoliberal fetishization of security, I call for a pedagogy that embraces risk, eroticism, and the ungovernable forces of desire as vital components of resistance in education.

Keywords:

Education. Sexuality. Resistance.

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Think of schools as double-agents, places that sponsor the good, nice person and the strange, eccentric delinquent that each child is.

Adam Phillips

This paper—which began as a lecture for the 9th International Seminar on Body, Gender, and Sexuality, held in Vitória da Conquista, Brazil, in May 2025—elaborates my view of the recent attacks on higher education in the United States². More than a critique of the second Trump administration’s effort to destroy universities’ independence and undermine academic freedom, however, the paper also reflects on the ultimate purpose of education. What are universities for? And how might we hold fast to that ultimate purpose in the face of authoritarian assaults on the university? By way of introducing my research on sexuality to an audience likely unfamiliar with it, I shall argue that sex—understood in terms of the libidinal rather than simply the genital—is at the heart of what we as educators do. Sex, in the educational context, represents a source not of shame or embarrassment but of radical hope.

Discussing the crisis in North American education, I draw primarily on French philosophy and psychoanalysis to chart possibilities for resistance, even as I recognize the groundbreaking contribution of Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire. Now, more than ever, we need to compare notes across borders and, indeed, across hemispheres in the struggle against authoritarianism. Despite differences of language, geography, and culture, we face a common adversary. Here in the United States, we are dealing with our own Bolsonaro—and we need all the help we can get with this “Bolsonaro-of-the-North.” Authoritarian politicians, working from the same playbook, always target institutions of education, independent media, and serious journalists. Authoritarianism fears above all independent thinking—which is why the Trump administration has launched such a concerted attack on universities over the past few months. In a widely

² Thanks to the organizers, Marcos Lopes de Souza and Talamira Taita Rodrigues Brito, for inviting me to the event, with special thanks—obrigadíssimo—to Danilo de Oliveira for his faith in my work and his remarkable fidelity to the project of bringing me to Brazil. Unfortunately, my lecture had to be delivered remotely, a constraint that was relieved by the expert translation of Milena Marques. Because I live in the United States but am not a US citizen—and because I have published work that is highly critical of the first Trump administration (see Davis and Dean)—traveling outside the country would have put me at risk of being denied entry upon my return. While I regret not being able to participate in person, I’m immensely grateful to everyone who made my remote participation possible and, indeed, meaningful.

publicized speech, the vice president of the United States (educated at Yale University no less) declared college professors and universities to be “the enemy” (Vance 2021). From this warped perspective, to educate the people is to become the enemy of the people. In order to “Make America Great Again,” the logic goes, universities long regarded as global leaders must be weakened beyond recognition.

The Assault on the University

Shortly after Trump’s second inauguration, in January 2025, the new administration launched its attack on universities, focusing primarily on elite institutions such as Columbia University and Harvard, but with ramifications for higher education throughout the United States. The attempt to revoke tax-exempt status for some and dramatically increase taxation for all university endowments threatens these institutions’ economic well-being. Trump’s efforts to block Harvard from enrolling any international students likewise jeopardizes significant revenue streams, as well as undermining the international exchanges and global goodwill that overseas students and researchers generally facilitate. More than 1 million international students are currently registered at US universities; 28% of Harvard’s student population is international; 23% of the students on my own campus hail from abroad; at nearby Illinois Institute of Technology, in Chicago, more than half of all registered students are international (see Badger, et al). Abruptly terminating international student visas not only creates a profoundly chilling effect throughout the higher education system, but it also broadcasts to the world an unequivocally xenophobic message: Your people are not welcome here! As if all this were not bad enough, greater damage has been inflicted on universities by Trump’s cancellation of their federal grants and contracts.

It may be worth reflecting on the fact that, unlike Brazil, the United States has no federal universities. Instead, higher education in the US is split between private universities such as Harvard, which are independent of the state, and public universities such as the University of Illinois (where I teach), which answer to state legislators but not directly to the federal government. Traditionally, private universities rely for their funding on exorbitant tuition fees and substantial endowments, whereas public universities rely on state appropriations to supplement their lower tuition fees. Since the 1950s, however, most universities in the United States have come to rely

also on federal grants to pursue large research projects whose expenses run into millions of dollars. These are the kind of multiyear research projects, primarily in science, medicine, and engineering, that could not be funded by a single university and therefore require government support. Historically, the federal bureaucracies that fund them—the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the US Department of Energy, and the US Agency for International Development, among others—have always enjoyed bipartisan support. That is, until now.

During the first few months of 2025, the Trump administration withheld, or threatened to withhold, billions of federal dollars from US universities (Bhatia, et al). Harvard alone has had more than US\$3 billion (roughly 17,006,100,000.00 Brazilian real) in research grants and contracts terminated or frozen by the federal government³. My own campus—one of the largest in the nation, with approximately 60,000 students and more than 2,500 professors—typically wins at least US\$600 million (3.4 billion Brazilian real) in competitive federal grants each year. Without that funding, progress on lifesaving research will halt, laboratories will be shuttered, and hundreds of researchers may lose their jobs. As the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker recently pointed out, “a federal grant is not alms to the university, nor may the executive branch dangle it to force grantees to do whatever it wants. It is a fee for a service — namely, a research project that the government decides (after fierce competitive review) would benefit the country. The grant pays for the people and equipment needed to carry out that research, which would not be done otherwise” (Pinker). Federal grants are not gifts but payment for the costs involved in pursuing cutting-edge research. Advances in medicine, among other vital fields, will be a casualty of this Trump-manufactured crisis.

It is virtually impossible to overstate how much is at stake or how unprecedented the government’s assault on higher education is. And yet more is at stake than just money⁴. Academic freedom in the United States has not come under this kind of

³ On May 27, 2025, as I was completing this paper, the Trump administration announced its intention to cancel all existing federal contracts with Harvard, thereby withdrawing an additional US\$100 million of funding. As the lawsuits that Harvard has filed against the federal government wind their way through the legal system, vital research funding will remain in suspension. Even if the courts find the government has acted illegally, tremendous damage has already been done. Higher education is experiencing a sustained and rapidly unfolding crisis that is quite unlike the slow-moving structural transformations that have affected universities in recent decades.

⁴ Even economically, Trump’s cuts to higher education make no sense: “Economists have warned that cutting federal funding for scientific research could, in the long run, damage the U.S. economy by an amount equivalent to a major recession” (Bhatia, et al 2025).

sustained attack since the anti-Communist witch-hunts of the 1950s. Following World War Two, senator Joseph McCarthy sought to root out from the government—and from universities—not only those suspected of Communist sympathies but also those suspected of being queer (Johnson 2023). Three quarters of a century later, the Trump administration has weaponized federal grants in an effort to root out “DEI” (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives, as well as to enforce extremely conservative notions of gender and sexuality. Campus support for trans students is a notable target of the current administration’s ire (see Currah). With remarkable consistency but no rational basis, authoritarian leaders tend to picture sexual and gender non-conformity as a grave national threat. The prospect of global leaders fretting over drag queens would be risible were those same leaders not so intent on erasing trans people altogether.

Even as the Trump administration targets ethnic and gender minorities, I want to advocate for thinking beyond minority categories or identities. The current crisis in North American education represents a battle over values, to be sure; but it is also, more fundamentally, a battle over the very possibility of independent thought. Our contemporary situation reflects more than an ideological conflict between Left and Right, for it throws into question the possibility of a thinking that conforms to no ideology. True freedom of thought is not easily won, though it can be easily lost. Since freedom of thought is not naturally given, it must be constantly fought for if it is to be achieved at all. Indeed, freedom of thought is what furnishes our students, particularly the non-conformists on campus, their freedom to be.

Educators, more than transmitting information or raising consciousness, are guardians of the possibility of independent thinking. As university educators, we aim to create and maintain the conditions that enable people to think freely, rather than simply repeating what is already known. Here I want to make clear that, with the phrase “independent thinking,” I am not referring to what tends to be privileged in scientific domains as “objective” knowledge. Freedom of thought is not a matter of the putatively subjective or objective foundations of knowledge. The widespread cultural crisis of scientific authority—in which, for example, the inconvenient facts of climate change are simply denied or ignored—makes clear that so-called “objective” knowledge depends on subjective confidence in its source. We do not believe the facts when we do not trust their source; and this subjective underpinning of knowledge has been exploited by authoritarian leaders to cast doubt on empirical realities (see Zupančič).

The conspiracy theories that flourish under these conditions are not at all what I mean by “independent thinking,” even though conspiracy theorists take pride in their freedom to invent reality. Independent thinking does not betoken the liberty to pick and choose among which version of reality you prefer⁵.

Instead, with the phrase “independent thinking,” I am trying to describe thinking that comes from the body, not just from a disembodied mind, and thus thinking that bears the traces of a singular subject’s desire. This kind of thinking aspires to independence from ideological overdetermination, but it cannot be independent from the human body as an engine of desire. My account of education as a sponsor of independent thinking draws from the political philosophy of Jacques Rancière (particularly *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*), from the later work of Michel Foucault on ethics, and from my own distinctive reading of Freud—an improbable mélange of influences, to be sure⁶.

In order to conceptualize relations among sex, education, and resistance, I want to describe styles of thinking that involve sex not merely as an object of contemplation, but as the driving force of independent thought. Sex as something that informs and motivates thought, that pushes us to think insatiably⁷. Perhaps this could be called thinking through education and, indeed, beyond education. In other words, I wish to conceptualize teaching and learning as more than merely sophisticated technologies of discipline. Knowledge and power are intimately entwined, as Foucault demonstrated; yet the effects of power sparked by education push in multiple, often countervailing directions (see Deacon).

⁵ As Alberto Toscano argues in “Fascist Freedom,” the relationship between liberty and authoritarianism is more complex than their ostensible antithesis would suggest. “Fascism stands for liberty,” declared Mussolini in 1932, anticipating how reactionary populism frequently adopts the rhetoric and insignia of freedom. Toscano effectively demonstrates how “late fascism” emerges from within—not against—coercive neoliberalism.

⁶ In a book available only in Spanish, *El rostro fijo de las perversiones*, I discuss how Foucault and Freud are more compatible thinkers than typically is recognized (Dean 2026). In a collaboration with Oliver Davis, I link a psychoanalytic account of sexuality with Rancière’s account of the hatred of democracy; *Hatred of Sex* is influenced by *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, though without engaging that work directly (Davis and Dean). *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* provides a highly specific account of eighteenth-century French educational practice—in which Joseph Jacotot, without knowing Flemish, discovered a capacity to teach Flemish students who knew no French—that Rancière unpacks to support his theory of radical equality. It is worth noting that Rancière’s political philosophy of education serves as a strong critique of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) account of the French educational system in *Distinction*.

⁷ Here I draw on the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche’s (2011) account of the sexual drive as a force that pushes the human subject beyond gender, often beyond sex, and, indeed, beyond anything recognizable as genital satisfaction. For Laplanche, the drive’s defining characteristic is its insatiability.

What Is Education For?

Like most of you, I am an educator—a college professor. For better or worse, I've spent most of my life in school. And for nearly half a century, first in Britain and then in the United States, I have been wrestling with what works in the classroom, what used to work but no longer does, and, ultimately, wrestling with the question of what education is for. At this moment of crisis and precarity in universities, I believe it is vital to reflect on the ultimate purposes of education, without getting distracted by the pragmatics of graduation rates or measurable “outcomes.”⁸ The utilitarianism of quantifiable outcomes and metrics will not save us now. Surely education must be more than a form of crowd control for young people; it has to be more than the inculcation of norms; and it has to be more than grades, scores, requirements, and credentials—more, that is, than an administrative or disciplinary system (even though it is inevitably those things as well). Education must amount to more than merely training, useful though various kinds of vocational and disciplinary training are.

To be more than a disciplinary system, education must transgress boundaries, including the boundaries and limits that the university itself has created. Education as transgression as well as conformity: this is the idea of “schools as double-agents” that I've borrowed from the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (2010) and taken as this paper's epigraph (95). We want our students to follow instructions, to comply with the directions for learning set forth in the syllabus; yet there is tremendous political and psychological value in non-compliance. Among the vital lessons that students learn in college is not to follow instructions but, rather, find their own way. Perhaps unwittingly, we teach disobedience as well as compliance and conformity. As “double-agents,” pedagogical institutions should not merely tolerate non-compliance, turning a blind eye to benign cases of disobedience; they should also thoughtfully develop creative ways

⁸ The neoliberal corporatization of the North American university, over the past several decades, has led to a business-derived model of education that emphasizes metrics, outcomes, and deliverables. At the University of Illinois, for example, all syllabi in every discipline are required to specify the course's “learning outcomes”—as if anyone could reliably predict before the course even begins what students might end up learning. The possibility of deferred action (*après coup* or *Nachträglichkeit*), in which the pedagogical significance of one course might “click” a semester or two later—or even a few years hence—is never countenanced. Neither is the possibility that students might adopt a more creative approach to the strict agenda of the syllabus, by using it to figure out for themselves what they wish to learn in any course of study.

to foster it. What the students learn from their professors is ultimately how to learn from themselves.

For me the idea of education as a covert sponsor of transgression has often meant crossing disciplinary boundaries—between the humanities and social sciences, for example—as well as crossing national borders. But it has also meant pushing against disciplinary consensus, in order not to serve as merely a mouthpiece for established ideas or agreed-upon ideological positions. Foucault (1985) articulated this problem very nicely when he wrote that “there are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all” (8). Thinking differently, as Foucault understood it, requires thinking against one’s own established positions—in other words, pushing against the consensus that one has formed with oneself. And this is easier said than done, because it involves much more than changing one’s mind, and more than merely an evolution in one’s thinking. Thinking differently means thinking not only against intellectual hegemony but also against oneself, by relentlessly questioning one’s own presuppositions. This is a matter less of disseminating knowledge than of unsettling the known. Education as an accumulation of knowledge is often understood as conquering and settling the unknown, as if it were terra incognita, but I am talking about unsettling what is always already known.

Let me concretize these claims by turning to a specific form of education. For over forty years, I have been wrestling with what works in the college classroom—for myself as a student and for the students I teach. But for forty years, I have also been researching what used to be called “safe-sex education,” which occurs primarily outside the classroom. Perhaps we could say that safe-sex education turns the bedroom into a classroom, provoking all sorts of questions about what it might mean for those spaces to overlap. What kind of education or “discipline” do we want in the bedroom? In pornography since the Marquis de Sade, that question has been posed as what kind of sex might be possible or desirable in hierarchical institutions such as the school, emphasizing the erotic dimensions of discipline⁹. My far less sexy question is: What kind of education might be possible or desirable for sex? If the pornographic

⁹ The locus classicus is Sade’s *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795). For an excellent discussion of the erotics of epistemological discipline, see Squires.

imagination can endlessly eroticize discipline, nevertheless we must ask how far sexual desire can be educated. To what extent do human bodies conform to discipline (per Discipline and Punish), and in what ways does the specifically sexual body resist education?

The history of safe-sex education offers a case study for answering that question. As it emerged during the 1980s in the United States, safe-sex education was a grassroots movement among gay men who wanted to preserve their sexual culture in the face of a deadly epidemic. Abandoned by the government of Ronald Reagan, who refused to acknowledge in public even the existence of AIDS, gay men had to figure it out for themselves—they had to self-educate about a genuinely new disease that nobody yet understood. Once it was established that the disease was spread by a virus carried in bodily fluids—and let us remember that this causal mechanism took several years to determine, years during which thousands of people died horrible deaths from AIDS—gay men realized that wearing condoms for anal sex could effectively prevent viral transmission (see Callen and Berkowitz). That realization was not as obvious as it seems in retrospect. Indeed, the principles of safe-sex education were contested from the beginning, not least because they relied on the assumption that gay men should not stop having casual, anonymous sex but should alter their technique (Crimp 1988). It was always controversial that gay men wished to uphold the value of sexual freedom while nevertheless curtailing the spread of disease. Likewise controversial was the assumption that people would not stop injecting drugs but could be persuaded not to share needles if you supplied them with clean ones and educated them about the risks. A community-sponsored harm-reduction approach sought to displace the abstinence approach to these stigmatized yet nonetheless everyday practices.

Safe-sex education emerged from the streets rather than from the classroom. However, activist groups such as ACT-UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) were heavily influenced by Foucault's (1976) distinction between identities and practices, as it had been elaborated in the introductory volume of *The History of Sexuality*. It was not who you were that would give you AIDS, but what you did, we argued; the emphasis shifted from the stigmatizing notion of "risk-groups" to more pragmatic reflection on risky practices. In order to make such arguments, ordinary gay people had to become experts on their own, to learn what they could about virology, epidemiology,

transmission routes, and antiviral mechanisms. We also had to resist the intensely normalizing views about sexuality and AIDS promulgated by the mainstream media (Watney 1987). This was a struggle not just for knowledge and information but also for influence—a struggle to get heard. Nevertheless, this period of *sui generis* education saved countless lives, including my own.

What slowly became apparent during the 1990s were the limits of safe-sex education. Despite widespread attempts to eroticize condoms, plenty of men didn't find them sexy at all. It became clear that the tenets of safe-sex education were not being followed consistently even by those who knew the facts, the risks, and the rules. In my early research on queer sexuality and HIV-transmission, I approached the phenomenon of “slipping up”—failing to use condoms when having anal sex with strangers—as a kind of *parapraxis* or Freudian slip. You mean to do one thing but end up doing something else; there is a conflict of intentions at work that generates a mistake. Freud's (1960) work on *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* describes how the unconscious makes itself known through slips of the tongue and bungled actions. In *Beyond Sexuality*, I argued that failing to use condoms could be understood as an example of a bungled action: consciously you know that you are supposed to use protection for sex, but unconsciously you desire something else (Dean 2000, 134-173). The sexual drive enjoys overcoming barriers, Freud (1953: 152) claimed, and one can appreciate how it might enjoy overcoming the barrier of prophylaxis.

In an essay on the problem of children skipping school, Adam Phillips frames with great lucidity the distinction that is at stake here. “If we speak in Freud's language,” he suggests, “the ego is the part of ourselves that wants safety and survival, and the id is the part of ourselves that wants sensual satisfaction whatever the cost” (Phillips 100). “To put it slightly differently,” he continues, “there is a part of ourselves that has no interest in our best interests, if our best interests are taken to be our own survival. It is not that a part of ourselves prefers risk to safety, it is that a part of ourselves doesn't use this vocabulary; it is not that a part of ourselves is self-destructive, it is that a part of ourselves has no regard for whether our actions are destructive or constructive” (100-101). To speak in terms of risk when discussing unprotected sex is already to have adopted an egoic perspective on the id, and thereby to have missed how the pleasure in sexual satisfaction depends on overriding (rather than simply reducing) the ostensible cost. I return to the question of risk in this paper's conclusion.

During the 1990s, my approach to the failures and limits of safe-sex education centered on individual psychology. But what became clear at the turn of the millennium was the extent to which the practice of fucking without condoms among gay men had become organized, deliberate, and heavily eroticized. It was not simply a mistake or a matter of insufficient knowledge. The emergence of “bareback subculture” revealed a phenomenon of group psychology (not just individual psychology) and therefore demanded a different approach. What fascinated me about this new sexual subculture was its embrace of risk and its commitment to making so-called casual sex utterly serious. Thanks to the epidemic, gay men had come to understand that a quick fuck with a stranger could change your life, and some of them decided to convert that circumstance into the possibility of a lifelong connection. Unprotected sex became the basis for creating kinship networks via the medium of a virus (Dean 2009).

It is true that many of the men who began identifying as barebackers were already HIV-positive and were taking the new antiretroviral medications that became available in the mid-to-late 90s.¹⁰ But there were also men who expressed a desire to become HIV-positive, to join the “bug brotherhood.” Bareback subculture was not about minimizing risk but maximizing it—through unprotected sex and the fetishized vocabulary of “breeding” and “seeding,” which imagined internal ejaculation of “poz” semen in terms of impregnation (Dean 2008). The subculture gave rise to new forms of pornography and, indeed, new pornographic conventions, thereby altering the visual representation of gay sexuality. Gay men invented safe-sex education for themselves, but then they invented barebacking as a new mode of eroticism. After trying to eroticize protection, they subsequently eroticized deliberate exposure to the virus. They didn’t want sex to be “safe,” they wanted to enjoy what makes sex dangerous. My research on this subculture adopted a psychoanalytic ethic of neutrality to approach and describe what I view as very complex behavior. (The queer anthem for this approach would be George Michael’s Listen Without Prejudice.) Having studied these

¹⁰ The story of gay men’s sex education entered a new phase with antiretroviral medications and the introduction of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), both of which require adherence to strict dosing regimes—in other words, the new pharmacological era entails both discipline and conformity (see Dean 2023). At an historical moment when AIDS, though not curable, is theoretically eradicable, it is worth noting that the new Trump administration eliminated federal funding for PEPFAR (the US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), which began during the Republican presidency of George W. Bush and is credited with saving 25 million lives globally. See the PEPFAR Impact Counter for data on the cost in human life of Trump’s funding cuts (<https://pepfar.impactcounter.com>). Here is a stark example of the biopolitics of “letting die” writ large (Foucault 2003: 241).

phenomena for thirty years, I am struck by the unlikely trajectory of self-education and then internal resistance to that education that this history reveals. What is it about sex that generates resistance?

The Possibilities and Limits of Resistance

I want to consider the sexual body—a body fragmented by drives—as a source and site of resistance, because I’m fascinated by the ambiguity lurking within the Seminario theme of “inventive resistances.” There are the resistances we can mobilize, politically and creatively; but there are also forms of resistance that thwart every attempt to instrumentalize them. What do you do with the student who seems actively to resist understanding what you are trying to teach, for example? Sometimes in the classroom one senses a failure of comprehension that has nothing to do with intellectual ability or aptitude, and nothing to do even with inattention or distraction. What Foucault (1976) famously described as “the will to know” (*la volonté de savoir*) is counterbalanced by what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1988) called “ignorance as a passion” (271). The “will to know,” which operates at both individual and cultural levels, runs into conflict with the no-less-powerful human will not to know. There is something in us that just doesn’t want to know—that operates as an active force, not simply as an empty zone of ignorance waiting to be filled. This “passion for ignorance” is what psychoanalysis calls the unconscious; and it functions at the sociopolitical, as well as individual, level. Throughout my work I have emphasized the significance of the unconscious—and hence of psychoanalysis as a methodology—because the passion for ignorance is never more active than in the realm of sexuality. When it comes to sex, there is a strong wish not to know that education can never completely overcome.

Because intellectual curiosity finds its origins in infantile sexuality, our thirst for knowledge tends to be shadowed by resistances to knowing. The passion for ignorance serves to keep us secure in what we know. I may not wish to know more because then I might need to change—to change my perspective on some topic, to change how I relate to the world, or, in fact, to change my life. We can accommodate a surprising volume of new information, but new knowledge is a different matter. Information can be accumulated like commodities, but knowledge changes you;



knowledge is more like an experience you undergo than it is a possession you acquire. Thus, education takes time because it includes the subjective cost of becoming someone other than you were when you began. Even when higher education is provided free-of-charge by the state, it bears this very high cost, which many people decide they do not wish to pay. Learning involves a persistent struggle between the part of oneself that wishes to learn something new and the part that, like Bartleby, would prefer not to.¹¹ And we must admit that the resistance that is internal is no less inventive than the resistances to power through which we exercise our political agency. In Freudian terms, we should acknowledge that the unconscious is a master of “inventive resistances”—not to mention an ideal worker, in the sense that it works 24/7, including when we are asleep. When it comes to “inventive resistance,” the part of us that doesn’t want to know is a veritable expert.

We can learn two things from the inventiveness of psychic resistance. The first is that the sexual body, mediated by the unconscious, is not very amenable to the self-improving projects with which we try to educate it. Because the sexual body is a nonconformist, there are real limits to the educability of sex. But the second thing we can learn from the inventiveness of psychic resistance runs in the opposite direction. It is that there is a part of us that ceaselessly resists. Ultimately, we are not just the “docile bodies” that Foucault (1977) imagined for biopolitical modernity. In the face of the overweening authoritarianism that Bolsonaro, Putin, Trump, and other leaders exemplify, it is crucial to remember that something in us resists no matter what. If authoritarian rule routinely inculcates fear as a means of encouraging compliance in advance, nevertheless there is something in us that resists complete intimidation. The part of us that cannot imagine our own death places limits on the efficacy of mortal threats.¹² Sometimes, even if you threaten to kill me, nevertheless you cannot get me to obey.

That possibility of resistance—which I claim is universally available insofar as you live in a body crisscrossed by sexual drives—is tremendously precious. It accounts

¹¹ Bartleby is the antihero of Herman Melville’s famous 19th-century story *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (1853): each time he is ordered to undertake a task, Bartleby replies, “I would prefer not to.”

¹² In “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” Freud (1957) explains, “It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence the psycho-analytic school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality” (289).

for ordinary and extraordinary examples of political courage. But it also accounts for the resistance to safe-sex education that produced a subculture of barebacking. In both cases, one can discern an ethic of risk. And it is with a brief consideration of the ethics of risk that I will conclude this paper.

The example of barebacking can make risk seem like a macho ethos of recklessness, but I suggest that it is more than that. Embracing risk does not give license for thoughtlessness or a disposition of callousness toward the other. On the contrary, the ethic of risk involves submitting oneself to the incalculable; it entails relinquishing the safety of predictable or guaranteed outcomes. By definition, risk involves transgressing boundaries—and most especially the boundary that protects one from one's own otherness. This paradigm of risk becomes clear in the work of French philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle, particularly her book *In Praise of Risk* (2019), but also *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living* (2018).¹³ Dufourmantelle's philosophy of risk implicitly critiques the financial logics of calculation through which neoliberalism seeks to maximize profit while insulating itself from exposure. This is the model of "risk management" that organizes not only financial economies but also some official versions of sex education. Dufourmantelle argues, to the contrary, that ethical risk involves what cannot be quantified and, moreover, that "being alive is a risk." As she emphasizes, "a life with absolute security—like zero risk—is a fantasy."

Here in the United States, we are taught to value—indeed, to crave—maximal security and safety in all arenas of life. But, of course, this rhetoric of safety functions as a strategic mechanism of control. We give the state tremendous power whenever we desire its protection. However, if living can never be absolutely safe, then we must acknowledge that sex is the arena of our lives in which relinquishing the illusion of safety may be most appealing. "Passion is the very substance of risk," Dufourmantelle (2019: 18) argues. "We want intensity without risk. Which is impossible," she observes (20). And she continues: "Intensity is the leap into the void, the unknown part of ourselves that has yet to be written and yet awaits us, some precise thing. Passion is a disposition born within us since childhood that can be enlarged or diminished—but

¹³ When I discussed the issue of sexual risk in *Unlimited Intimacy*, Dufourmantelle's meditations on risk were not yet published. But I was fascinated to discover that the English translator of *In Praise of Risk* connected her psychoanalytic philosophy of risk to my theses about barebacking (see Dufourmantelle 2019: 190).

totally altered, never” (20). What Dufourmantelle calls “the leap into the void” is a step beyond the limits of security in which the outcome can never be known in advance and therefore cannot be measured, calculated, or adjudicated as a “worthwhile” risk. The leap into the void constitutes an ontological risk: one’s very being is on the line.

I contend that there is no education deserving of the name without leaps into the void. One is never simply annexing the unknown to the known but taking a risk by throwing oneself into the unknown. And that is how education transforms you, by changing not simply what you know but altering your very being. The process is inherently risky—there can be, by definition, no guarantees—and this is why freedom of thought is so hard to attain. It is regrettable that disciplinary processes of credentialing too often discourage the risks that produce independent thought. Sometimes the education system functions paradoxically as a defense against thinking.

By discussing freedom of thought in the context of a specific form of education—safe-sex education—I have tried to connect the risks of bareback sex with the risks of thinking beyond borders and boundaries. Thinking without prophylaxis and therefore without guarantees. But I want to suggest, too, that the idea of fucking with abandon is more than simply a provocative metaphor for thinking with abandon, since both share the same source. That source is the sexual drive, which often takes non-genital forms while nevertheless retaining its characteristic of relentlessness. The person who is regarded as sexually insatiable is usually a figure of ridicule, envy, or desire. But the person who is insatiable for knowledge (not merely for information or academic prestige) must be an inspiration for our work as educators, as well as a profound threat to authoritarianism. The one who is insatiable for knowledge, willing to risk leaps into the void, has neither gender, race, nor any particular sexual identification. That insatiable person is inside each and every one of us. Now more than ever, I believe we should give them space to move.

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**‘O SALTO NO VAZIO’:
Sexo, Educação e a questão da Resistência**

Resumo

Este artigo, originalmente apresentado como uma conferência no 9º Seminário Internacional Corpo, Gênero e Sexualidade no Brasil, reflete sobre os crescentes ataques autoritários à educação superior nos Estados Unidos durante o segundo governo de Trump. Indo além de uma crítica política, interrogo o propósito fundamental da educação, propondo que a sexualidade — compreendida de forma libidinal e não apenas genital — é central para a experiência educativa. A partir da filosofia francesa e da psicanálise, especialmente Foucault, Rancière e Freud, argumento que a educação deve ser entendida não apenas como disciplina, mas como transgressão, movida pelo desejo e pela busca do pensamento autônomo. Reviso a história da educação sobre sexo seguro entre homens gays durante a crise da AIDS como um estudo de caso sobre aprendizagem auto-organizada e resistência, voltando-me, por fim, à subcultura bareback para explorar as dimensões éticas e políticas do risco. Enfatizando o corpo como um lugar de resistência psíquica e política, sustento que a educação autêntica sempre implica um salto ontológico no desconhecido — aquilo que a filósofa Anne Dufourmantelle chama de “salto no vazio”. Contra a fetichização neoliberal da segurança, defendo uma pedagogia que abraça o risco, o erotismo e as forças ingovernáveis do desejo como componentes vitais da resistência na educação.

Palavras-chave

Educação; Sexualidade; Resistência.

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