Many people woke up on June 12, 2016, in the middle of LGBTQ pride month, to conflicting reports: an attack on a nightclub, a terrorist attack, an attack on LGBTQ people, an attack on Latinx LGBTQ people? At Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, a club self-described as a “Latin Hotspot,” a single shooter killed 49 people and injured dozens more. In America, it became the deadliest mass shooting, attack on LGBTQ people specifically, and act of terrorism since 9/11. The massacre had far-reaching impacts on numerous communities. The shooter, who was born in America and previously had been investigated for potential terrorist ties, pledged allegiance to ISIS in a call to 911 before the shooting. Thus, the attack was highly politicized, with some political figures framing it within the context of gun control, while others framed it primarily about radical Islamic terrorism (Alvarez and Pérez-Peña 2016). There were speculations about internalized homophobia, and ambiguity as to whether the shooter had been a patron of Pulse. Much of the media coverage, domestic and international, focused on this more as an act of terrorism than as a hate crime perpetrated against LGBTQ people.

As we near the one-year anniversary of this violent act, we reflect on the potentialities of public criminology as it pertains to the responses of scholars working within and around the nexus between queer and criminology. Responses not just to incidents like this, but to violence against LGBTQ people more generally. We do not purport to know the precise motives of the shooter, and despite an understanding that this was domestic terrorism, we seek to contribute to a much broader conversation about interpersonal and institutional violence against queer people. In many ways, this article is not just about the Pulse nightclub shooting, but about how it exemplifies the experiences of LGBTQ people in the current climate, and the ideas and concerns queer criminologists have about moving forward in this moment.

However, who are we to speak for queer criminology or advance a normative agenda, drawn solely from our own views? Consistent with the ethos of public criminology, and trying to effect what Christopher Uggen and colleagues call for in their recent Criminologist lead article to draw from a larger “chorus of voices” (2017, p. 6), we asked what other folks thought. Not just professors, but students and practitioners, with varying levels of experience within and exposure to queer criminological academic work. Although in no way a “scientific” sampling method, we received comments from people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, several countries of origin spread across the globe, who fall on a continuum of gender identities including cisgender (female or male consistent with their birth sex), transgender, and non-binary, who may or may not identify as queer-spectrum (non-heterosexual). We recognize and acknowledge them as co-producers of this piece and of our recommendations, though take full responsibility for the words we present here, and any omissions are of course our own. We were struck by the passion, depth, and insight of our colleagues and friends, and although we can hardly do justice to all of their prescient comments, we will sure try.
Several themes were evident among many of these sentiments and are at the forefront of our minds as well. The first was that this instance, although unique, extreme, and tragic, occurs within a larger pattern of violence against queer people. We should not focus our efforts on one orchestrated and rare act of violence to the exclusion of other forms of violence, both overt and covert, that happen daily and to broad swaths of LGBTQ people. Political and economic elites enact institutional violence that excludes and oppresses by creating and perpetuating forces such as racism, sexism, and heteronormativity (e.g., Liazos 1972). To illustrate this, we need only point to several well-known pieces of legislation—which are often motivated by fear or dangerous and discriminatory assumptions about LGBTQ people being threatening in various ways—that seek to control queer people’s movements, access to public accommodations, and participation within social institutions. For example, North Carolina’s House Bill 2, referred to colloquially as the “bathroom bill,” required that at a government-run facility, people had to use bathrooms and locker rooms that corresponded to the sex listed on their birth certificate. This law’s recent repeal included a provision that prevents municipalities in North Carolina from passing or amending non-discrimination ordinances through December 2020 (Hanna et al. 2017). Laws such as these, and even their compromise “repeals,” not only prevent legal protections, but as noted by our contributors, arguably incite interpersonal violence from the fears they stoke. Narratives of alleged deception and assumed depravity often underlie fatal violence committed against transgender people (Wodda and Panfil 2015), with transgender women of color facing exponentially higher rates of fatal violence than other women (HRC and TPOCC 2015). Several of our colleagues discussed how after Pulse, queer people of color for a moment became “good victims,” but only vis-à-vis suspected Islamic terrorism (a point we return to shortly). They noted the disturbing hypocrisy of displays of support from otherwise oppressive, conservative political forces; tweets of “thoughts and prayers” for the victims and their families when the state and many citizens make no real effort to protect queer people from violence. Indeed, it more often seems the actions of some political parties and citizens seek to hurt LGBTQ people repeatedly by failing to protect them when they are being victimized and by introducing restrictive measures. Incidents like the Pulse shooting caused many queer people to feel unsafe in the days that followed, especially in frequenting Pride-month celebrations filled with other queer people, but so too do experiencing victimization personally and vicarious victimization from violence affecting their peers. Speaking personally, we (the authors) each felt paralyzing fear, sadness, and rage for days following the shooting, as did many of our colleagues. We each had the moment of “This was me.” But the everyday experience of feeling unsafe—or at least hyperaware—is very real for many LGBTQ people, even for those living in large and diverse cities, in the U.S. and globally. For many, while this was an example of extreme hate violence against LGBTQ people, particularly Latinx communities, it is but a single example of violence that they experience along a continuum of various forms violence, with many trans and gender diverse people experiencing terrifying threats to their safety on a daily basis. The Pulse shooting attracted a lot of positive media coverage, with news outlets around the world expressing their outrage and sympathies for the victims. Yet when a Latina or Black trans woman dies as a result of an individual hate incident, their loss barely rates a mention in these same news outlets. This also raises issues around the global south and the global north (Connell 2007) as, whilst Orlando evidenced an international outpouring of grief in the media and amongst LGBTQ communities worldwide attending vigils, LGBTQ folks in other parts of the world continue to be killed and again, their loss will be overlooked as important news in these same news outlets.
Alongside any positive media coverage, there exists a horrifying narrative among some groups insisting that this massacre was deserved: justified revenge for partying and being gay. Punishment for existing. To add to these horrific narratives, for many LGBTQ people, bars have historically acted as safe spaces and sites of resistance, not just places to drink and dance (though we’re entitled to do that, too!). Bars have been the safe havens when folks were exiled from family homes. They were the places where illicit affections could be secreted away from public and law enforcement visibilities. They were the sites in which political uprising, resistance, and defiance began. The Orlando shooting therefore raises multiple ambivalences for LGBTQ communities: knowing it will not be the last time hate like this is perpetrated against them; knowing that for a fleeting moment they were the ‘good victims,’ but tomorrow they will continue to experience the violence of political discriminations with no regard for their safety; knowing that violence will continue to threaten their existence, but this will continue to be largely ignored in the mainstream media and by politicians; and knowing that safe spaces like bars and nightclubs will always already pose a risk as a targeted space within which to inflict the most impactful damage upon LGBTQ people.

Another main theme we heard was the need to focus on intersectionality. A real focus, our contributors noted; not treating it as a buzzword, but as a meaningful way to contextualize and understand complex lives and experiences. Rarely are sexual orientation and gender identity situated within the larger “race-class-gender” focus, which is a glaring oversight perpetrated by our field for decades. We need to recognize the importance of race and ethnicity within the context of queer-spectrum identity, and several of our colleagues noted that we need to place race at the center of intersectional analyses. In addition, queer criminologists need to be committed to fighting colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism in academic and activist endeavors – “we need to lead the charge,” one contributor said, with challenging “whitegayhomohegemony” and “whitehomonormativity,” said another; the concepts so entwined for this person that they make up single words. If the sentiments we collected are any indication, the community of scholars engaged with queer criminologies is fundamentally and strongly opposed to single incidents of violence being used to bolster exclusionary sentiment, such as Islamophobia, xenophobia, and violence against immigrant communities. Many of our colleagues have expressed genuine disturbance, and for some, downright anger, that violence committed against queer people of color is being used to demonize and criminalize other non-white people. In addition to this, criminologists have recently highlighted how criminological thinking is shaped heavily by the global north, and when criminological thinking happens, it typically works through global north scholars travelling to and extracting data from the global south, and travelling back to the global north to interpret the data using global north conceptualizations of crime and punishment (Carrington et al 2016). Queer criminologies are equally guilty of these forms of analyses and the Pulse incident highlights the importance of ensuring the intersectional focus in queer criminological work to help avoid colonization and nationalism in particular by using “queer, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial scholarship.”

On the subject of intersectional identities and overlapping systems of oppression and privilege, one way to reduce colonialism and to ensure authentic engagements is to cultivate racial diversity among queer criminologists as well, and to build bridges and coalitions. Many recent conversations within queer criminologist circles at professional meetings and in social media
outlets have been about the relative whiteness of queer criminology and of research on LGBTQ people more generally, and how to best address that. Even the use of the word “queer” does not resonate with some people due to its changing meanings across generations and cultures.

Speaking of white LGBTQ people’s experiences in comparison to those of LGBTQ people of color, one of our colleagues reflected, “Your comfort is linked to our pain and suffering.” Indeed, it is imperative that we continue to seek out ways to be more inclusive lest queer criminologies become part of the broader processes that maintain the marginalization of LGBTQ people of color. As criminologists, we should recognize our privilege of various forms and try to put it to work for us – work from the inside out in ways that situate us and our work within a broader discourse that has at times overlooked all LGBTQ people. In the past, mainstream criminologies have contributed to the marginalization of the experiences of LGBTQ people in criminal processing systems, something which Derek Dalton (2015) suggests makes for an ambivalent relationship with mainstream criminologies in the first instance. We see this sidelining highlighted in studies where the experiences of gay and/or trans people are excluded simply because their numbers fail to meet a prescribed sample size. While demographic questions around class and ethnicity may make it into mainstream criminological research projects, sexuality and gender diversity, for example, can be routinely excluded for being too complicated or too much work. Or worse yet, as unimportant: there is no greater example of this as a political issue than the (continued) omission of sexual orientation and gender identity categories in the upcoming 2020 United States Census, despite originally being on the proposed instruments (Visser 2017).

A third theme that builds on the first two is to mobilize emotion and life experience to inform our work. In the Pulse victims and survivors, queer criminologists saw ourselves reflected: names, complexions, sexual and gender identities, ways we form community. Comments from our colleagues about activism in many forms were common, as were examples of ways they got involved following the incident or in longer stretches of equality-minded LGBTQ activism. Calls were made for us to get involved wherever possible, and to include ourselves and our experiences in our work. This can certainly be challenging. As Forrest Stuart notes in his recent (2017) Criminologist lead article, many academics are fearful to do this because of the risk of being accused of doing “me-search” or introducing bias into our scholarly works. But of course LGBTQ or allied scholars have pertinent experience in exploring concepts of import to queer communities, and of course we can utilize it to better inform our scholarship and our recommendations. Of course.

As mentioned, building bridges and coalitions is also key. We need to rethink what it means to do criminological work in a way that integrates public criminology principles. Working with practitioners and with the community at large are essential steps in making queer criminological thinking and research visible in the focus on public criminologies. Much of what we know about queer people’s experiences with crime, victimization, and the criminal and juvenile justice systems is actually from human rights organizations and found in the grey literature: accounts and findings of their research conducted on the ground and published on their own, outside of academic or commercial publishers (e.g., Amnesty International 2006). These sources are immensely helpful in understanding the challenges facing queer communities and should give us inspiration about how to make queer criminologies more public and collaborative. This might also entail employing new (or newer) ways of communicating and connecting: social media, op-
eds, and community outreach. Engaging in public ways with different forms of more mindful alternative media outlets is a good start, like Adam Messinger (2017) has done with research around transgender victims of domestic violence who are undocumented. But we also should engage with mainstream populist media as well, those media outlets who have also silenced and even ridiculed the lives of LGBTQ people in the past. (It is similarly true for us to share our work with mainstream academic outlets, instead of fatalistically believing that our discipline has not moved closer toward an interest in social justice.) We must talk back to the criminal processing systems that we do research about – doing research on how LGBTQ young people experience policing is worthless unless the police organizations themselves are aware of what the young people said. We need to go back to organizations and institutions of social control, present our research to them, tell them the narratives of the people we speak to, and see the ‘aha’ moments when they realize the gravity of the situation and what they can do to ameliorate it. We can attest to the strength and utility of this strategy. Queer criminological research has virtually no power or influence unless we talk back to these services about the research we do. Talking back could also include testifying at state legislatures and making ourselves visible in other forms of public civic life. As one commentator astutely suggested, “Talking only to each other is not enough.”

We close this article with a few reflections on our final theme, of academic possibilities. We start with the most obvious, which is curricular. Courses within and outside of criminology can be enhanced by providing even just a basic overview about what queer lives (good and bad) look like, queer figures and their accomplishments, and histories of violence against LGBTQ people. But, in light of the fact that criminology and criminal justice majors are among some of the most homophobic college students, and they will go on to serve LGBTQ populations in their work, integrating information about LGBTQ communities into criminology and criminal justice curricula seems particularly prudent (Fradella et al., 2006). Both authors and several of our commentators have responded to the dearth of queer-related information in each of their university’s course offerings by designing new courses and teaching them. Although not all universities allow such flexibility in course development, there is almost always room to at least integrate some primary source materials, documentaries, and/or news coverage of current events into existing courses. Based on our own experience and what we’ve heard from others, students learn a lot in these specific or enhanced courses since much of the information is brand new to them, and they are appreciative to have particular exposure, knowledge, or cultural competency that other future practitioners and scholars may not have. The key issue is engaging senior university and college administrators to convince them that these forms of information should not just be elective knowledge, but knowledge integrated across core curricula.

More in line with a public criminology sensibility, we can support LGBTQ students on campus by lending our time, expertise, and enthusiasm to the growth and nurturance of student organizations that serve them. This may be especially important at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which are significantly less likely to have LGBTQ student organizations and resource centers (Lenning 2017). We understand that service assignments on committees related to improving diversity and inclusion or campus pride may not “count” much towards tenure, or may be time- and energy-consuming. They are essentially labors of love and are not feasible for some. However, if we have good intentions and a stated interest and are not willing to roll up our sleeves and do the work, who will? Small steps can be taken to improve
climate without an official committee assignment. We can educate our own colleagues and make sure our university figures respond (at all!) and in an affirming way to incidents like the Pulse shooting and to other pivotal moments in queer history. We can empower colleagues to educate themselves, as sometimes it can be an expectation that LGBTQ faculty members are the ones to do this work – and some of us get to the point of burnout from the exhausting process of educating so many from the minds of so few. We can agitate for safe spaces on university and college campuses for LGBTQ students in times of crisis and mourning. Following the shooting, there were exchanges on the QUEERCCJ listserve about whether our respective universities’ administrations sent out any sort of communication to students and faculty/staff about the incident, and if so, whether it was acknowledged as an act of violence targeted at LGBTQ people. The willingness of faculty members to step up, help draft responses, consult on initiatives, give talks around campus, and related activities undoubtedly improved outcomes for students at those institutions.

Finally, caution might be warranted before we embrace full engagement in public criminology. As queer criminologists, we need to be cognizant of how our research might be used against us in an attempt to demonstrate that LGBTQ lives are somehow inherently pathological. We should be wary to avoid always being the tokenistic queer folks, moving towards political fatigue. We must be mindful of how traditional criminologies have at times excluded us as unmentionable minorities, and perhaps aberrant individuals. We need to move forward consciously about how, by co-opting ourselves into the race to make criminologies more public, we are not inadvertently reinforcing power relations that will continue to keep LGBTQ issues in this minority space. We nonetheless see many possibilities to build community and coalitions among fellow scholars, whether mainstream or critical, queer and non-queer alike, with the shared goal of making queer criminologies and criminology more inclusive and intersectional. In closing, the Pulse shooting reminds us why the endeavors we have discussed here are of such vital importance, and we wish to honor the victims and survivors of Pulse by renewing our efforts and leading the charge.

Works Cited


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