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QUEER AND GENDER-NONCONFORMING PARTNERSHIP IN THE UNITED  
STATES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INTIMATE POSSIBILITY

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Queer and Gender-Nonconforming Partnership in the United States and

Implications for Intimate Possibility

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This thesis addresses the omission of queer and gender-nonconforming relationship scripts by examining the relationship practices of a subset of queer and gender-nonconforming individuals in the U.S. Using a grounded theory approach, semistructured interviews were conducted with 15 queer and/or gender non-conforming participants to learn about their approaches to intimacy. The thesis applies a framework of *expansivity* and *flux* to describe how individuals and relationships exceed rigid categorical boundaries, and how individuals and relationships fluctuate over time. It elaborates on gender, sexual, and racial identity; gender expression and embodiment; monogamous and non-monogamous relationship forms; and practices of sensual and sexual intimacy. In the final chapter, the thesis explores how participants render themselves strategically legible; and how they simultaneously resist and compromise while navigating regulatory systems.

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## Introduction

When interviewing Adowa<sup>1</sup> (she/her), a 21-year-old black/Trinidadian participant regarding her relationship, she identified as a bisexual cisgender woman in the midst of questioning the fluidity of her gender expression. Her partner identified as bisexual and gender fluid, shifting pronouns over the course of a day. Nearly one year later, Adowa shared that both of their gender identities had shifted. Her partner was now identifying as a transgender woman,<sup>2</sup> and Adowa was feeling most comfortable with agender, nonbinary, bigender, or gender fluid identifications. Adowa's relationship and the relationships of other study participants reflect *expansivity*—or exceeding rigid categorical boundaries—as well as *flux*—or shifts occurring over time.

In engaging research on queer<sup>3</sup> and gender-nonconforming<sup>4</sup> partnership, my fundamental objective was utilitarian—to make visible a multiplicity of relationship scripts for queer and gender-nonconforming people. As a queer and nonbinary person providing violence prevention education in Utah, I encountered the omission of relationship scripts relevant to our experiences. Yet in sitting with the words of participants, a framework began emerging for how they and their partnerships both exceed rigid categorical boundaries and conventional expectations for remaining consistent over time. I apply a framework of expansivity and flux to identificatory categories, relationship forms, and intimate sensual/sexual practices throughout this

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<sup>1</sup> As per the IRB-approved consent form, all participants are referred to by a pseudonym of their choosing.

<sup>2</sup> Although Adowa's partner now identifies as a transgender woman, I refer to her as gender fluid throughout this thesis, as this was her identification at the time of the interview.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term *queer* to denote “nonnormative desires and sexual practices” (Love, 2014, p. 172).

<sup>4</sup> I use the term *gender-nonconforming* to denote nonnormative gender identifications, expressions, and embodiments (Love, 2014).

thesis to indicate that participants and their partnerships are comprised of complex and shifting parts.

Thus, this thesis has two objectives: (1) to make visible a multiplicity of identificatory, relational, and intimate practices as they navigate regulatory systems and (2) to elaborate expansive identities, partnerships, and sensual/sexual practices as they exceed prescribed norms and fluctuate over time. I intend this thesis to expand our intimate imaginaries and extend what we consider to be possible in intimate relationships. Even as I center queer and gender-nonconforming partnership in my analysis, the findings speak to a latent potentiality within the identificatory, relational, and intimate practices of us *all*.

### **Methods**

Consistent with a grounded theory approach, this study was approached with open intentions and minimal preconceptions. This study intended to uncover a multiplicity of relationship configurations and intimate practices by and for queer and/or gender-nonconforming people. I ask the following: How we are uniquely shaping our relationships? How, in our everyday lives, do we negotiate within and beyond cis-heteronormativity to invent queer ways of loving each other? Emerging are narratives of these varied relationship dynamics that grow our conditions of possibility, as well as an unanticipated theoretical framework.

### **Recruitment**

Outreach materials including a flyer, email, and social media post were developed, and the Rutgers University institutional review board approved them. The opportunity to participate was disseminated via the weekly newsletter of the LGBT center

at a large, public university in the mid-Atlantic and was announced on their social media pages, with flyers posted in and distributed through their office. The study was also announced in a few select departments on this campus. Lastly, I posted the opportunity on my social media pages. Participants were required (1) to identify as queer, transgender, and/or nonbinary *and* (2) to consider themselves partnered in some form. I verified via email that prospective participants met eligibility requirements. Thanks to the abundant interest that ensued, about mid-way through recruitment, I began asking participants their race/ethnicity in order to prioritize participation by persons of color, being that much gender and sexuality research is overwhelmingly focused on white experience.<sup>5</sup>

### **Sample**

I conducted 15 interviews, which I believed would sufficiently saturate my topic while being realistic about my own capacity and the scope of this project.<sup>6</sup> The primary sampling method used was “purposive social network sampling,” (Pfeffer, 2017) or developing relationships with key informants who can then disseminate the inform to their hard-to-reach and understudied network.<sup>7</sup> My approach also integrated maximum variation sampling to ensure that a multiplicity of lived experiences were represented. I anticipated that demographic questions (e.g., gender identity, gender expression, pronouns, sexual orientation, relationship configuration and so on), which I anticipated

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<sup>5</sup> Moore (2011) notes that much scholarship on gender and sexuality lacks intersectional perspective and that the focus is on “gay sexuality, not sexuality and race” (p. 2), which serves to reify white identity as universal gay identity.

<sup>6</sup> Charmaz (2014) notes that 12 interviews may suffice.

<sup>7</sup> See Pfeffer’s chapter in the recent anthology *Other, Please Specify: Queer Methods in Sociology*.

would be granted more depth by way of verbal description during the interview.

Accordingly, the demographic form posed open-ended questions as to race/ethnicity, class status, and ability status of participants and their partners. It also asked participants their age and instructed them to select a pseudonym to be used throughout the interview, in the transcript, in the resulting thesis, and any papers that might be written thereafter.

The result is a relatively young sample of individuals (average age of 24) who are generally committed to supporting queer and gender-nonconforming community. Many are community organizers for causes ranging from environmental and economic justice, to opposing white supremacy and police brutality. 87 percent of participants were transgender and/or nonbinary, 60 percent specifically identifying as queer, 40 percent identifying as people of color, 40 percent identifying as having a disabling condition, 40 percent identifying as non-monogamous, and 47 percent identifying as middle class (see Table 1). Participants were geographically located across five states (New Jersey, Utah, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Washington, D.C.). To review the demographic characteristics of their partners, see Appendix F.

Table 1

*Summary of Participant Demographic Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Sexuality	Race	Formation
MK	Woman, transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, tender butch, fuckboi	Queer	White	Polyamorous
James	Nonbinary, transgender man, embraces femininity	Queer, pansexual	White	Polyamorous
Dulcy	Nonbinary femme	Queer	Black; white	Non-monogamous

Athena	Between genderqueer and transgender woman; nonbinary femme	Pansexual, demisexual	Black American	Non-monogamous
Gabriella	Cisgender woman	Queer, sexually fluid, default to bisexual	Biracial; Dominican American	Monogamous
Alex	Nonbinary femme, default to transgender woman	Fluid	White	Monogamous
Ash	Nonbinary	Queer	White	Monogamous
Santana	Cisgender woman, femme	Queer, bisexual	Black	Monogamous
Jack	Femme of center, nonbinary femme, gender fluid	Queer, asexual	White	Monogamous
Robin	Nonbinary woman	Bisexual	White	Monogamous
Milo	Transgender man	Queer, gay, grey asexual/demisexual	White	Non-monogamous
Wren	Nonbinary, androgynous, soft butch	Queer, dyke, lesbian	White	Monogamous
CK	Genderqueer, butch, masculine	Queer, gay, dyke	White	Polyamorous
Zia	Between nonbinary and agender	Between bisexual and lesbian	Indian	Monogamous
Adowa	Cisgender woman, questioning, gender fluid	Bisexual	Black; Trinidadian	Monogamous

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## Study Procedures

The primary data gathering method of this research consists of 1.5-hour intensive interviews using my protocol as a flexible tool to encourage conversation, accompanied by “probing” techniques and detailed note taking. I developed the materials for this study (including a semistructured interview protocol, informed consent form, and participant demographic form), which were approved by the Rutgers University institutional review board (IRB). The protocol contains the following general sections: identities in

partnerships, dating and relationship scripts, relationship form, labor in relationship, emotional intimacy, physical intimacy, forms of social support, relationship conventions, and innovations. Protocol content is based on a series of questions and probes I formulated for this study, as well as two existing protocols I reviewed.<sup>8</sup>

I provided prospective participants with all materials ahead of time, to ensure that they were interested in and comfortable with questions posed. Prioritizing transparency throughout my research process, I shared with prospective participants that I am positioned in this research as a queer, nonbinary person (she/they) with race and relative class privilege, initially non-monogamously partnered and now in a monogamous relationship with a queer, trans, nonbinary-identified partner. I lived in New Jersey; if a participant lived in-state, the interview took place in person. In cases where participants lived out-of-state, we conducted interviews over Google Hangouts or phone. All interviews were audio-recorded, with the informed consent of participants. After each interview, the participant received a \$20 gift card either in person or by mail as compensation for their time and input.

### **Strategies of Analysis**

This study implements a grounded theory approach by systematically gathering and analyzing qualitative data, and inductively allowing conceptual categories and eventual theories to emerge directly from the data.<sup>9</sup> Such a strategy emphasizes the inevitable embeddedness of the researcher in their area of inquiry, and requires an

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<sup>8</sup> Including a protocol from *Queering Families* by Pfeffer (2017) and a protocol provided by Lamont (2017), whose article “*We Can Write the Script Ourselves*”: *Queer Challenges to Heteronormative Courtship Practices* I encountered early on.

<sup>9</sup> See *Constructing Grounded Theory* by Charmaz (2014) for a detailed account of the method.

ongoing commitment to self-reflexivity. Interviews were transcribed in full and thereafter underwent “member checking” to ensure participants felt represented by their account. Approved transcripts were then uploaded to the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. Initial coding was approached with openness and included labeling segments of data to begin making meaning of participant narratives, which became more narrowly focused as certain codes became more recurrent and analytically significant than others. Simultaneous memowriting occurred throughout to further explore emergent patterns and ideas.

### **Literature on Queer and Gender-Nonconforming Partnership**

This research prioritizes making visible a multiplicity of identificatory, relational, and intimate possibilities as strategically navigated amidst regulatory systems. In pursuing this study, I encountered only two book-length academic texts examining the partnerships of gender-nonconforming individuals. The earlier of the two is Sanger’s (2010) *Trans People’s Partnerships: Towards an Ethics of Intimacy*, which draws on interviews with 37 transgender people and their partners (some also trans), based in the UK, to think through how *all* genders, sexualities, and intimacies are regulated by state mechanisms, social norms and values, and the self-regulatory neoliberal individual, and intending to bring possible modes of resistance into view. Participants used a range of identificatory terms that vary from broad to more specific. In terms of gender these included genderqueer, intergender, in between genders, transgender woman/man, and non-trans; sexualities included undefined, queer, asexual, bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, and heterosexual; forms included both monogamous and non-monogamous. No participants seemed to use nonbinary pronouns in this sample, during this time and

context. Several interviewees do not mention race/ethnicity, which serves to reify whiteness as universal.

From the outset and threaded throughout, Sanger maps onto Foucault's notion of governmentality (p. 2), or power that induces self-governance via producing/enforcing normative "regimes of truth" (p. 31), and ethics/care of the self (p. 2), or the call to embrace an ongoing reformulation of identity and willingness to always be in process (p. 35). Sanger draws on Foucault to suggest it is "the individual's responsibility to reflect upon their own life and to choose how they should exist in the world" (p. 36) yet does not acknowledge that individuals have varying degrees of "choice" regarding how they move through the world, particularly in public spaces or amidst regulatory systems. Perhaps also, people have differing degrees of "responsibility" to enact changes to a system, which they benefit from to greater or lesser degrees, if at all. Employing these theoretical frameworks of governmentality and ethics, Sanger advances an "ethics of intimacy" (p. 134) wherein this logic of mutability is further applied to reconceptualizing intimate practices and possibilities.

One primary divergence between our studies resides in methodological approach. Whereas Sanger bases her ideas in the theories of another (in this case, Foucault) and then uses participant narratives to corroborate an ethical framework inspired by his existing concepts, my grounded theory approach allows concepts and eventual theorizing to emerge directly from the data collected during participant interviews. While I reviewed select literature early on to inform my interview protocol, I delayed a deeper dive into the relevant literature until thoroughly engaging my data, noting recurrent patterns, and generating the expansivity/flux framework to make sense of what I encountered. It is then

validated, for example, by Sanger's data, which contain a "heterogeneity and fluidity of experiences" (p. 1) and her claim that "fluidity and change over time must become factors recognised in intimacy studies" (p. 26). Another point of departure is that Sanger considers defaulting to a more legible identifier an act that reinforces the norm and symptomatic of the gender binary, in discussing a pansexual participant who defaulted to the term *bisexual* to increase their legibility (p. 98). In contrast, when this occurs in my sample I discuss it as the enactment of "strategic legibility," whereby participants are rendering their lives more livable. My findings affirm, as do Sanger's, that a shift in one partner's identity often impacts the identity of their partner(s). For example, when Adowa's partner opened up to her about gender identity/expression, Adowa explained "that planted a seed within me, *oh, I feel like I should be questioning my gender now. That's why right now I'm in this stage in exploring and questioning ways to express myself as well*" (November 4, 2018). Finally, it was intriguing to come across definitions of *bisexuality* during this time period (Sanger's data was collected from 2002–2006) and to find them so different in my data. For example, one of her participants observed, "*bi just seems so restrictive in the sense that it assumes two sexes and it just seems to rule out the in-between*" (p. 96), with Sanger noting that "Bisexuality allows for attraction to *either* [italics added] gender" (p. 97). My findings suggest that the queer community is repurposing bisexual identity to mean attraction to those of one's own gender, as well as genders apart from one's own.

Pfeffer's (2017) book *Queering Families: The Postmodern Partnerships of Cisgender Women and Transgender Men* centers the experiences of 50 women (who all happened to be cis) in relationships with transgender men. She intends to contribute to

understudied scholarship on gender, sexuality, and family, while also producing a resource for partners of transgender men. The book presents “thick description” alongside participant quotations, paired with researcher analysis. Our samples have similarities. For example, most of Pfeffer’s participants were in the United States (compared with my 100 percent), most of them had broad sexual identifications (compared with my 100 percent), with 25 percent practicing non-monogamy (compared with my 40 percent). Our participation also differs. I inquired as to the gender identity and gender expression of my participants, 87 percent of whom identified as gender-nonconforming (i.e., trans/nonbinary/genderqueer/gender fluid). Pfeffer asked about their gender identity and biological sex, which I consider to be an unnecessarily invasive question pertaining to a person’s genitals. However, in order to account for intersex folks, it would be legitimate to ask a question such as: “Do you or your partner(s) identify as intersex?” With all cisgender participants, only 15 *even identified a gender identity for themselves*, most femme. This speaks to the presumed universality of cisgender identity and the extent to which it is and taken for granted. Pfeffer’s participants had to designate their partners’ gender identity as “man,” “trans,” or “genderqueer,” which are not necessarily separate categories. An individual’s identification as transgender does not negate their identification as a man, and a person could identify as all three categories. Furthermore, (like most other research samples on sexuality and gender) only 10 percent of Pfeffer’s participants were persons of color, whereas 40 percent of my participants were.

Yet Pfeffer’s work meaningfully intervenes into those realms grappling with sexualities, genders, and relationships by making a case for broader definitions of *family form*. Invoking the term *postmodern partnerships*, she gestures toward the mobility of

categories, though this is not a primary theme. Yet throughout, Pfeffer uses terms such as *motion*, *ever-expanding*, *overflowing*, and *fluid* in reference to identity and form, signifying her acknowledgement of the mobility of categories. In her demographic form, she incorporates the medical transition of transgender men partnered with participants by asking about their “transition status.” Responses to the desire for testosterone and (top and bottom) surgery are portrayed as if all want to or have already begun or completed these procedures, and it is unclear if there were any who do not intend to partake in medical transition. She acknowledges the medical gatekeeping that can occur, the inaccessibility of transition for many (if not most) due to cost, and the prescribed discourses to which individuals are expected to adhere (e.g., born-in-the-wrong-body narratives, heteronormativity, binary gender). Pfeffer discusses transition and cisgender women partners’ perception of their partners’ transition, likely to illustrate what the process can resemble, thereby filling a gap in available resources. For example, from her time partnered with a transgender man, she notes “the lack of available resources and information about the experiences of partners of transgender men” (p. xxi). Similar to what I have found interpersonally and in participant data, she draws attention to ways in which navigating sexual intimacy can fall outside the gender binary. For example, language is significant when navigating sexual intimacy. Adopting the neutral term “genitals,” using terms in intentionally gendered ways that a partner finds affirming, and disassociating genitals from gender might be practices partners adopt; she speaks to some of this. One aspect of Pfeffer’s book I find most useful is the framework she develops to describe the ways in which transgender partnerships carefully navigate institutions by enacting what she terms *normative resistance* and *inventive pragmatism*. Normative

resistance entails “active strategies and actions for making life choices distinct from those considered most socially expected, celebrated, and sanctioned”; inventive pragmatism refers to “active strategies and actions...(or ‘workarounds’)...to access social and material resources on behalf of oneself or one’s family” (p. 135). This framework accounts for the nuance of simultaneously living life on one’s own terms, accounting for the regulatory systems we move in and the norms, traditions, and resources partners may want/need to access, rather than expecting all people to uniformly adhere to an “ethics of intimacy” when this may not be a realistic or desirable option. Lastly, she describes that the most common identity shift that took place among her sample of cisgender women partners of transgender men, fluctuated from lesbian to “queer” (i.e., a broader categorization), which resonates with the findings of the next work I discuss, which focuses on sexuality rather than gender nonconformity.

Central to Diamond’s (2008) book *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women’s Love and Desire* was the finding that most participants’ sexual identities shifted repeatedly over the course of her longitudinal study. These shifts were directed mainly toward *broader* identifications; that is, participant identities most often shifted toward bisexual or unlabeled identifications. She notes the contrast of this finding to standard identity models, which hold that identification moves linearly toward a stable identity of lesbian/gay/bisexual. Diamond’s study observed 100 cisgender women (85 percent of whom were white) over a period of 10 years by means of conducting one-on-one interviews every two years. The results catalyzed her development of a “female sexual fluidity” model positing that cisgender women have general sexual orientations based on varying degrees of attraction yet retain the capacity for fluidity influenced by situations,

close relationships, and overall environment. Some had greater capacity for fluidity than did others, and participants who retained consistent identifications were the smallest group.

Diamond emphasizes that, per her findings, non-exclusive attractions are the *most common* rather than the exception. In describing the directional broadening of participant identification, she offers: “Many of them gave up identity labels altogether because they felt that no single label could encompass the complexity of their feelings and experiences, and because they did not want to close off future possibilities” (p. 83). This sentiment resonates with many of the participants in my study who adopted broader identifications or who adopted numerous terms to describe themselves that would be deemed contradictory by normative standards but that make sense for them in the way they live their lives. However, this was exhibited not only in terms of sexual orientation, but also in terms of gender identity and expression, relationship form, and intimate practice.

In contrast with my work, Diamond focuses exclusively on differences based on binary gender in her comparison of the sexuality of cisgender women and cisgender men. She grounds her claim in research documenting that “women are more likely than men to have bisexual identities, attractions, and behaviors” (p. 95), without mentioning that her sample is based solely on cisgender people. Added complexity would result from incorporating the experiences of gender-nonconforming individuals and notions of shifting gender, as well as shifting sexuality. I consider this to be the most intriguing prospect. Despite her sole focus on cisgender experience, she acknowledges the predominance of cisgender identity in research on intimacy in a more recent chapter. In fact, she concludes by observing:

In embracing the complexity and fluidity of their gender identities, transgender and gender-variant individuals pose an inherent challenge to traditional assumptions about ‘healthy’ sexual and gender identity, and a key task for future research is to understand how their unique experiences with gender intersect with their experiences in sexually and emotionally intimate relationships. (Diamond, 2018, p. 290)

This call further affirms the focus of my research, studying the multitude of queer and gender-nonconforming partnerships in all their configurations and practices.

### **Organization of Thesis**

Chapter 1 of this thesis focuses on identities and identities-in-relation. I pair participant narratives with researcher analysis to demonstrate the ways identities exceed rigid categorization and fluctuate over time. This section engages gender identity, embodiment, sexual orientation, racial identity, and concludes by describing how participants validate these identities in their relationships. Chapter 2 addresses participant relationship forms. I expected participants to exhibit a clear practice of monogamy or non-monogamy, but many fluctuated between these categories. I explore the ways in which relationship forms exceed the monogamous/non-monogamous binary, and how these configurations shift over time. These proved to be dynamic relationship forms that exceed categorical boundaries. Finally, I discuss the ways in which partnerships challenge a hierarchical valuation of relationships, wherein the romantic/sexual couple is meant to take priority over platonic intimacy, kinship, and community.

Chapter 3 ventures into forms of sensual and sexual intimacy. This section explores the heterogeneity of asexual experience, and the ways those raised femme are recovering the sexual pleasure they have been taught to reject. Central to this discussion are the ways participants discussed the catharsis of “playing with power” and “power

exchange” during intimate encounters. Finally, the chapter discusses the incorporation of toys, props, and implements, including the appropriation of ostensibly gendered body parts during kinky genderqueer sex. Chapter 4 considers how queer and gender-nonconforming partnerships strategically navigate regulatory systems in terms of gender legibility, legal marriage, and child-rearing. Participants are constantly negotiating a balance between accessing and circumventing norms and institutions. The conclusion revisits the main claims of the thesis.

## Chapter 1

### Identities, Expressions, and Embodiments

*I just wish the world could change instead of my body* [laughs]. (Wren, October 24, 2018)

The queer and/or gender-nonconforming identities, expressions, and embodiments presented in this thesis bring into high relief the expanse of sexuality and gender, despite being subject to binary systems of categorization. Several participants articulated the limitations of rigid identity categories. For example, Jack (she/they), a 30-year-old, white, gender-fluid, nonbinary femme participant who identifies as queer and identifies on the asexual spectrum, offers: “I really don't like labels. It's hard to pick one label that fits me because *it could and has changed* [italics added], it feels weird to pick one” (October 20, 2018). Foucault (1978) observed that state institutions such as the family, school, and medicine regulate life (i.e., enact biopower) by diminishing heterogeneity into legible identificatory categories, contriving social hierarchies, and enforcing hegemonic norms. Legible identity categories, such as race, gender, and sexuality, become an imperative of the state as it endeavors to manage individuals and regulate populations.

Snorton (2017) foregrounds the racial dimensions constitutive of transgender identity by demonstrating that the “good transsexual”<sup>10</sup> emerged through a proximity to whiteness. Whereas white transgender women became incorporable through embodying and enacting normative white womanhood, it was at the expense of transgender women of color, whom Snorton demonstrates to be “outside—in excess of—the ‘American womanhood’ paradigm” (p. 160), subject to police harassment and arrest for publicly

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<sup>10</sup> See Skidmore, E. (2011). Constructing the “good transsexual”: Christine Jorgenson, whiteness, and heteronormativity in the mid-twentieth-century press. *Feminist Studies*, 37(2), 270–300.

expressing their gender. Snorton draws connections between black and transgender subjectivities in relation to the ways each have been rendered changeable. He explains: “they are brought into the same frame by the various ways they have been constituted as fungible, thingified, and interchangeable” (p. 6), as with the medical experimentation performed on enslaved black women, reduced to “ungendered flesh,”<sup>11</sup> which catalyzed the field of gynecology in the U.S. Similarly, Gill-Peterson (2018) foregrounds the nonconsensual sex reassignment procedures forced upon intersex infants that served as the antecedent to the category gender and gender affirmation surgery.

Meyerowitz (2002) demonstrates that fields of knowledge such as medicine, psychiatry, and psychology have enforced adherence to binary gender by pathologizing sexual and gender nonconformity. She describes the preoccupation of these disciplines with identifying the origins of nonconformity (i.e., whether psychological, biological, and/or social)<sup>12</sup> and “cures” for nonconformity designed to entrench normative gender and sexuality. Spade (2003) extends Foucault’s analysis to explain that it is by first producing categories of supposed deviance (e.g., transgender) by way of medical diagnoses, that normative (e.g., cisgender) categories of identity come to be produced as normal and natural. Such a bifurcation between normative and non-normative serves to regulate cisgender and transgender individuals alike, coercing entire populations toward narrow conceptions of masculinity or femininity. Normativity is further enforced by medical gatekeepers who require that (in order to gain access to care) gender-nonconforming individuals perform an investment in binary gender, such as expressing a

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<sup>11</sup> See Snorton (2017:19).

<sup>12</sup> See Meyerowitz (2002:107).

desire to “pass” as the “opposite” gender and to avail themselves of all possible hormonal and surgical interventions. Additionally, gender-nonconforming individuals are required to procure a letter of referral from a mental healthcare provider to procure hormones and/or top surgery, required to provide two letters to procure bottom surgery, and required to live “continuously for at least 12 months in the gender role that is congruent with their gender identity” (WPATH, 2012). Presuming gender nonconformity requires a diagnosis from a mental healthcare provider renders it pathological, while requiring a person to live for 12 months in a designated gender presumes that all individuals have a stable gender identification that corresponds with a normative gender role. In these ways, medical and mental health models intertwine to regulate gender identity, expression, and embodiment.

The state also enforces legible categories of sexuality and gender by regulating the gender marker on identity documentation such as birth certificates, social security cards, driver’s licenses, and passports. However, Spade (2008) demonstrates that the policies surrounding gender reclassification<sup>13</sup> in the U.S. are highly inconsistent, exposing these policies as developed and implemented arbitrarily. Further, due to the association of gender nonconformity with medical diagnosis and treatment, legal gender reclassification often requires various invasive medical procedures, from hysterectomies to various top and bottom procedures.<sup>14</sup> In her review of 38 legal cases regarding the gender reclassifications of transgender individuals in the U.S., Meadow (2010) observes

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<sup>13</sup> Spade (2008) defines *gender reclassification* as the practice of formally recognizing a shift in a person’s gender assigned at birth by state or federal government institutions.

<sup>14</sup> See Spade (2008: 736).

that even as transgender identity renders visible the “permeability of gender categories,”<sup>15</sup> courts require legibility in the gender binary and coherence among gender identity, expression, and embodiment when conferring legal recognition. Courts enforce gender legibility by requiring forms of medical intervention such as psychological counseling, hormone therapy, and bottom surgery (Meadow, 2010). Further, these cases are invested in “evidence of a stable identity”<sup>16</sup> that will remain consistent over time. Thus, the U.S. legal apparatus serves as another regulatory mechanism that enforces the diminution of expansive and fluctuating identities.

The vast majority of participants came up against “limitations of labels,” with identities, expressions, and embodiments that exceed the confines of such rigid categorization. Participants are comprised of numerous identifiers that are not necessarily exclusive to one another. Rather than seeking to undermine identity categories by foregrounding their assemblage, I draw attention to how participants employ a profusion of identity categories to make sense of their lived experiences. In her study of black cisgender lesbian women living in New York and their form of romantic relationships and/or families, Moore (2011) considers identity to be “a lived, continuous project” (p. 4) even as she observes:

Race remains a relatively stable and slowly changing power system in the way it structures the life chances of black Americans. For this group, the idea of categories being meaningless is largely a theoretical one, with little application to their experiences of being in the world or to their experiences of domination and subordination. (p. 5)

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<sup>15</sup> See Meadow (2010: 815).

<sup>16</sup> See Meadow (2010: 828).

Moore instructs that racial identity remains salient to the material experiences of people of color, and black Americans specifically. I engage race in this chapter to portray its impact on individuals and relationships, and the ways it structures life chances in systems of power. In a given situation, racial identity may take precedence, or it may strategically give way to other identity categories such as gender or sexuality, as with *code-switching*. Although race may fluctuate in this manner, it continues to dictate life chances in the U.S., with white individuals structurally advantaged and individuals of color structurally disadvantaged; this disparity must be attended to. Connection to race also fluctuates in the lives of participants as they challenge the white supremacy that has been instilled in them and challenge its embeddedness as a system of power.

Several participants exhibit what I call *identity expansivity*—they are expanding identificatory possibilities by exceeding categorical boundaries. Examples include identifying outside the gender binary (e.g., nonbinary), adopting identificatory labels conventionally thought to be mutually exclusive (e.g., woman, trans, nonbinary), and/or situating oneself *between* identity categories (e.g., *between* nonbinary and agender). Such (un)labeling practices confound the legibility required by regulatory systems. Many participants also engage in what I call *identity flux*, reflecting shifting relationships toward gender (e.g., moving from genderqueer to transgender woman to nonbinary femme), sexuality (e.g., moving from gay to queer), embodiment (e.g., alternating between wanting a flat chest and enjoying having breasts), and/or race (e.g., code-switching). These shifts occur over time. Some are immediately perceptible, whereas others occur over a period of years. In contrast to the universalized transgender narrative in the U.S., participants navigated shifts in identity on their own terms, without a linear

trajectory toward a concrete end goal. A shift in one identity category may bring about shifts in other identity categories, such as when relationship to gender changes (e.g., moving from cisgender man to nonbinary) and a shift in sexuality follows (e.g., moving from gay to queer). Such mobility resonates with the term *gender indefiniteness*, offered by Snorton (2017) as he describes the ambiguous gender of two black figures adorning an archival postcard. He observes:

Although the perception that “race” and “gender” are fixed and knowable terms is the dominant logic of identity...“trans” is more about a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival, and “Blackness” signifies upon an enveloping environment and condition of possibility.” (p. 2)

In describing their nonbinary and queer identity, white 35-year-old Ash (they/them) offered, “I decided lately that this is who I am, at least *it's who I feel like I am right now* [italics added]” (October 17, 2018). All participants made similar statements suggesting openness to change over time. This chapter discusses expansive and fluctuating identities, expressions, and embodiments. I conclude by discussing the ways partners provide mutual support, solidarity, and validation.

### **Gender Identity and Expression**

All participants discussed ways in which their own and/or a partner’s gender identity and expression exceed rigid categorization. CK (they/them) is a white 29-year-old genderqueer participant who experienced their “world opening up” upon coming into their queerness. Raised by conservative parents who founded a Lutheran church, CK found space to question norms with a previous long-term partner who “did gender and sexuality on his own terms” (CK, October 28, 2018). CK’s partner is MK,<sup>17</sup> a white 30-

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<sup>17</sup> This is the only partnership included in the study, with each partner interviewed separately.

year-old who identifies with an array of terms per their non-exclusive “both/and” mentality, including woman, trans, nonbinary, genderqueer, tender butch, and fuckboi. In this partnership, CK finds themselves further questioning gender rigidity and sharing (alongside MK) the perspective that “we get to use a bunch of labels that fit for us”<sup>18</sup> (2018). Describing their experience of gender, CK expressed:

For me it feels less like a trajectory. I have shifted my gender significantly in the last 5 years and the last year particularly. I have felt more comfortable expressing butch and masculine. *It doesn't feel like I'm trying to get anywhere...* [italics added] (CK)

CK is speaking to identity flux as ongoing process, wherein gender shifts over a period of years without becoming fixed. They do not feel compelled to follow a set path, or to accomplish a specific set of criteria. Identity flux is nonlinear, with no trajectory toward a definitive end goal. There is no expectation of arrival at a final gender destination. Although CK experiences what they describe as dysphoria, or “moments that feel hard being in the body [they are] in” (2018), for CK this has no prescriptive remedy beyond their shifting iterations of gender.

When Adowa’s partner acknowledged her own gender fluidity, it presented an opportunity for Adowa to explore her gender identity and expression in turn. Whereas Sanger (2010) observes that “transgender people and their partners are impacted by one another’s genders, sexualities and bodies with respect to their intimate lives” (p. 28), others note that this is not always the case.<sup>19</sup> Adowa describes her gender identity as “in

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<sup>18</sup> Sanger (2010) also encountered participants using a “plurality of identifiers,” which she found to problematize stable identity (p. 99).

<sup>19</sup> Spade (2006: 34) holds that those in a relationship may have sexual orientations not dependent upon the gender of their partner(s) (e.g., cisgender woman lesbian partnered with a transgender man with “fag” identity).

the works”—she identifies as a woman but is questioning her degree of fluidity. This suggests a period of identity flux, wherein Adowa’s gender is encompassing many characteristics at once with no perceptible urgency toward narrowing her gender identifiers. She then described her gender expression:

I am a Muslim person, so I wear the headscarf, but not as a typical Muslim woman that you'll see on television. I transition in the realms of masculinity and femininity. How I express myself manifests in the kind of clothes I wear, and also how I carry myself in everyday life. (November 4, 2018)

Adowa does not consider the masculine and feminine to be in binary opposition, but coexisting attributes that she can draw from in everyday life. Her gender takes form most visibly in her outward expressions and behaviors.

Adowa described visiting her grandmother’s library in Trinidad as a child, encountering books advising children to avoid “homosexuals” because they are a “stain on communities” (2018). Yet Adowa reconciled her identity with her religious practice through undergoing a “spiritual renewal” to heal and understand that “I have a right to have this spirituality; I have a place in this system” (2018). This brought her to research the presence of queer and gender-nonconforming people in various spiritual traditions throughout history, which is how she came to understand binary sexuality and gender as imposed by the West. She explained: “A lot of the work that especially transgender people have done, for Islam, for the message, and for spirituality, has been erased *because of colonialism*” (2018). Rather than finding her spiritual practice stifling, Adowa finds it to be affirming of her gender nonconformity. According to Adowa, Islam is not enforcing rigid identity categories; rather Western colonizers administered this

imperative. Adowa demonstrates identity expansivity both (1) in her simultaneous embrace of the masculine and feminine and (2) in her approach to gender as a process.

James (he/him) is an 18-year-old white transgender man who finds satisfaction in defying normative masculinity. One feature of his gender is “being who I am and like being validated as someone who identifies as male while still being feminine in a way” (September 20, 2018). He and his transmasculine partner share a desire to “feel pretty” without feeling that this detracts from their masculine identities. James does not consider masculinity and femininity as diametrically opposed. Rather his expansive identity incorporates elements of each, “I am transmasculine, I am a boy, I deserve that. But damn do I rock a dress, and I still deserve to be myself” (2018). James describes his gender as “being who I am,” and although his gender is primarily masculine, it is not exclusively masculine, as he does not adhere to the prescriptions of normative masculinity.

Zia (she/they) is an 18-year-old Indian-identified undocumented participant who characterizes their gender as somewhere between agender and nonbinary; “It really depends on the day,” they explain, “I just don't feel a connection to any sort of gender” (November 1, 2018). Zia met their partner at university orientation and described experiencing a haziness between friendship and dating, including open affection such as hand-holding, before defining their relationship. Zia was initially hesitant to pursue an intimate relationship with their partner, which they attributed to not wanting to compromise their friendship.<sup>20</sup> In asking Zia to further describe their day-to-day

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<sup>20</sup> In their study of lesbian courtship practices, Rose and Zand (2002) found that friendship was the predominant courtship script, which (the authors explain) can make it difficult for lesbians to know whether (when spending time with another woman) they are on a date or simply developing a friendship.

experience of gender, they explained, “There are days where I’ve wanted to be called ‘he/him,’ but there are days where I only want to be called ‘they/them’ or ‘she/her’...A lot of it changes based on my mood, or what I feel comfortable looking like” (2018). Zia articulates an expansive identity wherein flux is to be expected. Rather than being genderless, as may be supposed from their lack of “connection” to gender, Zia seems to contain the potentiality for many genders simultaneously. In Zia’s case, agender seems to imply no consistent identification with a single gender, and no impulse toward reducing the fluctuations of gender to fit exclusive categories. Taken together, these narratives of gender identity and expression exceed rigid gender categorization, instead portraying gender as comprised of many non-exclusive and fluctuating characteristics.

### **Embodiment**

The vast majority of participants describe having an expansive relationship to their body. Wren identifies as nonbinary with an androgynous expression, leaning toward soft butch. Wren attributes much of their willingness to interrogate binaries to their queerness, observing: “Why am I comfortable sitting in the unknown? Because my whole life has been a question. This questioning the binary is intrinsic to the truth of the world” (2018). This suggests that a person with marginal identity may be more inclined to acknowledge the expansive in themselves and others. Wren’s embodied experience challenges universalized narratives imposed on gender-nonconforming individuals, which coerce an adherence to binary gender norms. Fields of knowledge such as medicine, psychiatry, and psychology have perpetuated the fiction that all gender-nonconforming people experience gender dysphoria and want to transition, and that transition uniformly

entails living in a binary gender, hormone therapy, and gender affirmation surgery in the form of top and bottom procedures. Wren's nonbinary identity confounds this narrative:

I don't experience dysphoria, but I have at times considered things like binding—or I have bound—and things like top surgery are things I have considered but ultimately don't want to mess with. Yeah. I just wish the world could change instead of my body (*laughs*). (2018)

As with many other gender-nonconforming individuals, Wren does not experience gender dysphoria. Although they have bound their chest and considered top surgery, they associate this with existing in a world that demands conformity to binary gender in mind, body, and expression. Alternatively, as Wren suggested at the beginning of this chapter, rigid gender identity categories could be dissolved and people could have autonomy over the medical interventions, if any, they would like performed to increase the inhabitability of their body.

MK uses numerous gender identifiers that resonate with their experience, which has the effect of blurring the boundaries of rigid categorization. This also translates to the way they experience their body. Complicating universalized “born in the wrong body” narratives,<sup>21</sup> MK's experience of their body is expansive and fluctuating:

I often joke about wanting a bio-dick that I can also take off and leave at home. Or I joke about, I wish I could just take my breasts off sometimes and have a flat chest. Sometimes I do want to have my breasts, I really love them sometimes. (September 18, 2018)

MK's experience of their body far exceeds exclusive gender categories. Rather, their embodiment is dynamic, incorporating and disincorporating ostensibly gendered body parts as it suits them. At times they find their body fulfilling as it is; other times they

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<sup>21</sup> See Meyerowitz (2002: 111).

desire temporary modifications. MK's relationship to embodiment challenges narratives presupposing the ambition to medically transition to a fixed binary gender.

Transitioning was relatively new to Alex, an 18-year-old, white, nonbinary femme-identified participant. Their transition process may have entailed social transition only, hormones, or any number of interventions that Alex found affirming. She emphasized fashion in describing her gender identity, specifically her love of skirts and dresses. She was dating her partner prior to transitioning, and he has been supportive throughout the process. Alex has opted to transition in a way she finds meaningful. She identifies as a nonbinary femme, explaining, "I'm a woman, and I'm feminine, and that's my identity, but also there's an element of gender fluidity to it" (2018). She both aligns with and exceeds the categorical feminine. Contrary to the widespread assumption that all gender-nonconforming individuals experience gender dysphoria, Alex feels comfortable in her body and instead experiences *gender euphoria*. Putting language to this experience, Alex describes it as follows: "It just makes me very happy when someone refers to me with the right pronouns or validates me in the specific way of being a woman" (2018). As with other gender-nonconforming individuals, nonbinary people may desire to transition to varying degrees to feel affirmed in their gender identity. This is not fueled solely by negative perceptions of embodiment; it can also emerge from feeling positively about the body and being perceived in a particular manner.

As these participants' experiences of identity expansivity illustrate, the relationship to embodiment is complicated, and individuals find a variety of practices and interventions to be affirming. No single narrative can encompass the countless ways gender-nonconforming individuals relate to their bodies, whether or not they pursue

transition. These expansive experiences of gender resonate with Spade's (2006) argument for "a deregulation of gender expression and the promotion of self-determination of gender and sexual expression" (p. 319). Such a call might insist that medicine listen to and learn from gender-nonconforming people, legitimate their requests, and acknowledge that sexuality and gender are far too capacious for reductive categories of identity.

### **Sexual Orientation**

Nearly all participants discussed expansive or fluctuating sexual orientations not reducible to singular fixed categories. When Ash was young, they never felt like a boy, yet also did not feel the need to identify as a girl. Meeting their partner, who studied gender and sexuality while obtaining his undergraduate degree, helped Ash find language to describe their gender identity and question binary categories. Throughout most of their life, Ash identified as gay, yet as they came to understand their gender as nonbinary, they began identifying as queer. They spoke about having a consistent attraction to men, yet explained, "I think I've opened up the scope of what that means to me" (2018). During our interview, they described their attraction as extending beyond cisgender men to include male-identified people. As we spoke, they had a further realization: "The more I think about it, I don't even know if I would say people who identify as men. I guess I'm attracted to some sort of masculinity in presentation, but that might be just about all" (2018). As Ash gained more language around gender and sexuality, rigid categories broke down, and they could perceive more nuance in themselves and those around them. This expanded the horizons of their own gender and thereby their recognition of their capacity for attraction to others.

At the time of our interview, CK was exiting an eight-year relationship with a cisgender man while continuing to date MK non-monogamously. This previous long-term relationship opened them up to new ways of understanding the world—the first time they experienced sex as “good and joyful and gentle”—and the first time a partner sleeping with another person brought them feelings of excitement (compersion) rather than jealousy. CK explains a primary reason for their separation: “I’ve watched this person I care deeply about become less queer and self-identify as less queer and that is the thing that really shifted a lot of my attraction to him” (2018). CK has identified with the term *queer* to signify the range of people and bodies they found themselves attracted to and sleeping with; however, CK was experiencing identity flux in this situation. They explain: “One of the things happening right now, in talking to [my ex-partner] about not having sex with him anymore, I was like, also, ‘I think I might just be gay’ [*laughs*]. *It’s the language right now that’s feeling helpful* [italics added]” (2018). Though CK still identifies as queer, particularly with its political connotations,<sup>22</sup> they are beginning to identify more with the terms *gay* and *dyke*. By indicating that the term *gay* is “helpful,” that it has a utility for them, CK employs language to make sense of their current situations and experiences. As their sexual identity goes through a period of flux, they are adopting alternative terms to describe what they desire.

Milo (he/they) is a 23-year-old white transgender man who identifies primarily as queer but who also refers to himself as gay. His queer identity influences his BDSM practice, as he describes: “I have sexual attraction to men, but I’m also kinky...I do play

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<sup>22</sup> Stryker (2017) speaks to the reclamation of the term *queer* during the 1980s–1990s AIDS crisis as expressing political opposition to “heterosexist social norms” (p. 30).

with people of all genders in that way” (2018). Milo identifies as gay, yet his play partners are not strictly men and are not strictly masculine. He explained that BDSM scenes are not necessarily sexual; for example, when incorporating elements such as rope bondage or suspension, the focus is on the mental and emotional experience. Milo first met his partner/dominant/daddy at a leather convention, and they began a long-distance, non-monogamous relationship. The amount of sex Milo pursues outside of his relationship fluctuates, with Milo explaining: “In a way, I often ebb and flow through gray asexuality or demisexuality” (Milo). Milo exhibits identity expansivity in that his sexuality incorporates the umbrella term *queer*, as well as *gay*, signifying his attraction to the masculine, even as he plays with people of all genders and feels some affiliation with asexuality.

### **Dimensions of Race and Class**

**Whiteness as race.** A central feature of identity, as well as interpersonal and systemic identity relations, has come to be that of race. I begin by engaging the identities and observations of white participants to emphasize that they are subjects with race and material racial privilege, even as endemic white supremacy and ongoing settler colonialism in the U.S. conceals white racial identity by positioning it as universal and by legitimating occupation through its erasure.<sup>23</sup> Those who possess whiteness (i.e., who have whiteness as property<sup>24</sup>) most often do not experience themselves as racial subjects out of necessity; rather they may encounter their whiteness through deliberate

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<sup>23</sup> Vidal-Ortiz (2014) describes *whiteness* as an “unmarked social location,” as “a structuring and structured form of power that, through its operations, crystalizes inequality while enforcing its own invisibility” (p. 264).

<sup>24</sup> Harris, C. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review*, 106(8), pp. 1710–1791.

introspection, the seeking out of information, and by interrogating the material racial hierarchy pervading wider society. At one point during my interview with MK, they said, “when I was...figuring out that I was white” (2018). This language implies a process of coming to understand whiteness as a material (although constructed) racial identity and understanding oneself as a racialized white subject. MK is productively positioned, as an individual with white identity, who met their partner CK while facilitating a training for Showing Up for Racial Justice, which exists to educate and organize white folks against white supremacy.

MK described passing “young queers” on the street and noticing they did not make eye contact, speculating, “They’re too assimilated, they don’t nod at each other on the street in the way we used to,” going on to offer the astute observation, “I also understand is deeply informed by whiteness, right, like white people don’t say hi to each other on the street because we don’t see each other as part of the same group, we don’t feel racialized” (2018). MK identifies a juncture between queer identity and the disconnect that accompanies *whiteness as absence* of racial identity. White queers may also be more likely to embrace assimilationist posturing, as it is made disproportionately accessible to them. White individuals have the privilege of ignoring their racial identity if they so choose, and this is the easier option. To do otherwise is to experience the discomfort of what Wren termed “deep white guilt” (2018), with other white participants echoing sentiments of racial guilt and shame.<sup>25</sup> For example, CK shared, “One of the things that's been coming up a lot for [MK] is shame about being white, wealthy and

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<sup>25</sup> Moore (2011) notes that awareness of white racial privilege can manifest as feelings of “guilt and shame” (p. 7).

masculine” (2018). We *should* feel shame for being the beneficiaries of a white supremacist settler colonial state preconditioned on appropriation of land, indigenous genocide, and enslavement. And these feelings of guilt and shame may serve as a productive catalyst for white individuals to hold themselves accountable in a way that is ongoing—feelings that can be channeled into action. As a community organizer, Wren attributed their capacity for self-reflexivity to “years of doing work in [hometown] with multi-racial coalitions as a white organizer and just getting called out, and having to learn how to deal with that, and not internalize that, and recognize it's systemic” (2018). Even as white folks may endeavor to educate themselves and each other, they remain indebted to the labor of the “call out” by folks of color, in activist spaces and elsewhere.

MK observes, “I see that more white people who are queer see themselves as white than white people who are straight see themselves as white” (2018), suggesting that when whiteness is paired with some form of minoritized identity, it may be more likely that a person can become sensitized toward their own racialization and racial privilege. In the concluding thoughts of their interview, MK posed the question, “Are there ways we can use that trend or experience of white queer people being more understanding of race to change how we talk about race or change how we try to educate other white people about race?” In accordance with their racial justice organizing, MK intends to render their observation actionable. Perhaps, as they suggest, white queers occupy a unique position by which to undermine white supremacy in themselves, other white folks, and wider U.S. society. Perhaps *we* are well-positioned to both enact and advocate for white racial accountability.

**Class status.** Those occupying middle-to-working-class status in this study consisted of both white individuals and persons of color. However, the upper echelons of wealthy-to-upper-middle-class status was occupied entirely by white individuals, whereas those who considered themselves to be lower class were all persons of color. This suggests that extremes of high and low wealth are racially inflected due to the white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchy<sup>26</sup> that informs past and present systems of power in the U.S. For example, MK was the only participant who self-identified and was identified by their partner as unequivocally “wealthy,” with MK sharing, “I was raised in a family that has intergenerational wealth, and that has a way of reinforcing itself, perpetuating itself” (2018); that is to say, it set MK on a path to make a high wage in their chosen career. This observation acknowledges the perpetuation of intergenerational wealth in white nuclear family structures. Wealth inequality in the West is a white supremacist structural phenomenon that advantages white communities at the continued expense of communities of color.

In contrast, Dulcy (they/them), a 24-year-old black-identified, queer and nonbinary femme who considers themselves lower class, grew up with separated parents and a mother who provided financial support “as much as she could...we were also on government assistance,” further explaining, “I wasn’t supposed to let on that I knew how bad of a financial situation we were in” (September 25, 2018). Dulcy described how these circumstances played out in their childhood:

So I would take on caretaker duties, I would start taking care of my siblings because I have two younger sisters. Hindsight shows me *that’s just the expectation of black women. If I was a white child, that same conversation*

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<sup>26</sup> A riff on the following book: hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody*. Boston: South End Press.

*wouldn't have happened, that wouldn't have been the case. It just would not have been how it worked out [italics added]. (2018)*

Moore (2011) notes that one feature of African American households emerging from black feminist literature is the “long history of women’s employment and economic contributions to the survival and stability of poor, working-class, and middle-class black households” (p. 8). Dulcy’s childhood experience demonstrates the exorbitant labor those raised as black women are often required to perform due to being structurally barred from accumulating wealth. Athena identifies as “black American” and as working class. Although her experience cannot be generalized to all those subject to low-class status, Athena experiences her class as materially affecting her capacity to explore her gender expression:

I’ve been poor for a while, so on the list of things if I spend money on my clothes is pretty low in priority. So I feel like not being able to focus on what my look is, kinda prevents me from understanding what my expression is. (September 26, 2018)

Athena is preoccupied with meeting her immediate material needs. In comparison, items that would allow her to express her gender, such as clothing, do not readily enter her horizon of possibility. *Race as a function of class* inevitably translates into relationships.

**Respectability politics.** Several participants of color discussed the pressure to adhere to a politics of respectability. Moore (2011) locates the origins of respectability politics in the “cult of true womanhood,” which she describes as regulating “acceptable female behavior” in the South from the 1820s through twentieth century (p. 10). The definition of respectability politics, she contends, often excluded black women and women of working-class backgrounds altogether. In response, “black middle-class women collectively sought to create alternative self-images in order to shield themselves

from pervasive stereotypes about and negative estimates of their sexuality” (p. 10). Her findings suggest that adhering to a politics of respectability is one way that black lesbian women find acceptance in black communities. Respectability politics pervades communities throughout the U.S. (not just those comprised of black-identified people), particularly people who are minoritized, as they navigate systems of power. Though adherence to a politics of respectability can facilitate group acceptance, as Moore notes, it can also have detrimental effects if more multiply minoritized folks are sacrificed/disavowed/rendered disposable to position oneself as more “normal”/respectable/incorporable in the process.

Athena experienced a politics of respectability growing up, describing: “There’s been a push for black communities to come off as white as you can and to appear as if you are the model citizen, and that really affects how people view and describe families” (2018). Folks of color are compelled to meet disproportionately high standards to counter the unrelenting racism embedded in U.S. society and culture. Snorton (2017) draws on the notion of *colonial mimicry*<sup>27</sup> to describe the need for a familiar “Other” who resembles the colonizer/colonial power (i.e., enacts white social norms) in part but not entirely. The Other is meant to exhibit difference and thereby reinforce colonial power. Snorton discusses assimilation and “the various orders minoritized people are given to perform, as if they are no different from anyone else, which is to say, no different from white people” (p. 189), when folks of color are structurally barred. Snorton further observes that, although assimilation can be regarded as a survival strategy, it also “maps

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<sup>27</sup> This notion originates from Bhabha, H.K. (1994). *The location of culture*. New York: Routledge.

the colonial promise of assimilation as the always deferred possibility that one might live into as a way to contend with one's current condition" (p. 189). He complicates a politics of respectability by observing that its returns will always be limited, and its possibilities indefinitely deferred if white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchy has its way.

Whereas white individuals are often met with leniency or considered racial outliers if they make mistakes or do harm, individuals of color are made to account for the entirety of their racial group, particularly when they fail. Santana (she/her) is a 27-year-old participant who identifies as a black, queer, femme-expressing cisgender woman. She describes feeling the need to counter the negative stereotypes associated with her multiple subject positions: "I don't want to fulfill a stereotype. In the moment you're a reflection of multiple communities, you have to uphold this idea that 'Not all bi people,' 'Not all black people,' all of that" (October 19, 2018). Santana is located at numerous intersections of identity, which compounds the respectability she is expected to perform.

Dulcy resides at multiple intersections in terms of their identity and religious background, as a person brought up by a Mormon mother and Baptist father. They describe both religions as expecting strict adherence to normative gender roles, observing, "I don't feel like there is room to be queer in a cultural context because there is so much put on what it means to be a black female" (2018). I asked Dulcy to speak further regarding the expectations placed upon black femmes, and they explained:

The first thing that comes to mind is that idea of the unbreakable black woman. She's super strong, she can get through anything, she can do her own labor and yours as well, be that physical or emotional or all of the above at the same time. (2018)

Dulcy is speaking to the absurdly high standard that black femmes have *had* to achieve in the U.S. context in order to ensure their well-being and that of their families in the midst of ongoing debilitation by way of structural racism. Athena similarly observed: “Gay and queer people were not included in [the] vision of what a family looks like” (2018), which is connected to the pervasive politics of respectability imposed upon black family forms. She describes: “For a lot of reasons, I felt estranged from my racial community. I’d get the common, ‘I don’t act black enough, I don’t talk black.’ Some part of my being is a betrayal to my race” (2018). This notion of “betraying one’s race” is likely connected to the excessive pressure placed upon black individuals to flawlessly represent an entire racial group by white supremacist standards.

Speaking to the need to carefully navigate racial community *and* queer community, Santana invokes “code-switching and the putting on of different masks of master statuses,” going to describe her experience:

whenever I'm around black folk my blackness is the master status and my queerness is neither here nor there. If I am around queer folk then I feel my race but not in a positive way, whereas my queerness is accepted. My blackness is accepted with black people, my queerness is accepted with queer people, but I don't really feel accepted anywhere because I'm always dividing myself. (2018)

With her intersectional identity, Santana does not feel entirely seen by any one community. She experiences a compartmentalization of identity as she moves through these spaces, wherein she must alternate downplaying her queerness and her blackness. This resonates with Moore (2011), as she notes that “master-status is not fixed and that depending on the environment, people will choose different identities as primary according to how others in that context perceive them” (p. 110). Athena observed that black transgender folks “are often estranged from *normative* [italics added] queer

communities” (2018), implying that queer and gender-nonconforming identity is considered to be white by default. She went on to express:

I feel like the queer community has excluded me in a lot of instances, not because of my non-monogamy but *mostly because of my race* [italics added]. It’s been really alienating, even in communities of transgender people I’ve found it difficult to find support because a lot of the times I’ll go to a space but I’ll feel alienated, it makes it hard to seek support. (2018)

White supremacy runs deep, even in communities that foreground gender-nonconformity. Vidal-Ortiz (2014) observes: “it is through the silences in which whiteness operates that transgender communities, representations, and thus visibility retain a white homogenous perception” (p. 264). And thus whiteness, by remaining unmarked and unnamed, is perpetuated as universal even in transgender communities.

**Affirming community spaces.** Adowa held a leadership role in an LGBTQ group for people of color, explaining that “as a black person who is bisexual, I have unique experiences compared to someone who’s a white bisexual” (2018). Moore (2011) reinforces this notion by observing that the experiences of gay people of color “may differ qualitatively from those of their White peers, whose racial identities may not be as salient to their sense of self” (p. 3), as they are not required to experience themselves as racialized subjects. I asked Adowa to speak to the significance of having this racially-affirming LGBTQ space, and she described the shared need of group members to “find out how we were subjugated to whiteness, honestly, and subjugated in a way that we have to behave and perform as white people, that caricature in order to be seen as human” (2018). This group became a space whereby queer and gender-nonconforming people of color could raise consciousness regarding their experiences of racial oppression. Adowa further describes the significance of the group for her and others:

Having a space where our race is taken into account, and our struggles and our experiences were taken as paramount. So we could navigate certain internalized racism that we have. And anti-blackness in other communities. Even though it's a people of color group there are people, Indian, Hispanic, Latino, whatever, those respective communities have anti-blackness in them. Colorism as well. (2018)

She describes the need for spaces to exist that can hold the complexity of intersectional identity, while working to counter white supremacy and undo its internalized and systemic harms. Moore's (2011) findings suggest that "race rather than—or in addition—sexuality is a primary organizing identity for some black lesbians" (p. 7) and that race is often foundational to how black lesbians establish community. This is consistent with Adowa's sense that her experiences as a black bisexual person can be supported in community with individuals who experience oppression in terms of race, gender, and/or sexuality.

### **Validation in Partnerships**

All participants discussed ways in which mutual support and validation is exchanged in partnerships. Malatino (2019) theorizes intimacy between transgender subjects (t4t),<sup>28</sup> suggesting that the mutual recognition that can occur in community with other transgender people can provide healing and increase the livability of our lives. In doing so, they ask "how transgender subjects might (and do) cultivate forms of self-regard and intracommunal recognition that bolster our ability to see ourselves—and love ourselves, and each other" (Malatino, 2019, p. 642). I found this practice of recognition to be an important aspect of the intimate relationships between queer and gender-nonconforming participants in this study.

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<sup>28</sup> Malatino (2019) notes that the "t4t" (i.e., transgender for trans) acronym first emerged as a category on Craigslist personals.

Cis woman Gabriella, a 22-year-old biracial Dominican/white participant, has a cisgender woman partner with an androgynous gender expression that has come under increased scrutiny since entering a graduate program and profession that expects business casual attire. Previously, she felt most comfortable in gym clothes, but now she has a wardrobe full of bow ties, button-downs, and slacks. She experiences frequent misgendering, which she fears will only intensify in these public settings. Exacerbating this, although her parents have known of her lesbian/gay identity since she was in her mid-teens, her mother continually attempts to regulate her gender expression. Gabriella illustrated this using the scenario of a recent family wedding. Her partner wanted to wear a button-down and pants. Her mother, however, insisted she wear “something a bit more feminine” (2018), which deterred her from attending. Gabriella described how she validates her partner’s gender expression:

She'll send me pictures and I'll be like, ‘Oh my god you look so cute, I love what you're wearing.’ It's very much affirmation on what she's wearing, how she's presenting and helping her with that. She really appreciates that because no one has ever said anything positive about what she wears. (2018)

Gabriella recognizes that her partner experiences discomfort “because of how society expects her to perform her gender” (2018) and responds by making intentional effort to affirm her gender expression.

MK began openly identifying as transgender during Transgender Day of Remembrance in 2017. This came as a surprise to their partner CK, who had questions like, “Is this a shift? Have you been moving toward a trajectory I haven't known about?” (2018). CK wondered if this was affecting the way MK felt in their body, if it would change the way they have sex together, or if this was simply an acknowledgement of how

their partner already exists in the world. CK approached this fluctuation in identity with curiosity and openness, initiating a conversation:

[My partner] got to tell me what their gender identity is and what being transgender means to them...For me it's been so helpful to have them name that as a part of who they are because I get to watch my partner express desires and ways of being that make them feel really good, and I get to celebrate that with them. (2018)

CK supported their partner as they expanded the language they use to identify themselves by listening, showing understanding, and providing validation. The vast majority of participants described giving or receiving support for identity flux during the course of their relationship.

Participants also gave examples of mutual support occurring in their relationships. Wren met their partner when she was seven-and-a-half months pregnant, and neither were looking to be in a relationship. Yet a few months into knowing each other, they fell in love and quickly fulfilled the U-Haul-ing stereotype, with Wren playfully offering, “I wasn't given too many blueprints, but I was told, lesbians U-Haul” (2018). Although their positionalities differ, Wren explains that as community organizers “who understand our struggles are connected” (2018), they can navigate these differences in a way that strengthens their relationship. Wren summed up a few differences: “I am nonbinary, and that's something I engage with differently than [my partner]. She has different documentation status than I do, that's something where her experience has been really different than mine” (2018). Well over half of participants described navigating different positionalities in their relationships. Wren and their partner navigate their positionalities by making them visible and discussing them. They develop understanding by “asking each other to tell our own stories about those identities and those ways we've interacted

with power...Hearing each other's stories of self, and asking each other regularly, how can I show up for you in this moment?" (2018). Listening to and learning from a partner as to how they are situated in systems of power/oppression can allow partners to show up in meaningful ways.

## Chapter 2

### Beyond Monogamy and Non-Monogamy

*Growing up I didn't know that you could have multiple partners and what that might look like and they could be for different reasons, like sexual partners or romantic partners...It really could look like anything, your partner could look like anything and your partnership could look like anything. (Jack, 2018)*

Monogamy and non-monogamy are framed as diametrically opposed relationship forms by the sheer addition of “non-” as a prefix to the term *monogamy*, defined as the “reverse of”<sup>29</sup> or the antithesis of. Yet even as participants use the terms *monogamy* and *non-monogamy* to describe their partnerships, their practices often exceed rigid categorical boundaries. Some, such as Jack, spoke of not having the “emotional bandwidth” for non-monogamy but expressed openness to their spouse having other sexual partners. James and his fiancé identify as polyamorous and had recently exited a triad relationship because the other partner preferred a V-formation. While this might seem to render them temporarily exclusive, in practice their partnership continues to exceed monogamy. James described engaging in forms of platonic intimacy: “I mean I kiss my friends a lot [*laughs*]...we've talked about it as something that doesn't need to be discussed beforehand or communicated; it just happens; versus sex, which is much more romantically invested in our relationship” (2018). They have negotiated space for sensual encounters with others, with sexual intimacy requiring communication between partners.

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<sup>29</sup> “Non-”. In *The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*. Retrieved December 28, 2019, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/non->

In their book *Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and the Possibilities of Biology*, Willey (2016) situates monogamy as a naturecultural object, with meanings that shift based on histories, contexts, and material realities. Willey defines *monogamy* as a range of phenomena, including “sexual fidelity, the ideal of coupling, pair bond form—made intelligible through various disciplinary and disciplining modalities” (p. 4). Willey draws on the concepts of compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory monogamy, and compulsory sexuality to emphasize the ways in which we are structurally compelled toward certain norms with alternatives rendered virtually invisible. Willey’s research relies in part on their fieldwork at a neuroscience laboratory conducting genetic research on prairie voles interpreted to be monogamous. However, the term *monogamy* (as applied to this research) becomes convoluted in the public imaginary, as it connotes “sexual exclusivity (or ‘fidelity’) co-parenting, and long-term cohabitation,” even as scientists understand prairie voles to be more specifically “socially monogamous” (Willey, p. 48). That is to say, though they may be “pair bonded,” “extrapair copulation is widespread” (Willey, p. 49). Such a split between sexual and social monogamy demonstrates the slippages between monogamy and non-monogamy. Phillips (2010) further disrupts “normative monogamy” in her analysis of heterosexual *swingers*<sup>30</sup> who identify as monogamous yet who seek out extra-relational sex. She focuses on this population *because* they are heteronormative, thus portraying how even amongst otherwise

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<sup>30</sup> Phillips (2010) defines *swinging* as “multi-partner sex” and as ““non-monogamous sexual activity that *can* be experienced as a couple”” [italics added] via Bergstrand and Williams (2000). Note the word “*can* be experienced as a couple,” because the chapter mentions that sometimes people may simply watch their partner have sex with others. One participant in my study expressed interest in swinging and is open to their partner having sex with others separately, though they would prefer to have sex with others together (with their partner).

assimilated relationships, the practice of monogamy is “more fluid than perhaps previously imagined” (p. 85). Similar to how scientists split monogamy into its sexual/social components to justify their continued attribution of the term to prairie voles, Phillips notes that incorporating swinging into a monogamous worldview requires that monogamy “be disrupted, partitioned into its suddenly separable constituent parts—sexual and emotional monogamy” (p. 82). Swinging in this case once again exemplifies a slippage between monogamy and non-monogamy, with Phillips noting that the “arrangement both is and isn’t monogamous” (p. 85); that is to say, this practice exceeds the traditional categorical boundaries of normative monogamy. Slippages in relationship form surfaced with many participants in this study, as this chapter will discuss.

Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse (2006) understand polyamory as the concept “that it is possible, valid and worthwhile to maintain intimate, sexual, and/or loving relationships with more than one person,” associating it with polyamorous values of “caring, intimacy, honesty, equality, non-exclusivity and relational autonomy” (p. 518). These commitments are in accordance with the way non-monogamous participants described their approach to relationships. CK, who entered a non-monogamous partnership with MK while they were both in long-term non-monogamous relationships with other people, expressed that Spade’s (2006) book chapter “For Lovers and Fighters” helped them “realize I was a queer and that queerness aligned with my values” (2018). Spade undermines the inevitability of monogamy and explores the possibilities of polyamory. He identifies that “the myth of heteromonogamous romance” (p. 29) emerges from capitalism’s scarcity mentality, that perpetuates ideas such as there being only one person for each of us, that people have a limited supply of love, that we are in competition with each other for

partners, and partnership equated with possession. This resonates with sentiments that arose in this study, as when MK offered the following observation: “pitting ourselves against each other is a function of white supremacy, is a function of capitalism, is a function of the...extraction of resources and life to a very small number of people” (2018). Spade observes that this often leads to a hierarchical valuation of relationships, wherein romantic relationships are expected to meet all needs and are prioritized above all else. He acknowledges that these toxic yet pervasive relationship norms are “carried into queer communities,” influencing “approaches to sex, love, and romance” (p. 30), reinforcing the need (which I have identified) for a multiplicity of relationship scripts.

Spade finds promise in the queer community to grow our intimate imaginaries, as queer people often place deep value on friendship in developing alternative kinship structures in the absence of biofamilial support. Participants revalued relationships by moving away from a hierarchical valuation toward placing high value on all close relationships. They consciously extricate themselves from prioritizing romantic/sexual coupledness above all else, to valuing broader forms of intimacy. As Ash put it, “intimacy is so much more than sexual intimacy. I think even when you take sex out of the equation, sometimes there are non-sexual relationships that are even more intimate than sexual ones” (2018). Spade critiques the emergence of a “poly norm” in queer community, wherein some prescribe polyamory as the only “radical” way to do relationships and policing the behavior of others. Rather, Spade intends to “remove coercive mechanisms” (p. 39), which resonates with my intentions of opening up intimate possibilities rather than prescribing a particular relationship form or practice. He ultimately hopes we can build *trusting, loving relationships*, defined by “actual respect,

concern, commitment to act with kind intentions, accountability for our actions, and desire for mutual growth” (p. 36), rather than the imperative of exclusivity.

Extending the identity-based analyses of Chapter One to relationship formation, this chapter considers ways in which participants demonstrate *relationship expansivity*, meaning their relationship practices exceed the categorical boundaries of monogamy and/or non-monogamy—for example, identifying a relationship as monogamous wherein partners actively pursue sex with others (e.g., swinging) or identifying a relationship as non-monogamous while extending this into a revaluation of sexual, romantic, and/or platonic relationships that considers all worthy of investment. Slippages were found among monogamous *and* non-monogamous relationship forms, because of how participants are configuring their relationships, and also because “monogamy and nonmonogamy are not biologically distinct conceptual or behavioral phenomena” (Willey, 2016, p. 75). Participant partnerships also demonstrate *relationship flux*, or processes of shifting relationship forms. For example, when Ash was married to their former husband, they both opted to enter a closed triad relationship with Ash’s partner. This is an example of *polyfidelity*, or a form of polyamory defined by “closed-group relationships.”<sup>31</sup> When Ash’s ex-husband separated from them, “it was already sort of established that my current partner and I were not feeling comfortable with an open situation” (2018). This case illustrates relationship flux, as these practitioners of non-monogamy eventually circled back to a monogamous form. The vast majority of participants approach relationship formation as practice rather than orientation,

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<sup>31</sup> Pain, E. (2014). Polyamory and Polygamy. In S. J. Forsyth & H. Copes (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Social Deviance*, (pp. 527–529). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

expressing adaptability to circumstances and/or based on what they/their partner(s) agree upon. The sections that follow discuss the relationship dynamics of participants, drawing on their experiences to demonstrate ways in which monogamy, non-monogamy, and varied forms of intimacy may exceed presumed boundaries and fluctuate over periods of time. Participants are shown to revalue romantic/platonic relationships in the final section of this chapter.

### **Monogamy Unbound**

Well over half of participants discussed ways in which monogamy can be an expansive and fluctuating relationship form. The vast majority of those identifying their partnership as monogamous had previous experience with polyamory, or expressed openness to considering the practice. For example, Wren and their partner are practicing monogamy, yet both practiced non-monogamy in the past. Wren described dating people who were firmly committed to either practice, such as “I will always be monogamous” or, in turn, “I will always be non-monogamous.” Wren expressed, “I feel like I can kind of take it or leave it, it kind of depends on the situation I'm in” (2018). Wren demonstrates relationship expansivity, in that their formation at a given time is adaptable. They identify their partnership as “radically monogamous,” intentionally setting it apart from normative monogamy:

We're with each other, but we are under no illusion that we aren't going to be attracted to other people and have feelings, and probably have conversations with each other about what those feelings mean for us, for our relationship. (Wren, 2018)

Wren centers “serious, candid honesty” in any intimate relationship, including their current partnership. Their definition of *honesty* is intentional and ongoing, “not only

saying how I feel in the moment, but then taking time to really sit with what I'm feeling and making sure that's what I mean later" (2018). Their approach to this practice incorporates self-work and careful analysis of their own feelings. Wren describes circling back to their partner and offering further insight as they come to realizations. For example, when I said *this*, I realize it actually stemmed from *that*, "Being able to admit my mistakes and revisit an emotion, or conflict" (Wren, 2018). This commitment to honesty translates into communicating about the distinct relationships in their lives and what those relationships fulfill or may come to fulfill, "both platonically and otherwise" (Wren, 2018). Wren is adaptable. They have cultivated an openness in their relationship which encourages communication if feelings change.

Santana used the term *polyflexible* to describe her similarly adaptable perspective toward relationship form. She defines polyflexibility as "whatever my partner and I agree upon. So if the person wants to be monogamous, let's talk about that. If you want to be open, let's talk about it. I'm open" (2018). Santana has practiced non-monogamy in the past, although she defines her relationship with her cis-heterosexual male fiancé as monogamous. In practice, their relationship exceeds a bounded monogamy, as they have agreed that she can be sexual with coworkers. She explains that when stripping, she looks forward "to [having] sex with as many girls at work as possible" (2018), which she feels reaffirms her queerness while in an otherwise "passing" relationship. This is possible in part because, as she explains, "I have the kind of fiancé who's like, 'You can mess with girls; just don't mess with guys'...As long as I don't form an emotional attachment" (2018). Her fiancé seeing women-identified individuals as a non-threat (as sexual partners who are not to be taken seriously or that cater to the cis-heterosexual male gaze

in Santana's work environment) allows her to fulfill queer desire external to their relationship.

Robin (she/they) is a 19-year-old white nonbinary woman who identifies as bisexual, who considers her relationship monogamous even as it exceeds categorical boundaries. Robin acknowledges having the capacity to practice non-monogamy, yet she defers to her monogamous partner's preference that she refrain from dating other people. Although she has taken up a monogamous label, Robin offers, "We've talked about, if we want to have sex with other people, then we're okay with that...We are actively pursuing the idea of seeing other people sexually in our relationship" (2018). Robin explained that the dynamic of primary importance in their relationship is "checking in with our partner first" (2018); for example, if one of them wants to hook up with another person at a party. They have also discussed the possibility of participating in swinger events, with Robin emphasizing, "if [my partner and I] did want to have sex with another person we'd probably want our partner there just because it's more fun with more people" (2018). Even as the relationships in this section self-describe as monogamous, they exhibit relationship expansivity by way of practice.

### **Extending Non-Monogamy**

Almost half of participants spoke to ways in which non-monogamy is an expansive and fluctuating relationship form. The relationship between CK and MK demonstrates many of the values and practices associated with polyamory as expounded upon in the introduction of this chapter.<sup>32</sup> For example, both partners counter the scarcity

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<sup>32</sup> See Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse (2006: 518).

mentality laid out by Spade (2006) by committing to a practice of non-exclusivity, with CK describing: “poly helps me not get so wrapped up in a single person” (2018), and MK intentionally “investing in a broader web of relationships” (2018). This hints at relationship expansivity in terms of a willingness to revalue intimate relationships, challenging the traditional hierarchical value they are attributed. They also emphasize a willingness to take accountability during conflict. For example, one practice that works for them in their communication practice is to write down their thoughts, “We’re both journalers, so we will often be like, ‘I need to pause this conversation and write a little bit and figure out some of this thing’ ...we can pause communication in order to do some self-work, self-conversation” (MK, 2018). Another dynamic that has arisen in their relationship has been the need to set boundaries, what MK referred as “boundedness in care,” around the emotional labor that comes with discussing other partners. CK describes, “it was feeling really muddy for me. I had to set a boundary of like, ‘I can’t talk about your other partner, and the work you’re doing together’” (2018). Polyamorous people value honesty, so partnerships can require a careful balance between open communication and relying on partners to process other relationships. CK also drew attention to the deliberate planning and scheduling that their practice of polyamory requires. MK explains that despite their clashing work schedules, “We do our best to schedule a full or most of a day together about every other week, and spend a full weekend together every month” (2018), during which they focus on each other. They further resist a hierarchical valuation of relationships by not referring to each other as *primary partners*, a term used in poly relationships to denote a person’s most highly prioritized partner, in whom one invests the greatest amount of time, although MK notes

that they function as primary partners. Even so, CK observed that their form and practices are likely to fluctuate over time, offering, “I think it's going to really shift and change. I don't think I'm going to practice the same kind of poly my whole life. Just like all relationships, I'm going to need different things at different times” (2018). CK expresses openness to relationship flux by acknowledging that change is likely to occur in their poly practice.

Milo and his partner entered their relationship knowing it would be non-monogamous, as Milo's partner already had two husbands. Milo described first encountering polyamory through the punk scene and zines, eventually practicing polyamory. When he began dating his partner, they made a pact not to date anyone else for one year, giving themselves “a year with no new relationship energy and focusing on each other” (Milo, 2018). However, their agreement allowed them to “have sex with people outside of our relationship together sometimes. That was something we went into it knowing” (Milo, 2018). This arrangement demonstrates relationship expansivity, as they set boundaries around their pursuit of other partners, although Milo's boyfriend already had two established relationships, even as they permitted themselves to engage in multi-partner sex. Their relationship has also required communicating previously-experienced trauma as it surfaced in their relationship. Milo gave the example of being policed by a past partner who pressured him to be on good terms with his *metamour*,<sup>33</sup> explaining, “it had to be perfect” (2018). This resonates with Spade's (2006) critique of the “push for polyamory” (p. 36) in queer communities, as Milo's partner intended to

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<sup>33</sup> Ritchie and Barker (2006) identify the “first on-line use of the word ‘metamour’” in 2000; the definitions provided were “a love of loving,” intended to refer to “your partner's partner or sweetie's sweetie” (p. 593).

regulate his feelings by coercing him to like his metamour. These past feelings of trauma arose again for Milo upon realizing he does not care for one of his current metamours. He expressed, “I often feel like I'm bad poly because I don't really enjoy one of his husbands, and that was really hard” (2018). The situation was resolved when Milo shared his fears with his partner, who listened and validated Milo’s feelings while remaining impartial.

Athena is separately involved with three individuals, each of whom also have other partners. One partner is a transgender woman; another identifies as nonbinary, genderqueer, and masculine in expression; the third is a nonbinary femme Athena met while organizing to oppose police brutality. Athena identifies as both pansexual and demisexual, the latter a form of *asexuality*, defined as “feeling no sexual attraction towards other people unless a strong emotional bond has been established.”<sup>34</sup> She explained: “Sex is something that doesn’t come naturally to me, so figuring out what to do is always a process” (2018). She referred to *amatonormativity* during our interview, a term coined by Elizabeth Brake to “describe the widespread assumption that everyone is better off in an exclusive, romantic, long-term coupled relationship, and that everyone is seeking such a relationship” (Brake, 2012). Athena was introduced to the term by the founder of The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN),<sup>35</sup> who used the term to describe his cohabitation with couples without participating in sex, “He was still very vital and important in what it meant to be a family for these people” (2018). Athena found this language and the relationship expansivity it implies to be useful in describing

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<sup>34</sup> See AVEN (2019: The Gray Area).

<sup>35</sup> AVEN launched in 2001 to raise awareness of asexuality and to build asexual community, per their website. They claim to be the largest online asexual community. The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (2019). About AVEN. Retrieved from <https://www.asexuality.org/?q=about.html>

her relationship practice. Although those on the asexual spectrum do not experience sexual attraction or desire, they can experience “romantic, aesthetic, or sensual” attractions that can be directed toward particular genders.<sup>36</sup> In terms of relationships, AVEN explains, “Some asexual people may still desire romantic relationships. Other asexual people may be most satisfied with close friendships, or happier on their own”.<sup>37</sup> One concept often employed by those on the aromantic/asexual spectrums is “the split attraction model,” which acknowledges that “for some people romantic and sexual attraction are two different things.”<sup>38</sup> By explicitly partitioning the romantic and the sexual, this framework represents a tool by which individuals may come to better understand various aspects of their orientations. In this way, it exceeds the sexual/social bifurcation (in the case of scientists in Willey’s work) and the sexual/emotional bifurcation (in the case of swingers in Phillips’ work), as discussed in the introduction to this chapter. Due to the parameters of this study, asexual spectrum participants and partners experience romantic attraction and practice forms of sensuality with their partners such as cuddling, hand-holding, and kissing.

Athena and her partners carefully navigate the relationship boundaries of Partner A’s, B’s, and C’s other committed partnerships. She engages primarily in forms of intimacy with her direct partners and not with her metamours, investing time and emotional labor into listening, supporting mental health, and writing letters to her partners as expressions of romantic feelings. Athena’s practice of non-monogamy

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<sup>36</sup> See AVEN (2019: Overview, Attraction).

<sup>37</sup> See AVEN (2019: Overview, Relationships).

<sup>38</sup> See aroacefaq.tumblr.com (2016: The Split Attraction Model--What Is It?).

demonstrates relationship expansivity; she describes: “our relationships really just kind of fail labels, because of the way it’s constructed. When you add me into the mix it produces this arrangement that is hard to quantify, we don’t have language for that” (2018). Athena is disrupting the normative expectation of “having all our needs met” (p. 35) by one relationship, as identified by Spade (2006). Instead, her three partnerships meet different sets of desires for Athena and her partners. Her approach to relationships illustrates that there are numerous ways to organize kinship structures beyond the nuclear family.

### **Revaluing Relationships**

The vast majority of participants were found to be revaluing relationships, or challenging relational hierarchies that place the romantic/sexual couple above all other forms of intimacy. With their investment in community organizing focused on anti-capitalism and antiracism and on calling for climate justice, Wren and their partner value their platonic relationships. Wren further described this connection to community: “Both of us are community organizers and the relationship with community is a really big priority. In some ways it takes up relationship space” (2018), implying that the effort they put into their romantic relationship and relationship to community is comparable. They consider themselves part of “a larger ecosystem of resistance” (Wren, 2018), wherein building relationships with like-minded individuals sustains their political commitments. Community organizing has given Wren the opportunity to hone their communication skills and develop a commitment to “radical honesty” (2018). For example, Wren has learned to regularly check in on the feelings of other community organizers: “I feel like I’m classically conditioned to over-communicate feelings because after you check in—you have an organizer check-in—you’re both happier and feel better and more connected.

So it's like constantly reifying your relationship with each other" (2018). These intentional communication practices translate to their romantic relationship. Wren expressed that the more they practice checking in, the better they both become at "spidey-sensing non-verbal cues" (2018), which Wren feels helps them become a better partner: "I'm able to better guess where her needs are at; she's better able to show up for me" (2018). Both as community organizers and as people experienced with non-monogamy, Wren and their partner value the range of relationships in their lives. Their practice of monogamy demonstrates relationship expansivity, as it extends beyond the bounds of their romantic relationship, with Wren explaining, "when we say 'monogamy,' it feels very limiting for the variety of relationships that really end up making us who we are, and how we experience the world" (2018). Monogamy typically indicates a couple foreclosed from experiencing intimacy with others; however, Wren's monogamous relationship extends beyond this normative definition by remaining rooted in community.

In their practice of polyamory, CK and MK are committed to pursuing a range of relationships. CK explained: "We've spent probably the most time with each other out of all the people we each have in our lives, but deeply want and need each of us to have many other relationships" (2018). For example, MK described their relationship with their "bestie" as "a very sweet, tender, sometimes romantic relationship" (2018), often including forms of affection, such as cuddling. MK's relationship with their bestie resembles their romantic relationship, "other than [the fact that] I've never had sex with my bestie, and we don't tend to sleep in the same bed" (2018). MK went on to observe, "It's features that are different as opposed to value that's different" (2018). Though the substance of these relationships differ, they are not attributed more or less value. This

resonates with one of Spade's (2006) stated goals—to “treat the people I date more like I treat my friends--to be respectful and thoughtful and have boundaries and reasonable expectations” and in turn “to treat my friends more like my dates--to give them special attention, honor my commitments to them, be consistent, and invest deeply in our futures together” (p. 31). Such a practice exemplifies relationship expansivity, as it undermines the scarcity mentality emerging from capitalism that can often lead to a hierarchical valuation of relationships. The relationship between MK and CK demonstrates that polyamory can help individuals understand love as a source of abundance rather than as a scarce commodity. In CK's experience, it is valuable to find and maintain intimacy with “people and relationships that reflect back to us more of who we are and how we want to be in the world” (2018). Most participants found meaningful forms of intimacy within *and beyond* their partnerships.

### Chapter 3

#### Reimagining Sensual and Sexual Intimacy

*We don't ever leave the outside world behind, but there are ways we can play with power, and respect boundaries but also have it be really hot and consensual, and dominating in some ways. And you can release a lot of things for somebody else in those moments. It's a good practice that power is not stuck in particular ways out in the world.* (CK, 2018)

CK suggests that power is not one-dimensional but rather is a dynamic that can be reimagined through engaging in forms of sensual and sexual intimacy with others. Many participants discussed incorporating power play into their sexual repertoire. Perhaps, then, power play and the performance of consent can provide a sense of agency rarely accessible in systems of power. After all, common adages of *BDSM*<sup>39</sup> include “safe, sane, consensual” and “risk-aware consensual kink.”<sup>40</sup> In her book *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography*, Cruz (2016) examines the racialization embedded in BDSM practice, centering her analysis on black cisgender women who are often relegated to its periphery. Cruz seeks to understand how, in BDSM situations, “violence and aggression become a source of sexual pleasure and possibility for women and how women are active agents of violence and domination rather than passive victims” (p. 8). She argues that *race play*,<sup>41</sup> while controversial, represents a mode by which black women may choose to “fuck and fuck *with* racism” (p. 56). She ties such practices to the

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<sup>39</sup> Sloan (2015) defines Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, and Sadism and Masochism (*BDSM*) as “consensual interactions in which two or more adults cultivate a power imbalance through physical restraint, emotional vulnerability, role-playing, pain, or other intense sensations” (p. 548-549).

<sup>40</sup> See Cruz, A. (2016). *The color of kink: Black women, BDSM, and pornography*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>41</sup> Cruz defines *race play* as a form of interracial D/s that “uses racism as a tool of practice, often involving the exchange of racist language, role play, and the construction of scenes of racial degradation” (p. 33).

agentive pleasure-seeking of practitioners and to the “therapeutic potential” of BDSM “to transform trauma into both pleasure and a kind of healing and self-recovery” (p. 63).

While she hesitates to emphasize BDSM’s therapeutic capacity for fear of its becoming further pathologized, she observes that both race play and rape play can produce a reclamation of the self: “Through the reenactment of past sexual [and racial] trauma on their own terms, these women become agents of their own sexual pleasure and pain” (p. 63). The “therapeutic potential” of BDSM is demonstrated by participants as traumas surface and are worked through in relationships.

Cruz complicates notions of consent, observing that “consent is not a universal principle; it does not have the same valence for everyone” (p. 46); that is, it is disproportionately accessible based upon histories and realities of subordination in systems of power. However, the black women BDSM practitioners she encountered found consent to be a source of both “pleasure” and “empowerment.” Many participants practice “consent” but define it in different ways (e.g., consent forms, blanket consent, consensual non-consent). Cruz explains that, for the black women in her study, “Consent in BDSM functions to transform the quotidian physical and psychic pain of black abjection into the realm of rapture and affective agency in the ‘safe’ playground of kink” (p. 65). This resonates with my earlier observation, that perhaps practices of consent can provide a sense of power and agency rarely accessible in wider society. Cruz investigates the use of “fucking machines,” tracing the “white male genealogy” (p. 197) of their invention; I complicate this analysis of toys, props, and implements by considering how they are appropriated and redefined by participants to affirm gender identity and embodiment.

BDSM can facilitate open communication, boundary-setting, the fulfillment of sexual/non-sexual desires, and relationship building. A few participant BDSM practitioners discussed the capacity of BDSM to center *non-sexual*<sup>42</sup> desires. Sloan's (2015) article "Ace of (BDSM) Clubs: Building Asexual Relationships through BDSM practice" is instructive in examining these experiences. Sloan complicates the assumption that BDSM is inherently sexual by drawing on the narratives of 15 asexual BDSM practitioners who use the practice to navigate non-sexual intimate relationships. Negotiation within BDSM provides a script by which asexual individuals can express "attractions they *do* feel and fantasies they *do* wish to realize" (p. 553), while communicating that these attractions and fantasies are *not based in sexual desire*. Partners can communicate what they consider to be sexual and non-sexual behaviors, and establish boundaries accordingly. BDSM gave Sloan's participants the language to describe sex as "just another kink", that is, "an activity that practitioners should respect for its potential to generate pleasure and intimacy, but not assume to be ubiquitously desired" (p. 555). In these ways, BDSM provides an avenue by which asexual individuals can form intimate relationships based upon well-articulated expectations.

This chapter ventures into the dynamics surrounding sensual and sexual intimate practice. The section covering sensual intimacy (or forms of physical pleasure that de-center sex) engages participants and partners on the asexual spectrum, proposes expansive possibilities for pleasurable intimate encounter, and examines how participants

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<sup>42</sup> Sloan (2015) describes a behavior as *non-sexual* if it is not primarily motivated by "its capacity to vitalize a desire for intercourse, or to incite pleasurable arousal, anticipation, or fantasy derived from the idea of intercourse" (p. 556-557).

raised femme have been socialized to detach from their desires and experiences of pleasure. Dispelling misconceptions, all asexually-identified participants and partners enjoy sensual intimacy such as cuddling, hand-holding, and kissing. The chapter discusses the innovative sexual practices of participants, including language used during sexual encounters; one's relationship to embodiment and its effect on relationships between bodies; the incorporation of toys, props, and implements; the ways power dynamics are explored between partners; and the ways body parts are appropriated, their normative roles disregarded for genderqueer sex exceeding bodily binaries. I consider a person or partnership to demonstrate *intimate expansivity* if they are reimagining intimacy beyond compulsory hetero/sexuality<sup>43</sup> in ways such as de-centering sex, perceiving sex to extend beyond penetrative heteronormative intercourse, practicing power play/BDSM and in doing so reimagining the possibilities of power dynamics, or appropriating ostensibly gendered body parts for kinky genderqueer sex. Participants demonstrate periods of *intimate flux* when a dynamic in their intimate practice shifts, such as shifting the language used to refer to bodies (e.g., moving from "cunt" to "dick"), a partner transitioning socially (e.g., adopting nonbinary identity and they/them pronouns), and/or with medical intervention (e.g., hormone therapy and change of gendered terms during sex). Dynamics may continually fluctuate to reflect a gender fluid identity.

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<sup>43</sup> Willey (2016) uses the term *compulsory hetero/sexuality* to indicate both compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory sexuality (p. 5).

## Sensual Intimacy

The vast majority of participants mentioned forms of sensual intimacy. Willey (2016) uses the term *compulsory hetero/sexuality* (p. 5) to suggest that a heterosexual orientation is prescribed as the “healthy” norm, and that engaging in sex is prescribed as fundamental to a “healthy” and legitimate relationship. Yet several participants prioritize forms of sensual intimacy over sex and may rarely or never have sex. Participants who identify, or whose partners identify, on the asexual spectrum discussed the need to center asexual identities; they emphasized that romantic relationships do not require sex. Many participants raised femme also discussed forms of socialization that sought to repress their sexual desires and experiences of sexual pleasure.

**Asexuality.** Dulcy recognized the absence of asexual representation and the need to make visible asexual identities through their relationship with Partner A, expressing, “I recognize a whole lot more. Like, holy shit, you never see yourself” (2018), further asking, “What would it look like if we catered toward the lens of asexuality?” (2018). Partner A identifies as an asexual, nonbinary transgender person with a femme expression and masculine (he/him) pronouns. Exceeding the stereotypes surrounding asexuality, they began as play partners. Although they shared an interest in BDSM and kink, they each wanted something different out of the experience. Dulcy was seeking sexual pleasure, whereas Partner A wanted to explore their relationship to power. Sloan considers the exploration of power dynamics to be a valid, stand-alone desire; “a legitimate source of satisfaction on its own” (p. 559). Dulcy and Partner A decided it was possible to fulfill each of their desires, yet this was a complicated dynamic to negotiate. “I’d never been taught that something could be sexual for one person and not sexual for

another person” (Dulcy, 2018). They negotiated their desires and boundaries by modifying a contract they found online and talking through what they were willing and unwilling to do. For Partner A, this meant, “I can watch, I can command, I can praise and validate but I will not touch” (Dulcy, 2018). They can revisit their contract as their desires and boundaries change. For example, at first their relationship was restricted to play, but they eventually chose to pursue a romantic relationship. Further dispelling the stereotypes surrounding asexuality, Dulcy describes: “Partner A really likes physical affection, so when we go out, we’re holding hands, or they’re holding me, or we’re cuddling, or they’re sitting on my lap—there’s some indication of partnership” (2018). Partner A demonstrates intimate expansivity by exceeding conventional boundaries as an asexual BDSM practitioner who enjoys sensual intimacy.

Jack feels that their sexuality lies on the asexual spectrum. They have a “sex drive,” but it is not on par with their spouse’s; accordingly, they prioritize romantic and emotional connection over sex. For Jack, this has initiated a process of sifting through their anxiety and coming to better understand their sexual orientation. Still, the incongruity of their sex drives has been a challenge. Jack attributes this, in part, to cis-heterosexual relationship norms. “It’s really been hard to navigate compulsory monogamy in the pressures to have sex a certain amount of times, not feeling like I’m letting my partner down or hurting our relationship in some way” (2018). The prescription that sex must occur with a minimum frequency for a relationship to be considered successful is compounded for those on the asexual spectrum. Even so, Jack and their partner reimagine sexual intimacy by “getting away from the idea of sex being compulsory” and refusing “sex as only a penetrative act that will lead to mutual orgasm” (2018). Jack demonstrates

intimate expansivity by questioning compulsory hetero/sexuality—that is to say, reimagining sex without a mandated frequency or prescriptive sex acts. Jack describes their intimacy as a “work in process” as they explore having sex in ways that are comfortable, non-coercive, and pleasurable (2018).

**Recovering pleasure.** Another dimension to consider are the perspectives of participants who described being socialized to be “ashamed” of sex while growing up. In being taught to bury their sexual desires, nearly half of participants described finding it difficult to know what they want or how to ask for it during a sexual encounter. Spade (2006) observes:

We [people socialized as women] are raised to think that sexual pleasure is not for us, that to seek out pleasure is to be a slut, that we should be less sexual than men, that sex is a service you give to attain commitment and family structure from men. Moving past that, owning sexual pleasure and being allowed to seek it out is a radical act for everyone in our shame-filled culture, but particularly for people raised as women who are told to be sexy (for others to consume) but not pleasure-seeking. (p. 34)

For example, James was taught that relationships are never about yourself: “Holding your own wants and desires was never well-represented for me, it was always about the other person” (2018).

Those raised as women are taught to disregard their desires and to put the pleasure of others before their own. This can make it challenging to reclaim an entitlement to pleasure, with MK explaining, “I think a lot of us, we’ve been so trained in conformity and norms that we really don’t know what we want” (2018). CK described that topping during power play has brought them to sex therapy. “I felt like our sex was causing me to come up against a ton of fears around masculinity and even expressing desire” (2018). This is complicated for CK, who was brought up in a conservative environment and who

has begun presenting as increasingly butch and masculine. CK further observed that their partner MK, who is also in sex therapy, “is struggling with how to be present when they're experiencing pleasure and sex in a really deep vulnerable way” (2018), which CK attributed to disassociating during past sexual encounters because of their gender identity. For Robin, past trauma has led to disassociating during sex; “Once I'm not enjoying something, my instinct is to just shut up and let it happen,” yet she explains that in her current relationship, “I'm working on not doing that. That hurts both of us” (2018). MK described a time when they were having sex with their partner CK and came to realize it was not for pleasure or connection, but because they thought they should be having sex frequently. They recognized, “I'm not really enjoying this, I don't want to be doing this” (MK, 2018), at which point they interrupted the encounter; “I stopped it, and it was great, but I had to do a lot of self-talk to figure out what was going on, and then a lot of writing about the experience to really understand” (2018). MK came up against compulsory hetero/sexuality in feeling internalized pressure to have frequent sex with their partner, and proceeded to challenge its prescriptions.

Participants spoke of ways they build emotional and sensual intimacy in ways that enhance sexual intimacy. Wren and others described the importance of checking in both during and after sex, with questions such as “How did you feel about that?” or “Was your orgasm good? Mine was” (Wren, 2018). MK and CK have developed a practice of storytelling after sex: “The first thing that happened was this, you did this...and then...” (MK, 2018), as well as offering feedback, such as “This is the thing that really made that awesome for me” (MK, 2018). By way of check-ins, partners revisit shared erotic experiences to learn what evoked feelings of pleasure (or did not). These examples

resonate with practices of “aftercare” that generally follow BDSM encounters, described by Sloan (2015) as “an opportunity to alleviate the intense emotions incited by scenes by cuddling, rehydrating, troubleshooting the scene, or recounting its successes” (p. 551). Raised in an “anti-sex” environment, CK described feeling “stuck even being able to talk about stuff. And I don't want to feel that way” (2018). To work through feeling “stuck,” CK and MK exchange smut they have written to unlearn shame and to practice expressing their sexual desires.

### **Sexual Intimacy**

Participants are demonstrating intimate expansivity in their partnerships through incorporating variations on performing consent, embracing power dynamics, adopting gender-affirming language, adapting to embodied preferences, and involving implements in creative ways. I inquired as to consent practices in large part due to my background as a violence prevention educator. I understand consent to be differentially accessible and interpretable as a form of respectability politic. This inquiry was met with a range of responses, largely dependent on preference and stage of relationship. As with the contract Dulcy incorporated to navigate BDSM practice, others such as James used an online consent form to open dialogue around sexual preferences, preferred terminology for the body, and areas where the waters may be tested. Santana made her hard limits known: “So for me, no kids, no animals, no shit, no piss. Those are hard boundaries. Anything that's not those, let's talk about it” (2018).

Robin and her partner make a habit of talking about their desires both during and outside of intimate situations. During more dominant scenarios, they find creative ways to check in: “We say, ‘I bet you'd love it if I kept spanking you,’ so it gives an

opportunity for the sub to say ‘no’” (Robin, 2018). Many, such as Wren, described frequent verbal check-ins toward the beginning of their relationship, with dynamics becoming more intuitive as familiarity and trust are built over time: “I think after being together for weeks and months, the every-step consent fades into slightly more fluid stuff” (2018). Some prefer fewer restrictions despite recognizing “It’s a bit taboo” (Milo, 2018) and have negotiated forms of blanket consent wherein both partners may, for example, have sex with the other while asleep. Milo and his partner at times also choose to incorporate themes of consensual non-consent in their planned BDSM scenes.<sup>44</sup> The point being, what we refer to as “consent” takes no singular form and may fluctuate over time in a given relationship. However, the performance of consent can provide a sense of agency in interpersonal situations even as it remains systemically inaccessible.

**Playing with power.** Most participants incorporate power play, BDSM, and/or topping and bottoming in their sexual intimacy. Power play makes sex more “enlivening” for CK: “The first time [my partner] grabbed me harder, my body reacted in a way it never had before, and I was like, ‘Oh I like this.’ A lot of it is just mutual pleasure” (2018). Their partner MK identifies as a power bottom who loves to create their scene and tell people what they want. As they put it, “It’s really important to me to be able to say ‘This feels awesome,’ ‘I love it when you do x,’ or ‘I want you do y to me’” (MK, 2018). MK reiterated their practice of exchanging written smut with partners as a medium for communicating desires: “I want to say nasty things to people and have them respond in kind” (2018). CK was attracted to MK’s candid expressions of desire from their initial

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<sup>44</sup> Sloan (2015) describes *scenes* as the “physical location, time span, and fantasized scenario in which this power exchange takes place” (p. 551).

encounters, yet as their relationship has become more exploratory and vulnerable, they have uncovered areas of MK's body that cannot be touched in particular ways at the risk of triggering them. Careful to be attentive during power play, CK described running their fingers down MK's sides as MK was tied up: "I just saw their face and I was like, 'Okay. Let me untie you'" (2018). This represents an instance of surfacing trauma, as Cruz noted may emerge during BDSM practice, which gives a person the opportunity to process the trauma. CK attributed this triggering experience to times when MK has disassociated during past sexual encounters due to gender dynamics and safety concerns. CK described the added responsibility they feel when incorporating power play into intimate practice and their fear of evoking a triggering experience: "I don't have control over that all the time, we do as much support or care as we can...but often times we don't know" (CK, 2018). Communicating needs and desires can anticipate and prevent distress or discomfort, but trauma can still arise unexpectedly. Precautions can be taken, yet a partner may still come up against past harms, gender dysphoria, or other experiences that make sex difficult. Provisioning care and paying attention to nonverbal cues is necessary.

Milo explained being drawn to the BDSM community in part because the gay men involved are more likely to have educated themselves on transgender identity. From the time of their initial encounters, Milo and his partner discussed what feels pleasurable and affirming. They now have an established D/s dynamic; "He's a dominant, and I'm 'the submissive'...He's technically my daddy, and I'm his boy. We also have an authority exchange situation" (Milo, 2018). Milo distinguished between power and authority, emphasizing his autonomous decision to confer authority to his partner: "I'm not giving him all the power because I still have a shit ton of power" (2018). They have several

kinks in common wherein they will plan scenes ahead of time, including pushing the boundaries of consensual non-consent and exploring themes of incest. Milo gave an example: “we were going into a more purposeful scene of me pushing him off as he's trying to fuck me” (2018), explaining that although “it’s the hottest thing for both of us,” it requires them both being in a primed mental and emotional headspace. Although these scenes are controversial, as with the race play documented by Cruz, they are carefully negotiated and entered into consensually. As a queer partnership in the BDSM scene, Milo and his partner stray away from strict protocol and will at times switch roles in ways that undermine conventional D/s dynamics. Switching up their D/s dynamic and deviating from protocol demonstrates a practice of intimate expansivity.

**Implements, embodiments, and the performance of sex.** The sexual practices of participants exceeded cis-heteronormative expectations by reconceptualizing the gendered body in the performance of sex. The vast majority of participants demonstrate forms of intimate expansivity during sexual intimacy. Several participants spoke of the need to consciously navigate the language applied to the body during sexual encounters between queer and/or gender-nonconforming partners. Some ask that certain body parts such as the chest not be acknowledged or touched. Milo had a realization, or intimate flux, during initial sexual encounters with his partner: “I was using the word ‘cunt’ and then realized as I settled into things, ‘no I actually really don't like that’” (2018). Milo now uses terms such as “dick,” the playful term “gennies,” “front hole,” or “*his* hole” (i.e., “his” attributing possession to Milo’s partner, given their D/s dynamic), and “ass” to refer to his body. During our interview, Robin mentioned that her partner recently began hormone therapy. With this change, embodied language has been shifting toward the

feminine. Robin increasingly uses terms such as “tits,” “clit,” and “eating out,” though Robin explained that her partner is “starting to feel like it's not really masculine to have a dick, now that she's meeting other people who are women with dicks” (2018). This insight gets at the notion that bodies, and genitals in particular, are not inherently gendered. Adowa’s partner identified as gender fluid, which played out during their remote sexual encounters as long-distance partners. Adowa described the fluctuating language she used: When they're feeling...more like a girl, they prefer I don't refer to their chest as a “chest” but refer to them as “tits.” They refer to their genitals, as like “girl cock”...it changes depending on their gender at that moment (2018). Intimate flux can occur infrequently, or (as with Adowa’s gender fluid partner) it can be ongoing during an intimate encounter. As these examples illustrate, the language applied to the body plays an important role in affirming gender identity. The intimate sphere can serve as a productive space to discover language that feels most comfortable.

Santana described her cis-heterosexual male fiancé’s discomfort with her using vibrators and dildos, explaining: “There's...something about toys, that's like ‘You don't need a toy, you have me’” (2018). She had a similar experience with a past cis-heterosexual male partner who interpreted her use of toys as a critique of his ability to sexually satisfy. In both cases, a cisgender woman partner using toys to stimulate herself is seen as emasculating the cis-heterosexual male partner. Sex toys themselves may present a queer association by which the cis-heterosexual masculine is threatened. Yet Santana is clear and sarcastic regarding her motives and desires: “Vaginal orgasms are great, but so are clitoral orgasms; can I have them all?” (2018). The fiction that cis-heterosexual masculine penetration is the ultimate satisfaction is projected onto Santana’s

cis-feminine queer sexuality, attempting to limit the ways she is expected to experience pleasure. She and her fiancé have negotiated a blanket consent situation, with his one boundary being no anal penetration. “He gets weird when I try to kiss his chest or suck his nipples too” (Santana, 2018). She observed that, what she has done in the past with femme bodies is foreclosed with her current partner. This suggests that cis-heteronormative masculinity requires validation by differentiating it from the feminine and negating all signs of the homoerotic. They did, however, find a mutual outlet in watching pornography together, wherein they were both aroused watching women; Santana was dually aroused watching men and women. She explained, “Watching porn together was actually really hot because I felt like, the fact that I was interested in girls and sexually aroused was put out there, and it was something we shared in that moment” (Santana, 2018). Discovering these outlets for her queerness while in a relationship with her cis-heterosexual male fiancé affirms her identity and desires.

In contrast to Santana’s cis-heterosexual partner, who warily guards his enactment of normative masculinity, Milo and his queer cisgender male partner are reimagining masculinity and its performance of sex. Milo’s D/s dynamic occasionally switches, further subverting already subversive BDSM sex practices. They readily incorporate toys to amplify pleasure rather than interpreting them as significations of sexual deficit or emasculation. Milo described one seemingly simple, unrestricted switch scenario: “I’ll use a Hitachi [Magic Wand vibrator] on his dick in ways that are overwhelming, fun and cause intense physical sensations, which you don’t often think of a submissive being that role” (2018). Alternatively, if they are having sex and Milo has yet to come, his partner will offer to incorporate a toy. In this queer, masculine relationship, toys are considered

another possibility for administering pleasure. Milo's partner introduced him to the intimate expansivity concept that dildos are "prosthetic boyfriends" and vibrators are "robot boyfriends," which Milo finds affirming as they are transformed from inanimate objects to contributors to the sexual encounter. They will also incorporate implements such as needles to give temporary piercings, and scenes that include rope bondage. Their masculinities embrace rather than shun implements that can facilitate their exploration of mutual pleasure.

Participants' relationship to embodiment further influenced the ways in which they discussed sex practices. Santana identifies with the term *autoandrophilia*, which she described as a cisgender woman aroused at the prospect of having a penis. She considers this separate from her gender identity, attributing it instead to how she relates to ostensibly gendered body parts. She is happy with her body as it is, does not identify her experience as dysphoria, and describes: "If there was some hypothetical way to have a fully-formed penis and keep everything else, that would be ideal" (2018), going on to explain, "but it does make me uncomfortable that I can't act out" (Santana, 2018). This intimate expansivity desire seems to be, in part, about what a penis can *do*, and identifying with this *action*. Santana discussed enjoying a dominant sexual role: "I also like pegging guys; I want to wear a strap on" (2018). She has also penetrated past femme partners. She hesitates to express this to her cis-heteromasculine partner: "I almost feel uncomfortable being too dominant because I don't want to make him feel insecure and in turn make him less attracted to me because he doesn't want a *manly* fiancé" (Santana, 2018). Her partner's normative masculinity leaves little room for Santana's expression of masculinity in the relationship, be that through embodiment or sexual practice.

When describing the content of the smut they exchange with partners, MK was candid about one major turn-on: “I really get off on the idea of dick jizz” (2018). They disconnected this entirely from a cisgender man’s semen, explaining, “When I’m having strap-on sex I really love the like, coming inside of someone” (MK, 2018). This desire plays out circuitously as MK enacts it with partners only to recreate it through exchanging written erotic fantasies. They are clear about its genderqueer design—the smut centers two female-bodied people and “ejaculation from a dick...separate from physical body parts that exist” (MK, 2018). Through appropriating normatively gendered body parts and substances in an intimate expansivity fashion, MK reimagines their capacity to elicit queer and gender-nonconforming pleasure. Similarly, Wren finds pleasure in incorporating dildos and faux penises, “almost as an extension of my body,” (2018) in their sexual practice. They intentionally differentiate this from a “Freudian ‘I wish I had a penis’ situation” (Wren, 2018). Rather, they describe their gender and sexual identities as interconnected, both shaped by the performance of the other. Although they have had “hella kinky sex” with past sexual partners involving toys and props, they explained: “Sometimes when I’m fantasizing I would prefer to fantasize the idea of actually being able to have, what some might consider more heteronormative sex...it’s just part of my sexual identity” (Wren, 2018), which is further entangled with their gender identity. Both of them identify as “very sexual” people who have done their share of exploring variations of sex, sexual partners, and relationship forms. However, they have been restricted in their sexual exploration of each other by circumstance—they met and began a relationship while Wren’s partner was seven-and-a-half months pregnant. Material obstacles presented themselves, such as a pregnant belly and a body recovering

from labor. Yet Wren describes: “The way she goes down on me is as if I had a penis...the sexual behavior is performatively different...it can be a huge turn on, some of the time” (2018). By acknowledging the profuse meanings tied to embodiment, and the imbrication of gender identity and sexual identity with sexual practice, we begin to recognize the complex dynamics at play in sensual and sexual intimacy.

## Chapter 4

### Navigating Regulatory Systems

*I've always been a fan of the idea that, in order to change a system that doesn't want you to exist, you have to know how to work well in the system and create change from the inside.* (Dulcy, 2018)

The following section considers how participants navigate gender legibility, legal marriage, and child-rearing in a system that prescribes certain norms, and imposes barriers to access. Legibility can become a risk for queer and gender-nonconforming people as they move through public space and interact with regulatory systems. Describing their relationships, Dulcy expressed, “We’ve figured out something that’s healthy and that’s working...We need to be out there, and we need to be visible” (2018). The more we multiply the relationship scripts available, the more we have to draw on when forming our relationships. However, Dulcy went on to complicate the visibility of queer people and their relationships, “It’s a catch-22, because at what point is our safety worth being visible for?” They asked, “how many times a day can you handle being misgendered before you're like, nope I’m done, I'm shutting down, I don’t want to do this anymore” (2018). Participants demonstrate the careful navigation of legibility while pursuing a strategic balance between accessing and circumventing norms, state institutions, and legal recognition. I apply the term *institutional expansivity* to denote instances when a queer or gender-nonconforming individual or relationship comes into friction with formal systems by exceeding circumscribed boundaries, which they negotiate in creative ways to render life more livable. The term *institutional flux* is used to indicate the maneuvering of queer and gender-nonconforming individuals and

relationships in formal regulatory systems, as they fluctuate between normative choices that bring greater access and acceptance, and making decisions counter to the status quo that position them in the institutional periphery. There are varying degrees of “choice” in these situations, as what transpires is informed by the need to survive in a system antagonistic to minoritized existence.

I find it useful to revisit Pfeffer’s (2017) notions of “normative resistance” and “inventive pragmatism” in this chapter, in thinking through the careful balancing act queer and gender-nonconforming partnerships must engage in as they navigate systems not intended to accommodate them. Pfeffer developed the term *normative resistance* to describe making decisions that run counter to the norm and the term *inventive pragmatism* to describe maneuvering in regulatory systems for the purpose of accessing resources. Rather than installing new counter-norms to which queer community must adhere to avoid homonormativity,<sup>45</sup> this language accounts for the *simultaneous resistance and compromise* participants negotiate in their everyday lives. Pfeffer focuses her analysis on marriage, parenting, relationship configurations, visibility, and reproductive technologies. Her findings have a degree of continuity with mine, and also differ from mine. For example, her participants often experienced dissonance between (1) their predominantly queer identities and (2) their being in a relationship read by many as heterosexual, yet this perceived normativity could also work in their favor. Although this erasure of queer identity came up with a few of my participants partnered with cisgender men (e.g., Jack, Santana), it was not a common theme. Rather, participants were

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<sup>45</sup> Duggan, L. (2002). The new homonormativity: The sexual politics of neoliberalism. In R. Castronovo & D. D. Nelson (Eds.), *Materializing democracy* (pp. 175–194). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

rendering themselves strategically legible, encountering barriers to resources for childbirth/reproduction and legal parenthood, opting out of formal institutions, and redefining institutions in ways they find meaningful.

### **Strategic Legibility**

Many described strategically adopting more legible identifiers while navigating regulatory systems and interpersonal interactions to reduce anticipated friction. Athena describes her gender identity and expression as lying somewhere between genderqueer and transgender woman. Of the language available to her, she finds that *enby femme* (i.e., nonbinary femme) best suits her. She elaborates on the modifier *femme*: “*Femme*, in this case, not only being a marker for expression, but a marker for identity as an important distinction from it being nonbinary” (Athena, 2018). The language available to Athena cannot capture her experience of gender; she explains, “I struggled with both classification and labels” (2018). Yet navigating state systems and formal institutions often requires something akin to *strategic legibility*. “For most intents and purposes, especially on government documents, I go with transgender woman. That’s not entirely right, it’s not entirely wrong” (2018). Recall how the state organizes people into legible categories of sexual and gender identity by way of identity documentation, further enforcing legible identity by way of a legal apparatus that regulates gender reclassification (Meadow, 2010; Spade, 2006). Athena demonstrates institutional expansivity as her gender exceeds organizing institutional categories, even as she must compromise the complexity of her identity to be legible to regulatory systems.

Others demonstrate institutional expansivity as they strategically navigate forms of shared social life, such as the nuclear family and extended social relations. Gabriella

identifies as queer to indicate her sexual fluidity, yet when explaining her sexuality to her parents, “I came out as bisexual because they would never understand what queer means, so I’m not going to spend the time educating them” (2018). Similarly, Alex feels most closely aligned with a nonbinary femme identity but often claims the identity of transgender woman for the sake of legibility. According to Alex, enby femme identity is “harder to explain to people.” Alex circumvents the labor of educating others; “I don’t really have problems with being viewed as a woman so I go by that day-to-day” (2018). Gabriella and Alex demonstrate institutional expansivity as their identities exceed normative gender and sexuality, which produces a degree of friction in their shared social life. They address this by rendering themselves more legible, to minimize the time they must spend educating others.

### **Barriers to Access**

Wren’s partnership has encountered several barriers toward having their partnership and parenthood legitimated. Wren saw their partner through 41 hours of labor after only one-and-a-half months of dating, and Wren has been co-parenting since that time. Wren described the precarious conditions their partner faced after the birth:

She applied for Medicaid, but we realized Trump has an executive order on his desk, that if he signs it, it could mean anyone who doesn't have citizenship, who is receiving government aid, is put on a deportation list. So even though she qualifies for Medicaid and could receive that financial aid for a medical bill, she doesn't actually have access to it because it would risk being separated from her child. (2018)

Wren’s partner cannot receive financial assistance for the birth due to the looming threat of deportation and being torn from her child. Xenophobia in the U.S. leads to compounded material barriers for those who are both undocumented and queer. In this

case, they found a way around accessing government assistance. This represents an instance of institutional flux, as the relationship must opt out of formal systems to bypass the debilitating consequences of anti-immigrant bias. Wren described barriers toward feeling affirmed in their parenting role: “To feel recognized as a legitimate parent when the state doesn't recognize me as such. And frankly when so many of our friends and family might not recognize me as such” (2018). In a cis-heteronormative society that only acknowledges nuclear family forms, Wren’s queer and gender-nonconforming partnership with one opt-in parent is called into question. The biofather fails at communicating and contributing to the child’s well-being, which leads to an additional systemic barrier. Wren explained, “The world we live in doesn't recognize third-parent adoption...I couldn't legally be [child's] parent unless I was in one of six states. That means this guy has to relinquish his rights to parentage” (2018) in order for Wren to be legally recognized as a parent, although they already enact this role day-to-day. Their family formation demonstrates institutional expansivity, as it conflicts with the normative organization of nuclear family life.

Wren and their partner are both new to parenting, and have encountered an absence of resources on raising children in ways that affirm queerness and gender-nonconformity. However, they are trying to parent in a way that affirms the child’s identity, “This kid is a bi-racial, who knows what gender, who knows what sexual orientation, super cool individual, and I want to provide the best possible platform for him, or her, or them, to enter this world” (Wren, 2018). Wren is documenting parenting techniques they learn along the way via journaling. They and their partner are considering organizing a queer parenting group and support network, to alleviate the isolation they

sometimes experience as parents. This relationship is strategically navigating its way through regulatory systems that administer cis-heteronormativity, the nuclear family form, and citizenship as compulsory.

### **Circumventing Regulatory Systems**

Even as participants must continuously navigate systems that regulate identities and relationships, many simultaneously refuse these prescriptions; Pfeffer (2017) calls this *normative resistance*. When I asked how Dulcy's V-structured non-monogamous partnerships fit into the larger social structure, Dulcy explained, "By definition, they don't fit in, they can't fit in to something only meant for a very homogenous heterosexual cisgender experience" (2018). Dulcy described their relationships as full of communication, emotional support, mutual validation, and showing up for each other, "But it's marked as 'other' so it doesn't get seen or recognized that way" (2018). Dulcy distances their relationships from regulatory systems that prescribe normativity. When asked if legal marriage appeals to them, Dulcy responded, "I have no desire to buy into that institution" (2018). They expressed resistance to "marriage equality" by observing, "It's a thing that happened when cisgender white hetero men realized that cisgender white gay men couldn't have the same rights... It's just a trickle-down effect the fact that it affects me, not because it was intentional" (2018). Dulcy recognizes marriage as the incorporation of legible gay subjects into normative relational structures. They circumvent institutions that privilege white, gender conforming, monogamous relationships. However, legal marriage appeals to others such as James, who explained, "It's being able to say 'my husband,' having it not be dismissible" (2018). For others, the

institution of marriage is strategically accessed for incentives such as tax and health benefits, spousal hires, or securing a partner's status as a U.S. citizen.

Wren and their partner are committed community organizers. When asked to situate their relationship in the larger social structure, Wren responded, "I think we fit in somewhere in a larger ecosystem of resistance to the normative structure," emphasizing the community ties they have formed while organizing for social, economic, and environmental justice. This insight positions resistance not in the structural fringes but as an immanent widespread response to systems invested in producing categories of difference to justify oppression. Wren's relationship demonstrates institutional expansivity, as it is situated within a network of regulatory systems, yet participates in collective resistance to bring about social change. Radical organizing spaces challenge the status quo, thus organizers may opt out of having children and forming nuclear families. Wren explains the impact this can have; "kids are not always the most welcome" (2018). Meetings may be inaccessible to parents due to lack of childcare, for example. Wren and their partner are some of the only parents involved in their organizing community; thus they are also redefining norms in radical spaces. Wren considers their organizing community to be a developing support system:

I feel like they're going to be learning with us, because we're both shamelessly, unabashedly putting [our child] into this world because we want him to be raised around all of these amazing radical people. So we're all going to have to learn what parenting means together. (2018)

In this way, Wren, their partner, and their community are shaping the upcoming generation of organizers who will in turn refuse systems of oppression. Wren's relationship demonstrates institutional expansivity as they encounter barriers in the

shared social life of organizers, exceed the community norm of *not* raising children, and still insist on being incorporated into radical community spaces. Wren expresses that between select relationships with family and friends, “we feel very supported, even though we are positionally nonbinary, undocumented queer couple with a bi-racial child (*laughs*)” (2018). They challenge prescribed norms while cohabitating by intentionally sharing unpaid labor. Wren acknowledged filling a more normatively masculine role, yet explained, “I try and fight against that stereotype on a regular basis and do a lot of work around the house” (2018), emphasizing that both of them are employed full time, and accordingly they pitch in equally. They are deliberate about sharing the labor of childcare, yet Wren credits their partner with doing more: “She's working from home and has, as we say, ‘the boobs.’ So for right now, with a 3-month-old whose breastfeeding, that's very real” (2018). They are transforming their niche community, which itself is resistant to U.S. regulatory systems. They both identify as “adamantly anti-capitalist,” and practice what they preach by resisting the division of gendered labor in the home. Their relationship yet again demonstrates institutional expansivity, as their identities exceed gender norms, which for them translates into a radical reconfiguration of domestic life.

### **Accessing and Redefining Institutions**

**Marriage.** Participants have various reasons for organizing their lives in particular ways. Some find marriage appealing, some are engaged, and some are married. In many cases, participants creatively redefine institutions such as marriage. These dynamics gesture toward what Pfeffer terms *inventive pragmatism*, or maneuvering in creative ways to access institutions. For example, Gabriella wants a gay friend to ordain

their wedding, which counters homophobia. Santana and her cis-heterosexual male fiancé are hyphenating their last names, which counters patriarchy. For some, marriage is considered an affectionate gesture, or an experience they want to have with a particular partner. Alex expressed the perspective: “I like the idea of being married and getting engaged and having a whole ceremony. It seems very romantic to me” (2018). She describes how she arrived at this conclusion:

I feel like what I've done personally has gone away from very traditional views of relationships, and worked hard to break those things down and think about why are they the way that they are. What's actually happened is I've actually come back to a lot of them, this time on my terms. (Alex, 2018)

Alex took a step back to scrutinize traditions, and plans to redefine them according to the perspectives she has developed. Having taken a college course on queer utopia, Gabriella critiqued the judgement gay relationships can receive for availing themselves of traditional institutions. She questioned, “But what if that's what I want? I understand it's not a system created for us, but why does that mean we can't partake in that just because we want to? Why is that seen as a bad thing?” and described her situation, “We've talked about marriage and kids, it's something we do want to do” (Gabriella, 2018). The possibility of being judged for her decisions, by those on the outside looking in, does not deter her from structuring her relationship in a way she finds meaningful. Gabriella's relationship demonstrates institutional flux, as partners negotiate the policing of normative *and* nonnormative communities, and intend to access formal institutions on their own terms.

Jack is legally married to their partner, and explained that their relationship can appear to be heteronormative. Jack feels pressure to be visibly queer because their

relationship can be read in this way. They resist this by referring to their partner as “spouse” rather than as “husband,” for example. Jack redefined marriage in a way they found meaningful by defying tradition during their wedding ceremony; they refused to wear a white dress, get married in a church, or be “given away” by a father figure. Instead, Jack wore a non-white dress, their wedding ceremony was held in a mountain cabin, the couple walked down the aisle together, and they both took Jack’s last name. Jack explained their motivations for entering marriage, “It’s really financially important for us because we get a tax break” (2018). They are both academics, and Jack explained: “If and when [my spouse] gets a job, then it will be easier if we are married to also get a job, a spousal hire...it’s easier to prove to them that it’s a ‘real relationship’” (2018). Their relationship exemplifies institutional flux, as they strategically accessed marriage to avail themselves of its benefits, even as Jack maintains a critique of marriage as an institution. Marriage is set up to favor white cis-heterosexual monogamous relationships, yet its incentives can make life more livable for queer and gender-nonconforming people.

Ash and their partner pursued marriage when Ash’s partner’s completed his Ph.D. A “resident alien” at the time, they wanted him to procure citizenship. As they began planning their wedding, they realized, “Oh, this is just like a public declaration of our love in our community” (Ash, 2018), becoming invested in the ceremony as an expression of their commitment to each other. Their relationship was previously structured as an exclusive, cohabitating triad including Ash’s former spouse. Eventually these two split off and experienced a “return to monogamy,” with Ash realizing, “this one person was really the person for me” (Ash, 2018). Ash’s father, who is a Baptist minister, helped them design a non-religious ceremony. Their vows resisted “*I belong to you*”

narratives and emphasized a “desire to work together toward social justice, to be partners in fighting for a better world” (2018). Their ceremony drew attention to their robust support structure, foregrounding “how our relationship moves in our greater community in terms of friends and family and chosen family” (Ash, 2018). In their case, marriage was a practical decision, an expression of love, and a chance to celebrate their relationship with community. It also demonstrates institutional flux, as marriage presented a means by which they could *use* formal regulatory systems to secure citizenship.

The decision of whether to enter legal marriage is complicated for Wren and their partner. First, Wren’s undocumented partner entered a previous marriage for the sake of papers. This marriage became domestically abusive, with Wren explaining that their partner is applying to become a U.S. citizen under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). Wren’s partner now rejects anything remotely “transactional” regarding her citizenship status. Their position on marriage also reflects their political commitments: “We both, as people who hate the way the state controls our lives, don't want that to be the reason [we get married]” (Wren, 2018), although Wren acknowledged that securing citizenship *is* a legitimate reason for marrying. Wren describes that prior to their current relationship, “I'd gone back and forth so many different times on whether I thought it was a legitimate institution...I just didn't even know how I felt” (2018). They cited Utah Constitutional Amendment 3 (passed in 2004), which bolstered heteronormative marriage while denigrating domestic partnership; “It's been this constant, lifelong, never knowing if the state was gonna give a shit or recognize my relationship” (2018). Another complicating factor is that they must be married for Wren to adopt the child they are co-

parenting. Wren explained, “If I legally want the state to recognize my parenthood, which I consider to be very real right now regardless, I would need to marry [my partner] and challenge for rights of adoption” (2018). Marriage it is set up to bestow material benefits to families and (particularly) to family parenting arrangements. As Wren puts it, “For logistical necessity and reality, for citizenship, for adoption, it makes so much sense to get married...we're trying to figure out exactly how we feel about that” (2018). If they do marry, they want it to be a voluntary decision. They demonstrate institutional flux by fluctuating between pragmatic reasons for accessing marriage, and rejecting the traditional premise of the institution.

Milo expressed a distaste for marriage, associating it with a host of normative expectations. His boyfriend has three partners in total: one cohabitating legal husband (which precludes another legal marriage), a second cohabitating “husband” whom he cannot legally marry, and a long-distance relationship with Milo. Marriage is only legally-binding between a couple; thus he is contemplating ways to legally attach his second “husband” to his primary relationship. Milo explained: “They're thinking adoption because that can allow for certain legal things that you would want in a marriage” (2018). This scenario demonstrates institutional expansivity—their non-monogamous relationships are not accommodated by legal marriage, so they find creative ways to structure their lives. They also demonstrate institutional flux, as they circumvent formal regulatory systems by availing themselves of adoption to form legal romantic attachments.

**Children.** Wren and their partner are the only participants actively parenting; Santana has a stepchild through her fiancé. The intention to raise children was split

between (1) not wanting children, (2) being unsure about or open to the idea, (3) planning to foster or adopt, and (4) planning on having biological children. Some are certain they want to raise children. Others can foresee parenting with their current partner, which impacts their decision. Some have no desire to parent. For others, parenting feels foreclosed due to the perceived precarity of the future, due to factors such as the climate crisis.

Gabriella was uncertain about whether or not she wanted to have children. This changed upon meeting her current partner: “I think we would be good parents together; it's something I would enjoy doing with her” (2018). In their ideal scenario, their child would have both of their genes. However, confronted with medical limitations, they have discussed a workaround—having two children: “She'd carry one, and I'd carry one” (Gabriella, 2018). Their solution exemplifies institutional flux—they are making a decision in accordance with reproductive norms, yet are redefining reproduction by circumventing heteronormativity as they form a nuclear family. This relationship and some others are delaying the process until they reach a certain age and/or have met certain goals for their education or career. Yet Gabriella reiterated her decision firmly: “It is something we will end up doing together; I'm excited to have a life together; I feel really lucky” (2018).

The thought of raising children is complicated for Jack. They remain unsure of whether they want to have children with their “paternal” spouse, expressing, “I don't know if I'm like that” (2018). Jack parented their siblings from a young age, which complicates their feelings toward raising children: “It's a lot to take on” (Jack, 2018). They expressed interest in adoption, yet acknowledged its many obstacles; “sometimes it

seems like it'd be easier to just get pregnant” (Jack, 2018). Partnered with a cisgender man, Jack explains: “I would be the person to carry a child” (2018), followed with, “I really don't want to be pregnant” (2018). Jack critiqued the medicalization of pregnant bodies, that “don't remain their own when they are pregnant” (Jack, 2018). These are complicated factors they are sorting through in their relationship. Their scenario demonstrates institutional expansivity, as Jack’s decision is heavily informed by the conflict they feel toward the medicalization of bodies that can become pregnant, and the lack of care and attention they receive in the U.S. medical industrial complex.

Several participants were *not* drawn to raising children. MK offered, “It’s not something I’m interested in doing myself...I value other people doing parenting” (2018). Other participants had a similar response. Ash expressed, “Neither of us want to have children” (Ash, 2018), going on to explain, “We both really like *other people's* kids. And we like the fact that we don't have to bring them home with us” (Ash, 2018). A major factor in their decision is being uncertain of what the future holds. Ash described:

Everything is such a shit show right now; everything is so precarious; it sort of seems, *to us*; again, not judgement to others, it seems like it would be selfish to bring someone into the world just to say they were *ours*. Because I don't really know what kind of world we would leave behind for them. (2018)

Ash explained that judgement can accompany the decision *not* to raise children: “Even as a queer couple, there's this expectation that everyone should be a parent, and that's the highest calling in life. There's a judgement that comes with that” (2018). Although queer and gender-nonconforming relationships exceed prescribed norms, they are still expected to replicate the reproductive, nuclear family structure. In deciding not to raise children

and coming into conflict with these reproductive norms, participants demonstrate institutional expansivity.

## Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated the relationship dynamics between a subset of queer and gender-nonconforming individuals in the U.S. It has elaborated on gender, sexual, and racial identity; gender expression and embodiment; monogamous and non-monogamous relationship forms; and practices of sensual and sexual intimacy. Participants were found to render themselves strategically legible; and to simultaneously resist and compromise while navigating regulatory systems. I have demonstrated that participants and their relationships exceed rigid categorical boundaries, and that their identities and relationship forms fluctuate over time. I use the term expansivity to describe how participant identities, relationships forms, intimate practices, and interactions with formal institutions expand beyond prescribed norms; I use the term flux to describe shifts in identities, relationship formations, intimate practices, and between institutional access or refusal. These findings provide paradigms for expanding our possibilities for intimate relationships.

In concluding my interviews with participants, I asked them what messages they would impart to queer youth and queer community. Their various responses were profound. Some called for undermining white supremacy; others observed the need to establish intergenerational queer relationships and mentorship opportunities. Still others emphasized that relationships “don't have to look a certain way” (Ash, 2018), and that possibilities for meaningful intimacy extend beyond romantic and/or sexual relationships. I want to conclude this thesis with some wisdom offered by Wren, as they spoke about how queerness informs their worldview:

Queerness to me is fundamentally not just about my sexual orientation, but my ability to question. I've been questioning assumptions since I came out, probably even before then. I think if there's anything we can instill in kids, it's the ability to question, and to be comfortable sitting in the question. Be comfortable not knowing answers to things, knowing that sometimes there's multiple truths. And if we can sit with that discomfort and be okay with people who are different than us, and truths that are different from our truths, and people who don't fit into one or the other box, we'll probably be a happier community. (2018)

This sentiment captures the central claims of this thesis—that we must be willing to question our assumptions, to not have the answers, to acknowledge the truths of others even when they are different from our own, and to imagine beyond binaries as we come to understand each other as expansive and fluctuating individuals.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Email

The [CENTER NAME] is assisting with recruitment for a study exploring how queer, transgender and/or nonbinary folks are uniquely shaping relationship(s); how, in everyday life, we negotiate within and beyond cis-heteronormativity to cultivate queer modes of relation and intimacy. The study aims to uncover and share a multiplicity of relational configurations and practices with queer, transgender, and/or nonbinary folks. To participate you must identify on the queer, transgender, and/or nonbinary spectrum, and consider yourself in committed romantic and/or sexual partnership(s).

Confidential, one-on-one interviews will be held at the Center between a queer and nonbinary—identified researcher and those who choose to participate. Interviews will be held separately with approximately 15 individuals, discussing how they navigate various relational conventions and innovations. Interviews are expected to last approximately 1.5 hours, and are entirely voluntary. Participants will be compensated with a gift card for their collaboration on the project.

If you wish to be part of this study, please email [jl639@ssw.rutgers.edu](mailto:jl639@ssw.rutgers.edu) letting them know you would like to participate. You will thereafter be contacted to set up a date and time for an interview. You will be provided all interview questions ahead of time for your review.

If you do not wish to participate, simply do not reply to the email. We will not contact you further regarding this project.

Sincerely,

[CONTACT NAME]

## Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

### **Consent Form: Modeling Queer Relationships**

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Carlos Decena, Professor of Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies, and Chair of Latino & Hispanic Caribbean Studies. Our purpose is to explore how queer, transgender and/or nonbinary folks are uniquely shaping relationship(s); how, in everyday life, we negotiate within and beyond cis-heteronormativity to cultivate queer modes of relation and intimacy. We aim to uncover and model a multiplicity of relational configurations and practices for queer, transgender, and/or nonbinary folks.

To inform this research, we are conducting a series of one-on-one interviews to talk about the interplay of identity, relational configurations and practices in order to reflect these vast possibilities. Approximately 15 interviews will be conducted lasting approximately 1.5 hours each. The researcher will take notes during the interview, and to ensure no details are missed, we request your consent to audio record the interview in the addendum below. We likewise request that you sign this Informed Consent Form with your chosen pseudonym, and complete the provided Demographic Form to your comfort level prior to beginning the interview. Following the interview you will be given the opportunity to review and inform researchers of any edits you would like made to the resulting audio and transcript. With your permission, researchers may also pose follow-up questions to further clarify your responses.

This research is confidential. The research records and any resulting reports or presentations will refer to a pseudonym of your choosing, and will not include any identifying information about you. Confidential means the research records will include

some information about you and this information will be stored in such a manner that linkage between your chosen pseudonym and your response in the research exists. Demographic information you may opt to provide includes age, race / ethnicity, economic status, and disability status—these are questions included within the Demographic Form. This information is being voluntarily solicited to further the intersectionality of our research and results. Please note we will keep all information confidential by limiting access to data collected by keeping information in a secure location (i.e., in a locked cabinet) and uploading to a password protected computer.

All transcripts, any resulting papers and presentations will refer to you by pseudonym only, and will be shared with you. The researchers and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the raw data we collect from you, except as may be required by law. No identifying information will be presented.

Audio recordings will be stored in a locked cabinet until they are fully transcribed, at which point they will be deleted from the audio recorder. The transcribed recording will be stored electronically only accessible to researchers with a password. Any information that explicitly identifies an individual by name will be systematically removed from any documents, audio and the resulting transcript. After three years transcripts will be deleted.

There are no foreseeable risks to participation in this study. You have been told the benefits of taking part in this study may be contributing to the multiplicity of relational configurations and practices made available to queer youth. You will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card as compensation for completing this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.

If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact the Co-Investigator at [jess.burnham@rutgers.edu](mailto:jess.burnham@rutgers.edu) or you may also contact Faculty Advisor and Principal Investigator, Carlos Decena at [cudecena@lcs.rutgers.edu](mailto:cudecena@lcs.rutgers.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact an IRB Administrator at the Rutgers University, Arts and Sciences IRB:

Institutional Review Board

Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey

Liberty Plaza / Suite 3200

335 George Street, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor

New Brunswick, NJ 08901

Phone: 732-235-2866

Email: [human-subjects@ored.rutgers.edu](mailto:human-subjects@ored.rutgers.edu)

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:

Subject (Print) \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Audio/Visual Addendum to Consent Form**

You have already agreed to participate in a research study entitled: Modeling Queer Relationships conducted by Dr. Carlos Decena. We are asking for your permission

to allow us to audiotape this interview as part of that research study to ensure we do not miss anything you have to say. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for analysis by the research team. The recording(s) of the interview will refer to you by pseudonym only. No identifying information will be collected. If you say anything that you believe at a later point may be hurtful and/or damage your reputation, then you can ask the interviewer to rewind the recording and record over such information OR you can ask that certain text be removed from the dataset/transcripts.

The recording(s) will be stored in a locked cabinet until they are fully transcribed, at which point they will be deleted from the audio recorder. The transcribed recording will be stored electronically only accessible to researchers with a password. Any information that explicitly identifies an individual by name will be systematically removed from any documents, audio and the resulting transcript. After three years transcripts will be deleted.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Subject (Print) \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Demographic Form

**Demographic Form**

Your wellbeing takes priority—there is absolutely no obligation to answer every question or share information you are uncomfortable discussing. In our introductory email, we asked that you receive your partner(s)' consent to provide their basic demographic information—any information that explicitly identifies an individual by name will be removed from any documents, audio and resulting transcript. The information solicited below is meant to further inform the intersectionality of our research and results. Please respond to your comfort level.

1. Pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_
2. Today's date \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_
3. Your date of birth \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_
4. How do you identify your race / ethnicity?
  - 4a. Race / ethnicity of partner(s)?
5. How do you identify your class (economic) status?
  - 5a. Class (economic) status of partner(s)?
6. Do you identify as experiencing any forms of disability?
  - 6a. Disability status of partner(s)?

## Appendix D: Semistructured Interview Protocol

**SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

Study ID Pro2018001616, Arts and Sciences IRB

**INTRODUCTION**

Queer relationships take many forms, yet they are not widely discussed or modeled. I'm hoping to learn about how we are uniquely shaping our relationship(s); how, in our everyday lives, we negotiate within and beyond cis-heteronormativity, inventing queer ways of loving each other. The intent of these conversations is to collaboratively gather our experiences of creating intimacy and relationship building.

Once we finish up the interview, it will be transcribed verbatim after which I will share it with you. You will be invited to edit or remove anything you do not feel is representative or accurate, or which may compromise the confidentiality of another person.

Your wellbeing takes priority—there is absolutely no obligation to answer every question or share information you are uncomfortable discussing. We can end our discussion at any time. If you need a break at any point, please don't hesitate to let me know. The bathrooms are located \_\_\_\_\_.

Have you finished filling out the demographic form and consent form that have been provided to you?

**DESCRIBING IDENTITIES WITHIN PARTNERSHIP(S)**

- Can you describe your gender identity and gender expression?
- What are your pronouns?
- Can you describe your sexual orientation?
- Can you describe the gender identity and gender expression of your partner(s)?

- What are the pronouns of your partner(s)?
- Can you describe the sexual orientation of your partner(s)?
- Have you had any conflicts or struggles between your gender identity/expression or sexual identity and those of your partner? (Pfeffer, p. 200)
  - PROBE: Has any partner's sexual and/or gender identity shifted during the course of your relationship?
  - Has this affected your relationship?
  - Has it affected the way you are perceived publicly?
  - If so, how are you navigating this process?

#### **DATING & RELATIONSHIP SCRIPTS**

- How did you learn about dating, love and relationships (PROBE: What were you told relationships should look like? Did family express expectations for your future relationships?)
  - Were queer relationships represented for you in your community?
  - Were queer relationships represented for you in a classroom?
  - Were queer relationships represented for you in media/popular culture?
- How did this shape your expectations for dating, love, and relationships?  
(Lamont, Courtship Behavior Study, p.3)
- Where do you turn for advice on dating, love and relationships? (PROBE: Do you read any magazines? Listen to any podcasts? Watch any television shows?)  
(Lamont, Courtship Behavior Study, p.6)

- What do you think could be done to make navigating queer dating, love and relationships easier for queer youth?

### **RELATIONSHIP FORM AND STRUCTURE**

- Are your relationships typically romantic (i.e. emphasis on emotional intimacy), sexual (i.e., emphasis on sexual desire), or both?
- Are you monogamous or consensually non-monogamous (“open”)?

#### **IF MONOGAMOUS**

- Is a lifelong monogamous relationship something you desire?
  - Do you feel any identification with serial monogamy?

#### **IF CONSENSUALLY NON-MONOGAMOUS**

- Is this understanding implicit or has it been explicitly discussed? (Pfeffer, p.204)
- How do you structure your relationship(s)? (e.g., primary relationship/secondary relationship; V-structure-dating two partners equally, triad-three partners dating each other, etc.) (Mogilski et al., 2017)
- Have you and your partner(s) discussed any romantic and/or sexual boundaries for the relationship(s)? (PROBE: Use of protection with outside partners including condoms, dental dams, latex gloves etc.)

What language do you and your partner(s) use to describe:

- you (girlfriend, boyfriend, partner, husband, wife etc.)
- your partner (girlfriend, boyfriend, partner, husband, wife etc.)
- your relationship (heterosexual, queer, transgender etc.) (Pfeffer, p. 203)

How did you meet your partner(s)? (PROBE: through friends, at a party, at a bar or nightclub, extracurriculars, on a dating app etc.)

What initially attracted/keeps you attracted to your partner(s)? (PROBE: personality, intelligence, humor, style/presentation, attraction, sensuality etc.)

### **EMOTIONAL INTIMACY**

- How do you approach communication in your relationship(s)?
  - PROBE: Is communication easy, ongoing and spontaneous? Or can it be more difficult to approach, and take more intention?
  - PROBE: What are the communication strategies that seem to work for you/your partner(s)? (e.g., active listening, paying attention to body language, negotiation and compromise, setting time aside, use of technology)
- What have been the biggest sources of tension and conflict in your relationship(s) and how has this been navigated?
- Do you/your partner(s) demonstrate care and affection in your relationship(s)? (PROBE: This might include love notes, gifts, quality time, physical affection, paying for dates, taking care of each other, making each other laugh)
- What are some of the ways you show validation in your relationship(s)? (PROBE: This might include compliments, validating perspectives, encouraging passions, validating gender identity)
- What mental/emotional needs does your relationship(s) meet? (PROBE: In terms of emotional support, support for mental health, need to feel heard/loved/safe)
- What practices have allowed your relationship(s) to work for you/your partners?

### **LABOR IN RELATIONSHIP**

- What does paid labor look like your relationship(s)?

- PROBE: Are partners formally employed? Do you anticipate this will continue or might paid labor shift over time?
- How do you handle money in your relationship(s)?
  - PROBE: How do you decide who pays for what? (e.g., Does the person with more income pay/pay more? Do you split bills equally? Do you switch who pays?)
- How do you navigate unpaid labor your relationship(s)?
  - PROBE: What does care work (i.e., work undertaken with the goal of caring for your partner(s) needs or well-being) (Braksmajer, 2017) look like in your relationship(s)?
  - In what ways do you and your partner(s) perform emotional labor (i.e., investment of time, care, and emotional support) for each other? (PROBE: In terms of validating thoughts and feelings, validating gender identity/expression, support for medical and/or mental health needs)
  - IF PARTNERS LIVE TOGETHER—Can you describe how household labor and responsibilities are divided up? (Pfeffer, p. 203) (PROBE: groceries, cooking, cleaning, laundry, pets, paying bills)
  - IF PARTNERS HAVE CHILDREN—Can you describe how child care is divided up?
- Do you and your partner(s) play certain roles in your relationship(s)? (Pfeffer, p. 203)
  - PROBE: Do you feel labor in your relationship(s) is gendered in a particular way?

- Do you feel there is reciprocity in your relationship(s)?
- Do you feel there is an equal balance of power in your relationship(s)?

### **PHYSICAL INTIMACY**

- If your relationship incorporates forms of physical intimacy (e.g., cuddling, kissing, sex as you define it), have you had any conversations with your partner(s) that make physical intimacy more enjoyable?
  - PROBE: Did you discuss certain preferences? Are there forms of touch that are comfortable or uncomfortable? Are some body parts off limits? Did you discuss boundaries or triggers etc.?
- Is establishing sexual consent a priority in your relationship(s)? If so, how would you define consent? In what ways do you navigate consent? (PROBE: Can you provide some examples? Communication, continually checking in etc.)
- Is there particular language you intentionally use in your relationship(s) to describe your/your partners' body parts? (e.g., terms for chest, genitals etc.)
- Do you feel that your/your partner(s) sexual desires align fairly well? If there are differences, how have you negotiated between the sexual desires of each partner?
- Are there ways in which your relationship incorporates sexual inventiveness because your sexualities and/or embodiments receive less representation? (PROBE: For example, incorporating sex toys, creative language for sex practices etc.)

### **FORMS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT**

- What are some sources of support you have your relationship(s)? Are they enough? Do you wish for more? If yes, what might you wish existed? (Pfeffer, p. 202)
- Do your friends and family know about your relationship(s)? (Pfeffer, p. 201)
- If yes, are your friends and family generally supportive of your relationship with your partner(s)? Can you give some examples of support and non-support? (Pfeffer, p. 201)
- Do you and/or your partner(s) participate in the LGBTQ social and political community?  
Why or why not? Are there any tensions in your participation within the LGBT community? (Pfeffer, p. 202)

### **RELATIONSHIP CONVENTIONS & INNOVATIONS**

- How do you feel your relationship with your partner “fits in” to the social structure (or not)? (Pfeffer, p. 202)
- How do you navigate between traditional relationship practices and creating new dynamics that work for your relationship?
  - PROBE: Are there conventions you’ve chosen to incorporate into your relationship? (If yes, what is it about \_\_\_\_\_ that you value or identify with? Are there ways in which you’ve adapted this practice to fit your relationship?)
  - Is marriage a priority within your relationship? (PROBE: If yes, what is it about marriage that you value or identify with? If no, what is it about marriage that doesn’t appeal to you?)

- Is parenting a priority within your relationship? (PROBE: If yes, what is it about parenting that you value or identify with? Do you ideally envision a two-parent family? If no, what is it about parenting that doesn't appeal to you?)
- Is it important for you/your partnership to feel visibly queer, or do you prefer/feel safer flying under the radar if you feel you have that privilege?
- Are there relationship practices you've had to seek out or innovate because you didn't see them modeled elsewhere?

## **CONCLUSION**

- What else should I be asking about queer relationship formations and practices, that might be helpful for queer youth?

Those are all of my questions. Is there anything you would like to ask or anything you would like to say that you haven't said? (Lamont, Courtship Behavior Study, p.6)

Thanks so much, I appreciate your time.

## Appendix E: Partner Demographic Table

Table 2

*Summary of Partner Demographic Characteristics*

Participant	Partner	Gender	Sexuality	Race
MK	Partner A	Genderqueer, butch, masculine	Queer, gay, dyke	White
James	Partner A, fiancé	Transmasculine	Queer, gay	White
Dulcy	Partner A	Nonbinary, transgender, femme	Asexual	White
	Partner B	Cisgender woman	Queer, bisexual	Hispanic, Mexican-American
Athena	Partner A	Nonbinary femme	Queer	Japanese, white
	Partner B	Nonbinary, masculine, genderqueer	Pansexual	White
	Partner C	Transgender woman, femme	Bisexual	Filipino, white
Gabriella	Partner	Cisgender woman, androgynous	Lesbian, gay	White
Alex	Partner	Cisgender man	Pansexual	Black, Puerto Rican, St. Lucian
Ash	Partner, spouse	Genderqueer	Queer	Latinx
Santana	Partner, fiancé	Cisgender man	Straight	Black, Honduran
Jack	Partner, spouse	Cisgender man	Straight	White
Robin	Partner	Transgender woman	Lesbian	White
Milo	Partner A	Cisgender man	Queer	White
Wren	Partner	Cisgender woman	Queer	White, Spanish
CK	Partner A	Woman, transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, tender butch, fuckboi	Queer	White
Zia	Partner	Cisgender woman, butch	Lesbian	White
Adowa	Partner	Gender fluid	Bisexual	Black