

**Queer Intimacies:
The Construction of LGBTQ Sexuality
Outside of Normative Sexual Scripts**

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Abstract

The profusion of social sexual norms that center cisgender and heterosexual experiences leaves those who identify as LGBTQ without sexual narratives that are inclusive of their identities. This study examines how LGBTQ individuals negotiate sexuality outside of and in within cisheteronormative sexual scripts. This research consisted of 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews of LGBTQ-identified college students aged 18-23 at SUNY Purchase. Interviewees were asked questions about their identity formation, the interaction of their identities with their sex lives and sexual ideologies, and their sexual ideologies, practices, and desires. Six themes were identified: (1) the rejection of binary sexual categories, (2) an emphasis on communication, (3) feelings of comfort and safety with partners, (4) queer pre-sexual experiences, (5) trauma and its impact on sexuality, and (5) individual research into queer sexuality. These data help elucidate the complex tensions LGBTQ individuals experience while navigating the liminal space between proscribed social sexual norms and their own desires to build sexual modalities that meet their needs.

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Introduction

Queerness places individuals outside of, and in conflict with, the norms that shape and define our society. I say conflict purposefully, because I believe that queer existence- our prideful, unabashed, and powerful existence- flourishes despite these constraints. No site is more exemplary of this than queer sexuality. We know that queer voices and bodies are regulated and harmed in our society, but all too often explorations of this stop at the most radical part of queer existence- the lives we carve out for ourselves and our communities. I argue that queer sex is a site of resistance and creativity in which our existence outside of norms creates a generative space for us to build more equitable sexual beinghoods and practices.

Cisnormative and Heteronormative social norms and mores not only dictate what kinds of behaviors are acceptable, but also what kinds of bodies. Author and Activist Joan Nestle (1987) used the term “transgressive body” to describe bodies that in its wants or perception is deemed abnormal or perverted. Nestle details her experiences as a working class Jewish lesbian growing up and living in New York City in the mid to late 1900s and through her testimony explores her embodiment in a transgressive body (Nestle 1987). Foucault (1976) argued that bodies are regulated and controlled through complex systems of sanctions, rewards, and surveillance through what he called “biopower.” Biopower is the existence of the many and varied ways in which bodies are dominated and controlled through social institutions. Ideal populations are productive and reproductive, making queerness, a disruption of both the capitalistic and reproductive nature of the nuclear family, a deviation from norms. Bodies deemed abnormal are sanctioned through medicalization, ostracization, and internalized shame (Foucault 1976). Disabled bodies are inherently transgressive bodies, as they, in their functioning or appearance, do not meet the exacting standards of ability. Seibers (2008) argues that disabled people create

new and creative ways of being sexual that accommodate both social and physical constraints. To him, disabled sexuality "... transforms the temporality of lovemaking... in the same way that narrative temporality has a beginning, middle, and end, normative sexuality requires beginning, middle, and end points" (Siebers 2008). This immediately struck me as true in my own sex life as someone with a chronic illness, but it also felt true as a queer person.

This gap between normative sexuality and sexuality that is intelligible or inclusive to queer identities can, I argue, create a generative space for us to build more creative and equitable sexual beinghoods and practices. Queer affect and existence are not only confined by norms, they exist outside of and between. Anzaldúa's "Borderlands/La Frontera" is an affective, semi-autobiographical work of art that melds poetry and theory to transport the reader to a new temporal state. She peppers Spanish and prose into her writing and in so doing uses the code-switching she learned to master for her own safety in order to give the reader an affective experience of living within the borderlands. The style of writing makes the piece hard to read for non-Spanish speakers by design, as it mirrors in a small way the way in which borderlands are sites of instability. "A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. *Los atravesados* live here... the perverse, the queer, the troublesome... in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal"" (Anzaldúa 1987). For people of varying marginalized identities this description calls out to us, hails us as it's subject. To me, this is as much a description of the borderlands between Mexico and the U.S. as it is a description of the experience of queerness in the U.S. This makes sense as Anzaldúa wrote this piece informed not only by her Chicana identity but also her lesbian identity. This state of improvisation, transition, and fluidity is emblematic of queerness, "[t]he word 'queer' itself means *across*- it comes from

the Indo-European root-*twerkw*, which also yields to the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist)” (Sedgwick 1993). The boundaries of social mores and language construct the landscape of queer affect, making us all *los atravesados*, those who traverse boundaries and live in the interstitial places between norms.

Sex outside of sexual norms forces us to rethink what sex can be. Because we have thrown out the scripts, we have to communicate our needs with our partner(s) more clearly and purposefully, which opens up more opportunities for creativity, communication, and pleasure. The increased communication helps make consent less transactional and more conversational, which is especially helpful for sex with transgender and gender nonconforming people who may have to navigate dysphoria. When we stop worrying if we are doing sex correctly, or doing our gender correctly, the whole body becomes a potential source of pleasure. When bodies are freed of heterosexist norms, we are able to enjoy sensations and fantasies that those who adhere to a heterosexist binary many struggle with. Furthermore, because social models of sexuality also reinforce ableism, sexism, fatphobia, racism, and more, sexuality outside of those models can more easily be more equitable. Sex can be a space for exploration and play that is shared (or not) with others, in which intimacy and pleasure can go hand in hand. This is not to say that not-queer sex cannot be any of these things, but I argue that it is harder when you are psychically constrained by heteronormative and cisnormative sexual norms. Nestle (1987) argues that sex and sexuality is a source of enrichment, solidarity, and comfort for queer people. Nestle believes in the reparative power of queer sex, particularly in the face of the violences of a culture that prioritizes and rewards heterosexuality and cisnormativity. For Nestle, the erotic is a source of power and community for queer people (Nestle 1987).

These experiences sparked what would become my senior project, in which I argue that for LGBTQ individuals the absence of normative sexual narratives provides the opportunity for LGBTQ individuals to develop new more inclusive sexual knowledges. In my research, I found that academic research around the development of sexual selfhood had little about queer sexuality and that research on queer sex tended to focus only on risk factors or systematic discrimination. Most upsetting is the lack scholarly research focused on queer perspectives and voices around their own sexual selfhoods and lived experiences. This is indicative of a larger problem in which those in academia often spend so much time thinking about the forces that impact the lives of queer individuals that we forget to think about the actual lives people are living. We miss so much nuance and meaning when we ignore the lived experiences of the people living under and within the institutions and systems of power that we study. But more than that, in ignoring these lived experiences we engage in a form of silencing dangerously similar to that which post-colonial theorist Spivak described of the subaltern (Spivak 1988). One in which all our benevolence and expert knowledge serves to deny voice to an “other” that we ostensibly are trying to help. As a researcher I must reckon with my own positionality as white, cisgender, and upper middle class and the ways this influences how and what different interviewees will share and how that testimony is interpreted. Acknowledgement and culpability of my standpoint is essential for reducing the risk of subalternizing those I am researching.

My study’s population is LGBTQ-identified students attending State University of New York at Purchase. As a queer student at SUNY Purchase I have found the school to be a microcosm of queer expression and exploration that, at times, has produced forms of queer normativity. I am interested in the impacts of such an environment on the identity formation, experiences of sexuality, and sexual identity formation and exploration of LGBTQ students.

Purchase is known as the queer mecca of the SUNY system, proportionally there is a large population of LGBTQ students, but more than that, an acknowledgement of queerness is knit into the tenor of the campus. This is not to say that Purchase has no growing left to do, particularly in the administration, but largely, Purchase provides a space in which queer students can explore identities in the company of others doing the same. Purchase, as an environment that incubates queer self-determination, is the ideal place for exploratory research into LGBTQ sexuality.

Moreover, as a queer Purchase student, it has provided me with an environment in which I could pose questions about queer sexuality without anxiety. The gaps in literature that I critique in the literature review are at least partially due to institutions stifling exploration and research into sex and sexuality, particularly queer sex and sexuality. The lack of LGBTQ researchers in these fields is also no doubt a product of institutional disquiet around queerness, sexuality, and queer sexuality. Queer voices deserve to exist without being filtered through the worldview of a researcher who has never lived queerness. This is why I prioritize experiential testimony and queer self-expression- I believe in the power of queer voices. To this end, I intend for the testimonies of this study's respondents to serve as an archive of queer voices on the everyday experiences and negotiations of queer sexuality in a cisheteronormative society.

Heterosexual and Cisgender sexuality is normative and are both tacitly and explicitly encouraged in our society. These norms are reified through sexual scripting, or the complex system of social sexual norms that dictate the ways in which we are sexual beings in society, amongst others, and within ourselves. The profusion of social sexual norms that center cisgender and heterosexual experience leaves those who identify as LGBTQ without sexual narratives that are inclusive of their identities. This lack can lead to feelings of isolation, confusion, and shame;

however, this absence of normative sexual narratives may also provide the opportunity for LGBTQ individuals to develop new sexual knowledges. This study endeavors to examine how heteronormative sexual scripts, in their exclusion of LGBTQ people, create a space in which LGBTQ people can construct their own sexualities. As this research demonstrates, LGBTQ individuals experience complex tensions navigating the liminal space between proscribed social sexual norms and their own desires to build sexual modalities that meet their needs. These negotiations happen in two zones- respondents' experiences of queer sexuality as they are living it now and respondents' internal sexual landscapes. Data was obtained through 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ identified individuals at State University of New York at Purchase. This study includes the testimony of individuals with a diverse range of sexual orientation and gender identities, rendering these data representative of many of the experiences of the broader queer youth population. These data are supported by existing research into queer negotiations of sexuality and add essential experiential testimony to the queer canon.

Literature Review

Provided below is a brief overview of scholarship on LGBTQ sexuality and the major factors that shape the experience of sexuality for LGBTQ individuals. This study uses sexual script theory and critical feminist and queer theory to explore the interaction between LGBTQ sexuality and normative sexual scripting.

Heteronormativity & Cisnormativity

Heteronormativity is the normalization and expectation of heterosexuality in society, wherein social rewards are given to those who exercise or signal their heterosexuality, and sanctions are

levied against those who are not heterosexual. Rubin (1975) argues that a stratified patriarchal system regulates human sexuality, what she called the "sex/gender system," that enforces heterosexuality and prioritizes maleness. To Rubin and other gender theorists, the foundation of institutionalized heterosexuality is a system of beliefs that naturalize and perpetuate male power and enforced heterosexuality (Ingraham 2006; Rubin 1975).

At the most general level, the social organization of sex rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality... The suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality, and by corollary, the oppression of homosexuals, is therefore a product of the same system (Rubin 1975).

Ingraham (1994) builds on Rubin's sex/gender system in her conceptualization of the "heterosexual imaginary" or the naturalization and assumption of heterosexuality that conceals the function of heterosexuality in constructing our societal understandings of gender. She argues that the institutionalization of heterosexuality enforces and justifies gender hierarchies by constructing sexual-gender roles, what she calls "heterogenders." In this way, gender and sexuality, and the systems of power therein, are inextricably linked.

Gender, or what I would call "heterogenders," is the asymmetrical stratification of sexes in relation to the historically varying institutions of patriarchal heterosexuality. Reframing gender as heterogender foregrounds the relation between heterosexuality and gender. Heterogender confronts the equation of heterosexuality with the natural

and of gender with the cultural, and suggests that both are socially constructed, open to other configurations (not only opposites and binary), and open to change.

(Ingraham 1994)

For those who are not heterosexual or cisgender this is especially problematic because their gender is institutionally linked with a sexuality that is not their own.

Heteronormativity is embedded within normative sexual paradigms through which “[w]e learn the rules for whom we should be attracted to, what is attractive, how to be sexual, and what we should and shouldn’t do with one another.” (Wade and Ferree 2015) These normative forms of sexuality reinforce what Wade and Ferree (2015) called a “gendered division of the sexual dynamic” through which men produce “sexual subjection” and women “sexual objectification.” These normative frames of sexuality revolve around the “coital imperative” in which vaginal penetration with goal of male orgasm is strongly prioritized. (Wade and Ferree 2015)

Butler (1993) argues that, in questioning heteronormativity and strictly stratified gender categories, we can “... promote an alternative imaginary to a hegemonic imaginary and ... show, through that assertion, the ways in which the hegemonic *imaginary* constitutes itself through the naturalization of an exclusionary heterosexual morphology” (Butler 1993). Through a critical lens we can see how heterosexuality is an enforced norm, not a natural truth, and in so doing open ourselves up to new sexual discourses. To that end, Butler argues for “... a displacement of the hegemonic symbolic of (heterosexist) sexual difference and the critical release of alternative imaginary schemas for constituting sites of erotogenic pleasure” (Butler 1993). Butler argues not only that heterosexist sexual norms are harmful, but also boring. Our understandings of sex and

the erotic are strictly confined by our social norms, and in critiquing the undergirding assumption of heteronormativity we open up the boundaries of the erotic to include more people and more practices. This “release” leaves room for sexual freedom and erotic playfulness to flourish.

Bodies are gendered into “male” and “female” categories on the basis of the appearance of the body’s genitals. *Cisgender* is a term used to describe individuals who are comfortable or do not contest the gender they were assigned at birth. In contrast, individuals who identify with a gender that is not the one associated with their genitals are considered transgender. Aultman (2014) describes the uses of the term “when used appropriately, helps distinguish diverse sex/gender identities without reproducing unstated norms associated with cisness” (Aultman 2014). *Cisgenderism* as defined by Lennon and Mistler (2014) “refers to the cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behavior, expression, and community” (Lennon and Mistler 2014).

Sexual Script Theory

Simon and Gagnon (1984) argued that social sexual scripting occurs on three levels- cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts. These complex systems of social sexual scripting dictate the ways in which we are sexual beings in society, amongst others, and within ourselves. A theory of social sexual scripting helps denaturalize sexuality and examine it as a social construct that is enacted and enforced through meaning-making, repetition, and internalization (Simon and Gagnon 1984).

Plante (2007) investigated the impact of normative sexual scripts on the construction of one’s own sexual scripts by conducting interviews with adults about both their sexuality in adulthood

and their development of sexual selfhood in adolescence. This enabled them to identify patterns that reflect the shared impact of cultural sexual scripting on individuals from a young age. In interviewing participants who are generally considered “normal,” i.e. heterosexual, white, and middle class, we were able to see the way in which normative scripting restricts and shapes the sexualities of even the most “normal” individuals (Plante 2007). Sexual scripting within the larger society shapes the ways in which individuals have sex and construct their sexual selfhood. In the United States, normative sexual scripts center cisgender and heterosexual sexuality. All individuals internalize normative sexual scripts and interpret them into their own sex lives, but little has been researched on the impact of these sexual scripts on those whose sexuality is unintelligible within normative frameworks.

Pham’s (2016) study of college students’ understanding of sexuality found that when participants, who were largely heterosexual, were asked to define “sex” broadly they included many more types of sex, such as oral and anal sex, than when asked to define “lesbian sex.” When defining lesbian sex, the heteronormative gender hierarchization of male pleasure was very apparent. To the participants, without a penis, or phallic penis substitute, lesbian sex was difficult to define and seemed to be impossible to conceptualize without vaginal penile penetration. These data demonstrate the large influence heteronormative and male pleasure centered sexual scripts have on the conceptualization of sex for the participants (Pham 2016). Heteronormative sexuality is tacitly and explicitly forced on us in society, which directly impacts the way that we construct and exercise sexuality. Pham’s findings demonstrate that without inclusive sexual scripting, it is difficult to understand, let alone engage in, non-normative sexuality. For LGBTQ people who have no choice but to engage in sexuality outside of heterosexual and cisgender centered norms, this lack is keenly felt.

LGBTQ Sexuality

Lamont's (2017) study investigated how LGBTQ people negotiate gendered courtship practices and construct queer courtship practices and romance. The study found that queer and LGBT-identified individuals challenge heteronormative gendered relationship practices in their own relationships by purposefully rejecting gender norms and working toward a more egalitarian relationship dynamic (Lamont 2017). This study endeavors to explore if, given that it has been shown that LGBTQ individuals' romantic relationship construction tends to eschew normative romantic scripts, the same could be said for LGBTQ individuals' sexuality.

“Researchers often theorize bisexuality as the midpoint between heterosexuality and homosexuality. This practice places less of an emphasis on bisexuality as an independent identity and more on how it exists relative to monosexualities (i.e., identities that refer to attraction to just one sex and/or gender)” (Flanders et al. 2017). Bisexuality is framed as not quite a real identity, but instead as a catch-all for all gender-variant and multi-gender attractions and behaviors. However, the experiences of these identity categories are far more fluid in practice and rich in definition than this schema would suggest. Flanders et al found that when asked to define bisexuality for themselves, participants' definitions revolved types of attraction, whether sexual or romantic or both, flexible understandings of gender categories, including attraction to various gender identities and bodies, and fluidity of attraction. This picture of bisexuality, when defined by bisexuals, is as a dynamic identity rich in nuance and flexibility. “Such identities are therefore social, subject to change and negotiation, fluid across time and place, and intersect with other constructions such as age, class, gender, and racialization” (Flanders et al. 2017).

Trans existence calls into question normative assumptions about the links between gender, sexuality, and bodily sex characteristics. Galupo, Henise, and Mercer's (2016) research explored

the ways transgender and nonbinary individuals describe their sexual identities. Respondents in their study described their sexual identities as complex, fluid, and focusing on desired partner qualities rather than traditional sexuality labels, incorporating different relationship styles, interrelated with BDSM and kink, and a separation of sexual and romantic attraction.

Respondents often identified with multiple sexual, romantic, relationship style, and BDSM and kink titles at once. Some individual's descriptions made note of not only how they identify, but how others may identify them based on the gender they were assigned at birth, while others stated that their sexual identities have shifted over time and with their gender identity.

Participants' identity descriptions often focused more on who they are attracted to and less on identity titles that are indicative of their own gender. (Galupo, Henise, and Mercer 2016)

Williams et al (2013; 2016) investigated the ways in which transgender people's gender identity is linked to the experience of their sexual identity. This analysis was done using the concepts of gendered and sexualized embodiments, the bodily manifestation of one's gender and sexual identities. Williams et al (2013) found that gendered and sexualized embodiments seemed particularly closely linked in instances in which transgender men engaged in gender-affirming "body work" such as taking testosterone and having top surgery, particularly when this "body work" helped them feel aligned with cultural norms of masculine sexuality such as sexual urgency. Instances in which the connection between sexualized and gendered embodiments were found, but less strongly were sexual partner validation of their masculinity and masculine sexuality and the retention of a vagina, which was found in some to negatively impact their ability to reconcile their gendered and sexualized embodiments with their gender identity. (Williams, Weinberg, and Rosenberger 2013) Their follow-up study (2016) found similar techniques were utilized by transgender women. Like transgender men, hormone therapy and

surgical interventions that increased their sense of bodily alignment with their gender identity were integral to many of the respondents' sexual embodiment. Respondents also used fantasy and reinterpretation to construct embodiments that aligned with their gender identity such as imagining having breasts or interpreting one's anus as a site of penetration and therefore vagina-like. Like the previous study, being treated "like a woman" by sexual partners, through sexual acts, positions, and language that mirrored cultural norms of female sexuality were integral to many participants' sexual practices. (Williams, Weinberg, and Rosenberger 2016) These findings demonstrate that the linkages between embodiment and sexuality for transgender people are highly relative and improvisational.

Page and Peacock's (2013) exploratory case study endeavored to explore how an individual with a non-normative gender identity negotiates the process of sexuality and gender identity-making. Page and Peacock came to two conclusions, the first is that individuals whose gender and sexual identities do not adhere to heteronormative standards have to construct their own identities privately. Furthermore, because these individuals have been socialized within a heteronormative society, much of their development of their identity is based on stereotypical concepts of the gender and sexuality that they identify as (Page and Peacock 2013). I argue that their findings ignore the social reasons why LGBTQ individuals may act "stereotypically" such as trying to "pass" in order to gain medical treatment and avoid social sanctions such as physical violence.

Research on LGBTQ sexuality, particularly transgender sexuality, has largely fallen into two frameworks: medicalization or marginalization. Medicalizing narratives construct queerness as abnormal and in need of medical intervention to rectify or tacitly suggest that medicalization is essential for actualization of sexuality. While marginalization as a concept is important for the

critique of power structures and their effects, focusing solely on the way LGBTQ people in aggregate experience oppression erases nuance within the community and prioritizes narratives of pain over pleasure. Marginalization paradigms reify what Judith Butler (1993) called “the heterosexual presumption of the symbolic domain” in which “apparently inverted identifications will effectively and exclusively signal abjection rather than pleasure, or signal abjection without at once signaling the possibility of a pleasurable insurrection against the law or an erotic turning of the law against itself” (Butler 1993). Relatively little has been explored about how LGBTQ individuals engage in such pleasurable insurrections through the navigation and resistance of heteronormative sexual scripts in their own sex lives. This study utilizes sexual script theory in order to understand how LGBTQ people engage in sexuality that is contrary to these normative sexual scripts.

Methods

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 18-23 year old LGBTQ-identified students studying at State University of New York at Purchase. Recruitment of subjects was done through the use of on-campus LGBTQ social networks and clubs, school information dissemination mechanisms such as the school’s ad-hock open forum on Facebook and bulletin boards around campus, and announcements made in classes. Purposive and snowball sampling was used in obtaining interview subjects in order to ensure as diverse a population as possible. The researcher utilized the social networks she developed through immersion in the campus queer community to find interviewees from harder to reach populations including transgender women and transgender people of color. Care was taken to include a diverse range of voices while avoiding the testimony-poaching behavior historically enacted on scientifically

marginalized groups. To this end, interview methodology was designed to create an informal and conversational atmosphere that empowered interviewees to share their testimony at their own pace. Institutional Review Board approval was secured before data collection began. A pre-interview survey was administered to obtain personal data including pronouns used, age, gender identities, sexual identities, race/ethnicity, and major. All multiple-choice fields except for age included an “other” option in which respondents could write any identity labels not included in the survey. Interviewees were given the option to choose the pseudonym associated with their data. Interviews were transcribed using the online transcription service Temi and inductively coded by the researcher.

Interview Methodology

Interviews consisted of open-ended questions about participants’ development of sexuality, their sexual and relationship practices, and ideologies around sexuality. The questions fell into three distinct categories- questions about respondents’ identity formation, questions about how respondents’ identities impacted or interacted with their sex lives and sexual ideologies, and respondents’ overall approaches to sex and their sexual desires. Interviews typically began with the questions “How would you describe your sexual/gender identities? Can you tell me about how you came to identify with those labels?” These questions were chosen as the interview’s starting point because most LGBTQ-identified individuals have invested thought into the identity labels they choose, and in relating the process of coming to identify with these labels respondents also often provided broad datapoints that could be explored later in the interview. While individual identities are hardly “caused” by one’s situation, the process of identity development is highly situational and dependent on one’s upbringing, background, and formative experiences.

These questions were not about respondents' coming-out stories, though they often included them, but instead focused on the respondents' internal journeys of discovering and developing their sexualities and sexual identities. These journeys for most included seeking out knowledge about how to be sexual in ways not covered in health classes or discussed in popular media. This process of fumbling for answers to sexual questions is shared by most and often provided an onramp to discussions of the interviewee's own sexual practices and experiences.

Questions addressing the interaction of one's queerness with one's sexual practices and ideologies posed the most difficulty for the researcher and respondents. The researcher struggled to find phrasing for questions that lead to respondents analyzing the boundaries and encroachments of heterosexist sexual norms in their own sex lives without leading respondents into answers. The researcher was not always successful, leading to multiple respondents asking for clarification or rephrasing. Respondents were asked "Do you think you approach sex differently than straight people?" and "Do you think LGBTQ sex and sexuality is different than cisgender and heterosexual sex and sexuality? How? Why?" Questions around respondents' sexual desires and ideologies often resembled thought experiments more than questions, broadly asking "How would you describe "good" sex?" and "How would you describe an ideal sexual encounter?" The aim of these questions was to give respondents the opportunity to, after recounting their experiences developing their own sexual practices and identities in a largely inhospitable ideological landscape, prize apart the elements of sex most important to them.

The goal of this research was to gain a better understanding of the process of sexual identity and practice formation for individuals whose sexual or gender identities are outside of heterosexual and cisgender norms. The operationalization of these concepts into open-ended questions that were not leading was challenging. The researcher found that in constructing

questions, the initial desire was to ask for the desired answers first and the participant's experiences second. Much work was done to focus the questions to elucidate the participants' experiences and worldviews in ways that left room for respondents' own testimony to guide the flow of questions.

Because of the intimacy of these topics, the researcher strove to create an informal atmosphere in which respondents felt like they were sharing experiences with a peer instead of being subjected to top-down scrutiny into their lives. To this end, the interviews were conducted wherever the interviewees chose so long as it was both a quiet and private location. Interviews most frequently took place in the researcher's own apartment, often over a cup of tea in the afternoon sunlight. The researcher utilized humor and her own experiences to build rapport with the respondents, and more often than not was hugged goodbye after the interview. This method produced a feeling of intimacy and openness that empowered respondents to share truths without fear of judgement or sanctions.

The researcher's positionality as a queer SUNY Purchase student of a similar age to the respondents was instrumental in creating an interview environment in which respondents felt comfortable and understood enough to share vulnerable parts of themselves. Interviewee Basil, in speaking on his increased comfort around queer people because of shared experiences of oppression attributed his willingness to share with the interviewer to their shared commonalities.

Like for example, knowing that you're also like queer identifying is very comforting. It makes talking about experiences very easy because you have had experiences like me as opposed to me trying to explain this to like a straight cis

man. Straight up, I wouldn't, I wouldn't try because it's difficult and uncomfortable. (Basil)

The researcher used Plummer's (1995) guiding questions for telling sexual stories: on the nature of stories, the making of stories, the consuming of stories, the strategies of storytelling, and stories in the wider world. In preparing and conducting interviews the researcher focused heavily on how narratives function politically to privilege or oppress, how stories can be suppressed and coaxed out, who has access to these stories and who is excluded, how language and speaking style influence the perception of the stories being told, and how stories fit within larger structures of power. Undergirding the interview research is the organizing question- "How might stories work to perform conservative functions maintaining dominant orders, and how might they be used to resist or transform lives and cultures?" (Plummer 1995)

Data Analysis

This study's emphasis on personal narratives necessitated the use of inductive coding, using the respondents' testimony to shape the process of data analysis instead of trying to parse the data through a pre-defined metric. The six major themes identified in these interviews are delineated by the zones in which they are experienced: sexuality as it is being lived now and internal sexual landscapes. Themes describing respondents' thoughts on and experiences of sexuality as they are living it include a rejection of binary sexual categories, an emphasis on communication, and feelings of comfort and safety with partners. Themes constitutive to respondents' internal sexual landscapes are queer pre-sexual experiences, trauma and its impact on sexuality, and individual research into queer sexuality.

Pseudonym*	Pronouns	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Race	Major
Alec	He	20	Transgender Man	Asexual Queer	White	Graphic Design
Basil	He	21	Transgender Man	Bisexual Pansexual	White	Psychology
Elaine	She	20	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual Pansexual Queer	White	Philosophy New Media
James	He	19	Cisgender Man	Gay	White	Sociology
Noah	He	21	Transgender Man Nonbinary Gender Nonconforming	Bisexual Pansexual Queer	White	Biology
Mica	She/They	18	Nonbinary Gender Nonconforming	Bisexual Pansexual Queer	Asian	New Media
Justin	He	19	Transgender Man	Bisexual	White	Graphic Design
Ginger	They	21	Genderqueer	Lesbian Asexual	White	History Playwriting/Screenwriting
Leah	She	20	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	Black	Theatre & Performance
Connor	He	18	Cisgender Man	Gay	White	Playwriting/Screenwriting
Clementine	She	20	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	Latinx	Journalism
Fern	He	21	Cisgender Man	Bisexual	Asian White	Art History
Dani	She	19	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	White	Journalism
Desha	She	20	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	Latinx Black	Arts Management
Jake	He	20	Transgender Man	Bisexual Pansexual Queer	White	Theatre & Performance
Rani	She	20	Cisgender Woman	Pansexual	Asian	Sociology
Sam	He	21	Nonbinary	Gay	Asian	Sociology
Valerie	She/They	23	Transgender Woman Nonbinary Gender Nonconforming	Bisexual Pansexual	White	Studio production
Jay	They	20	Nonbinary	Queer Abrosexual**	Black White	Language & Culture
Rose	She	21	Transgender Woman Nonbinary Agender	Queer	Asian	Theatre & Performance Literature

Figure 1: Respondent Data. A pre-interview survey was administered to obtain personal data including pronouns used, age, gender identities, sexual identities, race/ethnicity, and major. *Interviewees were given the option to select the pseudonym their data would be associated with. **Respondents were given the option to write in any of their identity categories that were not included in the question options.

Results and Discussion

Sexuality as it is Being Lived Now

Respondents articulated their experiences of queer sexuality as they are having it and thinking about it now in three major ways: a rejection of binary sexual roles, an emphasis on communication, and the emotional role of sexual partners.

Rejection of Binary Sexuality

Respondents reported a reduced pressure to adhere to gendered sex roles, whether through conscious work to reject heterosexual sexual norms or through tacit recognition of heteronormativity's intelligibility within their queer sexual relationships. This de-centering of normative sexual roles lead to an emphasis on creativity and open communication about individual desires with partners rather than a reliance of unspoken gendered sex norms to guide their sexual practice.

Often respondents' internalized binary cultural assumptions of sexuality conflicted strongly with their actual desires and orientations, leading to emotional conflict and discomfort. This emotional conflict was often the catalyst for respondent's sexual awakening into their queer identities. This process of self-identification is complicated by pervasive social norms that proscribe cisheteronormativity.

... gay people have to actually have a sexual awakening. They literally have that moment where they're like, I'm gay and I want to have sex with other gay people

whereas straight people we are literally raised from birth as being someone who is going to eventually get with a girl. You always know from like if you're born straight you have been being told since you fucking were wrapped in that blue blanket as a baby that oh look at how he's looking at the nurse. He's a lady's man. Like it is implanted into your fucking head to have this mindset... what I'm saying is from the beginning of birth to now, it is heavily influenced this dynamic of men look at women sexually and men have to look at women's sexually with the whole like, "oh, he's a lady's man." Like, "Oh have any girlfriends yet?" Like a preschooler holds hands with a girl and it's like, oh, "he's already like, he's already got his girlfriend" and it's like that kid that has his girlfriend right now it could very much be gay and he's five years old and he's holding hands with someone. Calm down.... so I don't think that straight people have the same sexual awakening because I think that it has been implanted in them. The only reason that gay people have a sexual awakening is because we are born and raised to be straight and then all of a sudden we have to fucking be like to crawl out of that mindset to be like, oh my God, I'm different. I'm not this, I do not associate with this. (Connor)

Like having a heterosexual relationship versus a homosexual... it's definitely like, I feel like that's not even a question of like is it, cause it's definitely easier, like this stuff is being fed to you since like your birth all of us, like, yeah. So even when you're not, when you don't identify as straight or anything like that, like this is still stuff that you have knowledge on just because it's everywhere. (Leah)

Rose, a trans woman who primarily sleeps with men, spoke about how social norms of sexuality proscribed a male-pleasure centered sexuality. Rose spent her first year on Estrogen abstaining from sex, which gave her the opportunity to rethink her the social sexual norms she had internalized.

...when I was younger I thought sucking dick was a requirement because it was just the process. It's important. It was like you make out, you sucked a dick and then they fuck you. I thought that was the steps but apparently you don't need to do that. (Rose)

Basil, a bisexual trans man, spoke about how these norms shaped his initial ideas of sexuality as restrictive and heteronormative. Through de-emphasis of social sexual norms, he constructed a more fluid sexual ideology.

Even before like identifying as anything queer or at least not genderqueer-wise. Um, my idea of sexuality was still based around the idea of like a heterosexual, uh, cisnormative sex. It was confusing to conceptualize how other sex could work before I realized like, okay, that role, those roles in like a sexual setting don't have to be the only thing anyone ever does... there doesn't have to be roles as a whole. Just again, two people doing two people things. (Basil)

Basil also recounted how lingering internalized cisheteronormative scripting impacts his sexuality by eliciting feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. Before he came into his transgender identity, the idea of heterosexual sexuality was particularly anxiety provoking due to his discomfort with the idea of being vaginally penetrated. After he began transitioning, his anxieties stemming from social sexual norms shifted from revolving around being penetrated and occupying a heteronormative feminine role during sex to anxiety about his inability to perform the masculine penetrative role.

I think it has made me more averse just out of that, um, and I, I know fully well that the typical, like a straight person's idea of what sex should be and what it's portrayed as isn't the typical, I guess not for everybody. That's not what everyone is doing all the time. Um, but it has made me more aware that if someone wants that, if I can't perform that, then I'm in the wrong. And even though logically I know, I'm like, that's pretty fucking dumb that's not always what I'm going to be expected but... it does make me think that, that typical idea of what sex is, is not something I'm capable to provide. (Basil)

Fern spoke on the restrictive nature of heteronormative sexual scripts: "... it really just constricts everything so much, um, when you think that you have to play a role in fit into a category and you can't deviate out of it" (Fern). This sentiment was supported by multiple other respondents' testimonies, and Fern and other respondents argued that queer sexuality reduced the pressure to adhere to those norms.

There's less of like this expectation of you to act a certain way based on your gender... I feel like if you're having queer sex that kind of goes away a little bit because you're not so worried about it because the other person is probably not that worried about it. (Dani)

Many respondents described how queer sexuality provided them with opportunities to restructure sexuality in new creative ways.

... fundamentally being queer means that you are inherently separated or um, not, not separate you're not following some societal rules and constrictions. Um, like, so, um, you know, if you can be aware of that, you can give yourself the freedom to straight person. (Fern)

I think queer sex, there's, there's more opportunity to experiment and find what, what you like, what feels good... because again, it's slightly less restricted, um, and 'cause straight sex can be. So, um, you know... the thousands of years of human civilization sort of shape[d] the idea of what straight sex is and it essentially gets down to penis goes into vagina. Um, and that's sort of the focal point of it, right? Like, everything else is foreplay. It's unnecessary. And when the man comes, it's over. He goes home. Um, and you know, that's not what it has to be for queer sex because it might not be a cis man and a cis woman. There might not be the same parts going on there, so you'd maybe have to be a little more

creative with it for one thing. Um, and sort of this aspect of creativity that does make it better because it doesn't have to be penis goes into vagina. And even if the people involved in it, both happened to have a penis and a vagina, there's so much more you can do with that because maybe the people are not necessarily afraid to do more than that... Which just, you know, there's just so much more opportunities for that um, and it can be a lot better because you can be creative with it. (Fern)

The rejection of normative sexual scripts, to Fern, allows for a letting go of the fear of deviating from those norms and therefore increased sexual freedom. He acknowledges that queer sexuality is not unaffected by social sexual norms but nonetheless it “transgresses” them.

Even though it is of course also constricted by societal expectations, queer sex just inherently goes against societal expectations in its own way just by being what it is by not being uh cis people of opposite genders um, having sex... it it it it transgresses. Um, so even if it's restricted by like societal expectations, the fact that it is what it is makes it different. Um, and from there, uh queer sex is such a like a wide broad thing, right? Cause there's so, such a wide range of people with all sorts of different identities and orientations and different parts fitting together in different ways. Um, and every single one of them is unique in its own way. (Fern)

Desha, a cisgender bisexual woman, spoke on how a release of heteronormative sex roles allows for more fulfilling sex and increased sexual freedom.

Interestingly, Desha argues that heterosexuals are also capable of such sexual freedom if they are able to let go of the imperative to adhere to social sexual norms.

I like to think that straight sex is more vanilla sex. That's just the way I think about it. I don't know. But I do know people that use toys and they're straight, but it's not, it's just not common... But, um, it definitely depends if the person is just willing to let go... let go of anything they've thought of before, like of how they should act during sex. Like I talked about like being like more fluid when it comes to it. I feel like that gives it, that makes you, um, you just feel, I feel like you have more fulfilling sex that way if you just let go of those social norms and the things you're taught and the things you've see on TV and you just, you just, you just become yourself with the person that you're having sex with, I guess. (Desha)

Connor, a cisgender gay man, builds on this by arguing that this increase in freedom is because gay men aren't afraid of "acting gay" in the way that straight men are and are therefore less restricted in the sexual activities they want to participate in.

There's nothing that you can tell... a gay person with another gay person that like wants to do it like where they'd be like, "oh I don't want to do

that. That's like straight," right?... like, there's no limit. Like you could do anything that's so fun. Like why would you want to like have sex in a where you're like, I can only do it this way (Connor)

This is complicated, however, by reports from respondents who engaged in gay male hookup culture who reported a replication of gendered sex roles in the top/bottom dynamic in which "tops" enact dominant sexuality of that emblematic of the expectations for heterosexual men and "bottoms" enact submissive sexuality mirroring the expectations for heterosexual women. James questions "why can't being a top or being a bottom just be a preference as opposed to a scale of who's masculine and who's not?" (James)

I would consider myself as a full bottom and the tops, I feel like it could be the same scenario that plays between a heterosexual male and female where the bottom plays like the female, um, role and the top players, the masculine and then that kind of sexual like sexual, um, what's the word for it? Like basically unequal views on sex of what happens between a cisgendered male and cisgendered female happens between a top and a bottom where it's kind of like whenever the top wants to have sex, that's when it's time for it... It's like this toxic masculinity that's like been just brought over from like, I guess like that was like the same as heterosexual male. It's like they have, they feel entitled to that to put it on to like the bottoms I guess in a way. (Sam)

Emphasis on Communication

Interviewees of all identities stressed the importance of communication both in and out of sexual situations. Many interviewees stated that queer sex is by nature more communication-focused though there were multiple reasons this was attributed to. Some felt that because queerness inherently places queer people outside of sexual norms, the gap in which unspoken sexual assumptions would reside was filled with communication. Others felt that increased communication was a result of a shared compassion and care for other queer people. Queerness makes people socially vulnerable, leading to compassion for other queer people which translates into increased care being taken around partners' wants and needs (thus necessitating communication) in sexual scenarios.

Jay, a nonbinary queer person, felt that increased communication in queer sexuality was due to the need to negotiate sexuality with partners because the sexual needs and realities of queer people are inherently out of step with heteronormative sexuality.

Um, queer people I feel like are just generally better at communicating and like, because the world is not based around them, they have to, because it's called heteronormativity for a reason. They're forced to communicate their way through scenarios and talk about the experiences that they've had and what's good for them and was not good for them... they have to warn people to not look at them and expect heteronormativity or just expect a certain level of hyper masculinity or hyper femininity. (Jay)

Noah felt that because of its inherent non-normativity, queer sexuality necessitated personal negotiations of norms and one's own desires before being sexual with others.

Well, I think that in um, for queer people things involve a lot more communication. Well that's what I think because um, it's like we have to, we have to practice with us. Like we have to think about these things beforehand and we have to, um, I dunno, I feel like communication is probably the biggest difference. I don't know exactly why, cause I'm sure there are quiet queer people in, in bed, you know, that's not, you know, not going to happen. But I feel like straight people are given the expectation that this is how sex goes. So when you're already kind of in the taboo of not being straight and having straight sex, things are already a little different. So let's define it more so there's more communication there... with straight people it's kinda like here's foreplay, then there's penetration, then that's sex. So, um, so I feel like, yeah, communication is probably what I would say is probably the biggest one. (Noah)

Valerie spoke about these negotiations of sexual desires and expectations as a dialect of society's social sexual norm language. This dialect, or sexual vocabulary, allows for a queer sexual shorthand to take the place of assumed sexual roles.

“ we have roles, like we talk about things like in terms of like top and bottom, we like categorize like people in terms of like, like masc/femme and like, um, like, like butch/femme. Like it's, um, we have all of these like tools of categorization

that straight people don't have because they don't need it.... it's so much freer in a sense in terms of how you can have sex with people. We create these tools to help facilitate us have sex, to have sex, you know? Like, um, meanwhile for straight people, like the ways heterosexuality is constructed the way that, um, like gender, the gender binary is constructed, the way the patriarchy is constructed, like all facilitates straight people having sex in a specific manner. Um, all facilitates that, like kind of typical penetrative sex between a man and a woman. And um like, we are in a sense free to explore each other's bodies and have sex and, um, like be intimate in like kind of an infinite number of ways, um, where like all of those things, all of those tools that the cisheteropatriarchy uses, um, just don't apply to us. It's not useful. So we create our own terms, we create our own, um, like category categories to facilitate that. But they aren't something that you need to be strictly beholden to either. Like it's just to, you know, help move things along a little bit better.” (Valerie)

In this light, the emphasis on communication is extraordinarily practical for a subgroup practicing sexuality within a social sexual system that was not designed for them. For many, however, communication stemmed less from practicality and more from compassion for other queer people.

I think that that's something that queer people definitely like to emphasize is communication. Because I feel like being queer and just like in, in being othered from heterosexual society, you're automatically going to take a different approach

to relationships. And I feel like from what I've seen, queer people are automatically not more respectful, but there is an element of like wanting to please your partner because neither of you are straight and you have experienced like, societal othering and you don't want to hurt anyone the way you had potentially been hurt (Ginger)

... you're in a community where you have a lot of like shit thrown at you hate crimes... You know, you're generally shunned from most places.... It kind of makes you have to rethink a lot... you unlearn like a lot of different things when you're queer. And then when you approach that in a relationship, you know what it's like to be mistreated and you know what it's like to not have someone understand you. (Alec)

Jay feels that it is not only communication, but a combination of communication and the willingness to adjust expectations and actions for one's partner's expressed desires.

It's not just communication. You have to be willing to put yourself out there for your partner, you know? You know, I mean maybe not to an extent that makes you uncomfortable, but like be aware enough to understand that there's someone else in that bed that needs pleasuring. (Jay)

Emotional Role of Sexual Partners

The complex roles played by interviewees' sexual partners was often spoken about, but in two distinct and opposing lights. Many interviewees reported a feeling of comfort and safety and reduction of body shame in sex with other queer people. Others believed that queer sex had the capacity to be comforting but felt that that was not actualized in the sex they were currently having or have had.

Respondents had different reasonings for why queer sex was so emotionally and physically satisfying for them, some felt that it was due to shared experiences leading to more acceptance, care, and feelings of safety.

... do think that queerness as a whole would make a person... more accepting because they typically... exposed to different types of discrimination themselves. So then they would take that experience and then realize that other people are experiencing that too and be more soft and kind to people who were experiencing, um, that kind of negative treatment, which is why I do feel more comfortable around queer people because they can understand, uh, the same if not similar plights that I have. And if they can't relate personally, they at least hear about it enough to know it's valid and it's reasonable that I have the feelings that I do based on the experiences that I've had... I just like the community of having people with similar experiences without the expectation that you have to be one thing or the other... I think the diminishing expectations that queer people have of other queer people is what makes me comfortable. (Basil)

Women respondents often spoke of feeling comfort in being sexual with other women because of their shared experiences as queer women in a heteronormative and patriarchal society.

[queer sex involves] feeling more connected to your partner, that's like the major thing. You just feel more connected and more comfortable... I just feel like I could be more myself around a woman than a man. I feel like, you know, both genders are equally judgmental at times but I feel like they with girl... it's like less judgmental and more like "I get why you feel like that I get, I get why you like would-wouldn't want this like sexually or emotionally" I feel like just that's my experience... cause I'm very secure about... some of my body... I think like with a girl... she accepts me more cause she knows like not everyone is gonna [look] like these like supermodels or like people you see like on the media. So she just like more open to like my body figure than men because men have this ideal woman in their head that they're supposed to look a certain way. So most of the time I'm not very comfortable fully in my skin around them... And it's like it doesn't leave the fact that I want to look great for the woman just leaves the fact that I don't have to, even if I look my best, even know something's missing, I'm still gonna look good in her eyes. But with men, I feel like I'm never going to look his ideal perfect. (Clementine)

Other respondents pointed to the combination of shared experiences and similar anatomy as the root of their comfort in sex with partners of the same gender and with similar genitals. Desha, a

bisexual cisgender woman, spoke about why sex with her long-term girlfriend is so emotionally and physically satisfying:

I feel like we're [women] more open and we communicate more and we discuss the way we want things and how we want it... I feel like women, they just understand you better. And if you guys have the same genitals, I feel like it's easier to know how to work through it. (Desha)

Valerie, a nonbinary trans woman, spoke about why she currently prefers sleeping with other trans women:

I already know more or less how their body's going to work because I've been through it... I don't have genital dysphoria, however, I understand that it's a thing. I understand that that is something that I need to be aware of going into that type of, um, interaction. Um, and like I know how to navigate that because even though I don't necessarily like have that, I have like a similar enough embodiment that like, it makes sense to me and I kind of have an immediate understanding without having even really met them yet, you know? And that's something that and it's like, and then when I have these interactions, um, like it's just kind of, um, almost easier. I find a lot of trans women are extremely shy in bed, like I um, and kind of makes me sad a little bit to um, see how, um, cause it's like, I don't know, we're like a seen as so, um, like just sexually undesirable. Um, we're like really hardcore fetishized in a lot of instances in some really gross ways. And um, just in

general, like the way society treats us, like the best way we can be and interact with the world around us is to be as like, demure and submissive as possible. To the most hardcore, hardcore degree. If you're not a fifties housewife, then fuck you, you're not getting hormones. Um, and that like, I see a lot of that then carried over to like how they act, um, sexually and then a lot of them are extremely touched starved. You know, it's something I a lot and a lot of them have like complex relationships with their sexuality that have, um, like relationship to trauma, relationship to the fetishization of their identity. Like it's, it's really complicated territory, but it's territory that I know. And I immediately understand and it just makes those interactions so much more powerful. (Valerie)

A complex interaction of perceived or anticipated expectations of individuals' partners, actual expectations of individuals' partners, the partners' identities, and the partners themselves shaped interviewees' experiences of sexuality greatly. While for some this interaction resulted in fulfilling sexual encounters, others recounted instances where sexual partners negatively impacted their sexual experiences.

Basil, a bisexual trans man, feels anxiety about disappointing sexual partners who may expect him to fit the socially proscribed sexual role of a cisgender male.

Sexually it's difficult for a trans person, or at least in my experience it is. Because it's kind of scary in being a trans person cause you always fear that you're going to be with somebody who expects certain aspects of the gender that you present as. So I heavily, heavily fear disappointing somebody like, "oh, by the way, uh, you

were expecting a dick from me and that's not going to happen." That's the kind of fear that I have. So I always feel like I could only date people who are also bisexual who would be content either way, which um, makes dating a little more difficult. Um, makes the prospect of dating apps or like dating people I don't know pretty spooky. Like, ohh my God, they don't know me and I don't like to be just up front what this kind of shit. Though, clearly I am comfortable talking about it, it's still, to a stranger, It's it's uncomfortable, but yeah. (Basil)

Valerie, a bisexual nonbinary trans woman, also looks for bisexuality in her sexual partners to avoid the possibility of partners rejection of her because of her trans identity. "I prefer my partners to also be bisexual. Um, just because I feel like it's a safer bet that they're going to be, um, like flexible and accepting of me in bed" (Valerie). Justin, a bisexual trans man, navigates this anxiety by preferring to sleep with other trans people.

You're taught that men have x parts and women and y parts and when that doesn't match up with you, it's weird because...I know I'm a guy... But that doesn't, you know, that doesn't mean that other people see me that way. I have thought about it before. I don't know if I could ever have sex with someone who is cis because I feel like that just makes me so vulnerable. (Justin)

Trans respondents reported not only anxiety around partners' expectations of their bodies but also expectations of gendered behavior. Trans men spoke about the

expectation, both internally projected or externally perceived, to perform hyper masculinity and dominance in sexual scenarios to cement their perception as a man.

I feel like I would be expected to be a dominant figure, like a dominant role sexually even though that is pretty far removed from the truth. Uh, your boy is not a top, but like, there is an expectation to me like, okay, these are the roles that I've been told should be followed. We'd like- going back again to being told what roles are what from childhood, okay, well the woman is demure and the man is dominant. And even though it's pretty fucked up... That's still how I think, in the back of my little monkey brain, it's supposed to be like how I'm supposed to act. And it's things that's even out of sexual situations too, where I'll see other men and I'll think, oh, they are rough and rugged therefore I should also be rough and rugged. Which is absolutely not what I'm doing ever. But this- just the idea that that's the role that I'm supposed to be in. (Basil)

I felt for a long time that I wanted to be, um, dominant in all situations just because my personality isn't necessarily like that normally. And it's the toxic masculinity aspect where my brain is like, "if I'm going to be less feminine I have to be dominant." So that's kind of how I was for a long time.... I think directly in my interest in that directly related to my gender. Um, but now it's, it's a little different because I'm also trying to steer away from using... the traits of toxic masculinity to be who I feel like I should be. I don't, I don't have to be a certain way and, and I've gotten to understand that a lot more recently. Um, but in, in

terms of like sex stuff, um, I always, I wanted to be the, the man in the, in the situation, um, just because I present, so femininely in some situations, but not as much anymore. But I did present very femininely, um, before that it was kind of like making up for it in a way. (Noah)

Conversely, Valerie, a trans woman, also reported being expected to perform hegemonic masculinity in sex with cisgender women.

The expectations of, um, like mostly like cis women having of like, like treating me like a man in bed expecting me to perform like a penetrative role. Um, expecting like a certain kind of interaction. Like there's some elements that go into like, like the trappings of the whole scenario that like, it's kind of hard to pin down and describe. Like, I think it really comes down to a lot of times, like some of like the small things that are said and like little interactions and how you touch each other. Um, and like with cis women, that has largely been in a manner that, um, like feels like there's certain expectations of me. (Valerie)

Trans respondents reported sexual misgendering, or being treated as or expected to act in line with the performance of a gender they don't identify with, during sex with cisgender partners.

I feel like when you're trans you have sex differently... So I was, um, dating a cis woman for a while um after I came out, it still felt like I was being treated like a

man in bed. I was still expected of, um, like, um, like taking like the penetrative role. (Valerie)

I guess something that straight people don't have to think about or cis people don't have to think about is the like are you going to touch me the way... I want you to touch me? Like are you going to have sex with me as you see me as a woman or no? (Rose)

Another obstacle to sexual intimacy and feelings of safety stemmed from the prevalence of fetishization of trans bodies and identities.

I perceive myself as a man. I know that other trans people do. I know that some cis people do, but I know that at the end of the day, sometimes it's really hard to unlearn what you've been taught. And I don't want them to see me as say, you know, "the Trans Guy they hooked up with" or not the guy that I hooked up with but, like "the guy with the vagina that they hooked up with" plus a lot of problems within like, you know, the human experience of sexuality is that, you know, the porn industry has exploited so many marginalized people, including trans people to be fetish objects and um, you know, it's a double edged sword. Like if I'm pre-op, if I don't have bottom surgery, I'll feel like I'm like a fetish category. Like, Ooh, a guy with a vagina. So exotic, so kinky, you know, people really do kind of see it as kinky, which is scary because it's like you really could want to have just

like very love like just like love making general and like connection, kind of just like very intimate experience. There'll be seen as like something kind of like, you know, naughtier. (Justin)

Rose, a nonbinary trans woman who primarily sleeps with men, felt that she had not experienced as much sexual misgendering because she attracts “down low” men, or men who are not out or do not identify with queerness but still seek sex with men, and men who fetishize Asian trans women, and therefore do not want to think of her as a man. While this fetishization makes her uncomfortable, she prefers the relative safety of hooking up with men who are aware and accepting of her transness over the threat of transmisogynistic violence that accompanies many sexual experiences for trans women.

I fulfill a certain fetish, the people that come to me... [are] looking for a trans women particularly. And so they're not going to call me, they're not gonna misgender me because that invalidates or that's going to make them feel like they're having, like, that makes them, that's going to make them feel like they're homosexual and that's what that's something that they don't want. So if they misgendered me, this is also going to make them feel uncomfortable... I used to feel very icked out by it um, because it made me feel like a product, but also I feel okay with that because dating apps are weird, how tinder treats me is weird. Um, but also like they understand the biology and my body and they're expecting what

they're expecting. And it doesn't have to be that fear or notion of like, oh, it's a surprise. No. Like you understand it, it's blatant and yeah. (Rose)

Sam, a genderfluid person who primarily sleeps with men, expressed similar experiences with “down low” men who, due to their feminine presentation, often approach them a trans woman on dating apps. This misreading of their gender feels dehumanizing because the emphasis of those approaching them was on their ability to fulfil a fetish rather than genuine interest in Sam themselves.

It's because of the way I look and the way I identify as, whereas like I look more feminine. I attract... the quote unquote straight guys who are into gay things, but they're still straight, those kinds of guys or the down low guys... And it's because like, I guess they could see past like, okay, you look feminine. They kind of relate it to like, I guess, female and like the whole feminine look... it makes me feel like less of a person, kind of like what am I then? Like am I not, like it, it makes me linger because I don't really hook up, I can't say I hook up with guys who are 100% just gay. I am more with like bisexual men or like those DL quote unquote straight guys or even guys who identify as straight... [and] although I don't identify as trans, they will view me as trans. Like they see my pictures and they automatically assume like, “hey, are you trans?” (Sam)

For some trans respondents, having sex with other trans people is as fraught as having sex with cis people. These respondents reported feelings of dysphoria as a result of interacting with

their trans partners' bodies and comparing it to their own. Alec and Justin, both of whom are trans men, spoke of the recursive dysphoria conjured between themselves and past trans male partners:

Dysphoria in that context, it's hard to just live your life normally. And then to couple on top of that, like when you have sex with someone, especially if like I've dated a lot of AFAB² people and I have nothing against dating AFAB people, but when you see someone else and if they're also trans, cause I've dated a lot of trans people. So seeing them, watching them struggle through their dysphoria and their problems and seeing their body look almost exactly like yours is you both kind of like conjure dysphoria for each other and not unintentionally. Like you try to be there and support each other but like seeing their body, you're just kind of like that's what I look like. Like this is like what I'm not comfortable with. This is what this other person is uncomfortable with. We're both suffering and trying to like figure it out together.” (Alec)

The first time I had sex with my previous boyfriend um, I cried afterwards because, um, he, you know, this is, you know, he was a bit further in his transition than me and kind of just, um, you know, like he took off his pants and he's wearing men's boxers and I still had like women's underwear on because I never thought to get new underwear because like, no one's going to see em. Now that people are seeing em and it's another guy, it's like, oh shit. And you know, he was

² Assigned Female at Birth

just a lot more leaner than me, you know, less hips, um, you know, flatter chest. Cause this was before I, you know, it was pre top surgery. Um, he kept his binder on. I didn't, and it was just, you know, it's kind of, he didn't pressure me at all, but it's kinda just like this kinda like, you know, it's kind of like he's the man I should be almost, which is sad. But I initially got over that really easily because, you know, our first time was only about two weeks into our relationship, but as time went on, um, you know, I knew that there wasn't really any pressure to be a specific kind of man with him. And, you know, we both opened up our boundaries a little more and kind of just let each other know, like, you know, I never really told them that I cried because I told him I cried because I was getting dysphoric, I never told him it was his cause of him because I wouldn't want him to deal with that and to live with that. (Justin)

However, other trans people felt that their gender was affirmed through sex with other trans people. Valerie, a nonbinary trans woman, feels that the intimacy she experiences when sleeping with other trans women is due to the shared understanding of each others' bodies and realities. The feelings of safety rooted in this shared understanding in turn allows Valerie to be more vulnerable and open with her partners which is deeply emotionally fulfilling for her.

Right now, my type is primarily trans women. Like I am mostly interested in being with like sexually, romantically like with other trans women... [because] we're willing to be vulnerable with each other... there is absolutely value... [in] being able to be vulnerable with each other. It's more intimate... [and leads to me]

deriving so much more pleasure from hookups with trans women, just so much more emotional pleasure even, is because of that vulnerability. Because of that shared vulnerability. (Valerie)

Basil, a trans man, reported feeling validated during sex with a nonbinary partner because he felt less pressure to fulfil the cisgender masculine ideal.

It was validating because there was not an expectation of roles one way or another because they would understand that there is no role that they would like to fill, nor is there a role they expecting you to also fill. Neither one of us was, uh, any more dominant or masculine or feminine than the other (Basil)

Jake, a trans man in a relationship with a trans woman, attributed his emotional satisfaction and comfort during sex to his girlfriend's acceptance of his gender. "The fact that she fully accepts me for who I am... before I was the girl and all the other relationships... they all knew I was genderfluid, but I was still like mainly a girl" (Jake).

Internal Sexual Landscapes

Interviewees' internal sexual landscapes were found to be influenced deeply by previous experiences with and negotiations of sexuality, notably the repression of queer pre-sexual desires

and experiences, social and sexual trauma and its impact on sexuality, and individual research into queer sexuality.

Queer Experiences in Youth

The majority of respondents recounted experiences of pre-sexual intimacy with same gender friends and gender nonconforming thoughts and beliefs felt at a young age. As they learned gender and sexual norms, whether through parental confrontation or cultural osmosis, they learned to repress and ignore these urges and thoughts. While it is common for young children to be exploratory and curious about sexuality and their bodies, the sublimation of these queer propensities and ideation is striking in its regularity amongst respondents. When asked about these experiences, many respondents appeared to show relief or pleasure at reconnecting with this young and blithely queer version of themselves.

Respondent Desha recalls struggling with same gender attraction in Elementary and Middle School after being chided by her mother as a child for pre-sexual exploratory play with a same gender friend.

In middle school I didn't really experiment much, I remember just observing girls, I guess, and keeping it to myself. But not thinking about it too much. Yeah, I just remember not thinking about it that much, I remember thinking "oh that was just like a little phase in elementary school, I'm okay" not okay in the terms of I'm sick or anything just like "I'm okay I don't think I am..." I would always just have these little battles with myself. And I remember thinking like seeing a girl like "oh my

god she looks nice" then thinking "wait I'm not gay I'm not gay I just think she's nice girls could think girls look cute or whatever." (Desha)

In elementary school when I would, um, have these two girlfriends, girls that are friends and um, we would experiment in the bathroom, like kiss and stuff, kiss in the staircase... just to experiment. I remember thinking that, just to experiment, and we, um, actually one of them actually kind of liked me and I remember rejecting that, like telling them like, "no, I don't feel that way. Like I was just experimenting" because in my head I knew it was wrong, what it was, it was wrong to me just because the way I was raised. (Desha)

Rani also engaged in dissuasive self-talk in response to same-gender attraction in her youth:

I would tell myself that they were friend crushes, I just wanted to be friends with them and I just, I didn't want to, yeah, I didn't want to accept it because I, you know, I have to be straight for my family. (Rani)

Jay, a nonbinary person, feels that their childhood enthusiasm for femininity was a form of self-policing their gender expression to better adhere to social norms.

There was that obsession with everything that was feminine and, you know, pink or whatever. And you know, that was, that was what I would assume, but the time was me just trying to hyper correct myself into identifying as femininely or as femininely as possible. Which, yeah, looking back at it now, that's probably what it was.... I know a lot of people go through like times where they feel like they have to hyper correct in some way because what they think is more liberal than conservative society standards. (Jay)

Trauma

For many respondents, their conception and experience of sexuality is filtered through the lens of past trauma, both sexual and cultural. For some, their experiences with sexual coercion and trauma lead to increased sexual activity, leading to risky hookups and emotionally unhealthy sexual relationships. For others, past sexual trauma lead to sexual anxiety and aversion, however, none had sworn off of sex entirely. For them, sexuality could still be a tool for pleasure, connection, and even healing, if not now then possibly in the future.

For Alec, a trans man who experienced childhood sexual assault and who has recently begun to identify as asexual, trauma and dysphoria interacted to make sexual pleasure difficult to attain. He reported lack of pleasure and sensation with sexual partners and struggling with masturbation.

I can't touch myself. Like my hands don't work, but vibrators do.... And I think because of the, you know, sexually related trauma that I have, um, a lot of like

what I try to do, like if it was penetration, like I, like, my body actually like seizes up that it won't let that happen. (Alec)

Not being able to meet societal norms of masculine sexuality was extraordinarily difficult for Alec.

“when I was figuring out like, the whole, like, I can't have sex because of the trauma... Um, I didn't know what to do because I was just, my immediate assumption was I'm broken... Like something's wrong with me because I can't do what everyone else can do, what my partners can do, what they expected me [to do.]” (Alec)

Valerie experienced sexual trauma in high school and became sexually hyperactive in response, for her, the reduction in sex drive caused by Estrogen gave her the opportunity to reevaluate what she wanted from sex and sexual intimacy.

I'm actually kind of thankful for going on hormones and having them calm down my sexual urges quite a bit because I'm like, because of trauma reasons I have had like extremely hyperactive, like sexuality, you know? Um, and it's like that kind of also interacted with like those extreme urges leading to like risky hookups, that kind of stuff. (Valerie)

Others experienced cultural trauma in which conservative beliefs inculcated throughout their lives lead to intrusive thoughts, sexual anxiety, and shame which hindered their ability to engage with sexuality and sexual pleasure. These included fears of recently deceased relatives watching them engage with taboo sexuality, beliefs in the inherent dirtiness of same-gender-loving that they were still struggling to unlearn, and anxieties around choosing between familial acceptance and their identities.

Being in a traditional family all throughout life I was pushed to be like the heterosexual straight male. So like I was like, you know, under pressure thinking and there was maybe something wrong with me and like I had to fix myself.

(Sam)

Rani, a bisexual Bengali Muslim woman from a traditional family, struggles to navigate her desire to explore her sexual orientation and her obligation “to be straight for [her] family.”

My big sister she cares more about familial valueless. So she told me to never date a girl that basically, because then it puts me at risk of falling deep in a relationship with them and then I'm going to want a future. So she told me to avoid any of these things. And I do, I do where I get where she's coming from, but I hate that she was also telling me to not explore this part of my sexuality (Rani)

Because her parents and community expect her to marry a Bengali Muslim man, Rani struggles with her desire to build sexual and emotional relationships with women because she cannot have a future with them without losing her community.

I would love [to marry] a Bengali Muslim woman, but I will be ostracized and alienated from my community. And while I don't think my parents would kill me... they would be very disappointed in me. I would be kicked out of the family, but I wouldn't want other people finding out because it hinders our reputation because reputation is what matters a lot in my culture. It hinders our reputation. And also it can put me like I can be harmed or my family can be harmed and I don't want to do that. So as much as I would love a South Asian Muslim woman, I also have to think of the consequences and how it can affect my family and my life and her life or her family's life (Rani)

Rani's internalized shame around sexuality made experiencing sexual pleasure, both alone and with partners, difficult for her.

I also just don't like the feeling of the wetness on my hands or anything. It's a lot of internalized misogyny. I don't like, I feel weird by direct penetration or touching. I think I feel more dirty, you know, and shameful. So, um, that's why I preferred my vibrator... I also wouldn't be like "I am the cause of it." Like I am, but I'm also not the direct cause it'd be like, it's my vibrator, you know, like I'm

not trying to be, I'm not trying to admit that I'm giving myself sexual pleasure even though I am like, I know I admit it now, but like I don't want to come to terms with it when I'm like doing those things.

She recounted her difficulty overcoming her anxiety and shame around being sexual with a past girlfriend but being dissuaded by intrusive thoughts about deceased ancestors watching her and during sexual experiences.

I guess I felt like I was sinning too much. I have, I have an Islamic phrase above my bed and I felt like, I think I just felt like I was going to hell. And then I think there was this one point when I was really down to do it [have sex], but then my aunt died and I was like, “well, she's watching me.” (Rani)

Similar feelings of shame and self-monitoring were reported by multiple respondents from varying religious and cultural backgrounds, from Guyanese Caribbean to Italian-American Catholicism. Interviewees engaged in varying improvisational practices to make do within their sexual (and non-sexual) realities.

Individual Research

Lack of inclusive sex education lead to many respondents turning to the internet to parse their identities and learn how be sexual with people of the same gender. For some this included

relatively tame youtube tutorials, personality quizzes, and online communities. For most, their individual research lead them to pornography and dating apps. These online forays began for most in middle and high school as they began to recognize an inherent otherness in their identities and sought others like them and resources to fill this social void.

I feel like the main source, cause nobody ever teaches you about this kind of stuff in school. So you're just kind of, you have to know how to do it. You have to look for it all yourself. I feel like a lot of where I figured out things is through porn, which sucks because you don't, it's not really the way that things are in reality. Um, I feel like that's where I've gotten a lot of my information. I've definitely gotten a lot of incorrect information from things like that. And um, also from friends, I have talked to them about their sexual experiences and I've learned a lot through that too. (Fern)

Um, you know, my parents are a heterosexual couple, my brother's heterosexual, um, and all my friends were, and like my friends parents and everything. So I didn't have like any kind of like other influence except for like the Internet and deviantart when I was like, like really young and tumblr when I had it at the time and I didn't really look into it that way. I was just kind of like something's wrong. And I just kind of had to stumble around in the dark myself. (Alec)

For some interviewees, access to the internet enabled them to explore other ways of being that they had previously been unaware of. The ability to see themselves in the experiences and narratives of others helped reduce feelings of shame and ostracization.

Uh, it [the internet] helped me immensely it first introduced me to the very existence of someone being transgender. Because before then I was... the only exposure I had would be like relatively to extremely transphobic jokes, using a number of slurs... but you don't want to ascribe yourself to... being the butt of a joke. (Basil)

I, through Tumblr, found the, found out what asexuality was and was reading up on that and had that moment of "Oh my God, it's me, I get it." (Ginger)

When seeking information on how to be sexual as a trans person or with people of the same gender, respondents often stumbled into internet pornography.

So it kind of left you like having to find the information out for yourself. Like, I would find myself googling certain things like... "how do like gay people have sex" and stuff. And then I feel like that would link me to like looking at videos and stuff. Cause like, you know, there's not going to be no like educational

videos. So you'd kind of have to look up pornography and be like, oh, well this is how it works. (Sam)

Others intentionally sought out pornography to learn about queer sexuality despite their understanding that pornography is far removed from the realities of sexuality.

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The desire to learn about queer sexuality and connect with other queer people often lead respondents to dating apps such as Tinder and Grindr at relatively young ages.

[in high school] I had to resort to Grindr... So I was like, I have to resort to that and cause I'm like, that's where the only guys I'm going to be able to like get access to because it was weird because it did. The only reason why I got that too

was not even about the sex. It was more about the like when you're in high school, you just want to be like someone's significant other or someone's crush or someone. And I felt like I couldn't be that because if, to my knowledge everyone was heterosexual, they weren't going to be into me. So I had to find guys who would to get some type of attention. (Sam)

These apps gave them the opportunity to engage in sexuality, but not always in a healthy or fulfilling way. Rose recounted feeling shame after hookups because of the brusque and impersonal treatment she received, stating that she was left "... feeling like shame after sex, but also feeling disgusted with what I'd just done because it just feels like I was being manhandled." (Rose) This description was not uncommon amongst respondents who interacted with gay male hookup culture.

The use of dating apps also placed two respondents in vulnerable situations that lead to sexual coercion and assault. Mica recounted their experience navigating Tinder at 17:

I went on Tinder and I looked like real small and like, you know, Asian and that kind of thing. So I got like 25 year olds who were older than my 17 year old self... there was this guy that I saw more and more and we kind of had this toxic thing going on and I don't know how to phrase that, but he kind of coerced me into having sex a few times... it's like a weird mix because it's like I want to have sex because it makes you feel validated but also don't want to have sex because

then that makes me feel used and I'm like, wait, but what do you want? Isn't it your fault when this happens then? (Mica)

Because they had sought sexual interaction on these apps, those who were assaulted blamed themselves for their trauma.

The internet was not the only risky place in which respondents sought out community and information. Valerie recounted her excitement in high school when she found out that her boss was also bisexual, but who, when approached, took advantage of her sexually. Because of the limited resources afforded to young queer people, Valerie felt that her experience was far from uncommon.

We have such a better understanding of ourselves than straight people... it's like we have to do all of the work to like, like, because we put in that work to understand ourselves, we have a better understanding ourselves than straight people likely ever will have in their life because they're not required to do that work. But then that's also still like intensive labor that we need to do to get there. And that takes a toll and the confusion takes a toll. And all of like the old ideas that, um, like cause like heteronormativity like it is definitely harmful to straight people, but in ways that they, that may never be relevant in their lives. Um, but in ways that are immediately relevant to our lives. Because if we try to hold over those concepts, it fucks us up. So it's like we do a lot of stumbling. And I, like it sucks, like so many of us are traumatized so many of us have like, like the

experience that I was just talking about of like being taken advantage of when I was trying to explore like we spend this portion of our lives in a very vulnerable state and it makes us easy to take advantage of. (Valerie)

This trauma deeply influenced her relationship with her own sexuality and identities.

I didn't really get to explore that until much later in life because, um, I was, um, taken advantage of at that stage... I think that's what delayed me coming out as trans for so long. Um like, cause like, like the process of coming out as bi was kind of like taken advantage of and corrupted. Um, and uh, like I almost like didn't want to go through that again. Um, this person in particular had a habit of fetishizing trans women... which then, you know, made it harder to see myself as that later on. Um, so it's like I did feel the need to look for those answers. Um, and in retrospect I wish that the answers I was looking for and the validation that I was seeking was more readily available in some other form. Um, like, like I wish that like sex ed in school was taught easier if I was like um like if it was something that was just like more easily and readily accepted by my parents and my peers, um, then I don't think that situation would have ever happened. (Valerie)

Discussion

Strikingly, the act of speaking on their sexuality during these interviews influenced respondents' perceptions and understandings of their own identities and experiences. Multiple participants reported impacts of the interview on their emotional landscape, some stating that they spoke about experiences for the first time ever during the interview, others remembering past experiences that had until then been forgotten, and some remarking that the interview gave them "stuff to think about." This highlights the relative isolation of queer experiences from those of cisgender and heterosexual society and the essential lack of inelible narratives for queer people. It is the researchers hope that these testimonies help to shorten the gap between queer experiences and our social sexual narratives.

This study centers the experiential testimony of LGBTQ individuals and sought to highlight the complex social/sexual negotiations queer individuals engage in in their daily lives. Major themes identified in these interviews were the rejection of binary sexual categories, an emphasis on communication, feelings of comfort and safety with partners, queer pre-sexual experiences, trauma and its impact on sexuality, and individual research into queer sexuality. This study includes the testimony of individuals with a diverse range of sexual orientation and gender identities, rendering these data representative of many of the experiences of the broader queer youth population. These data are supported by existing research into queer negotiations of sexuality and add essential experiential testimony to the queer canon.

This study is exploratory, with a relatively homogenous pool of respondents and a small sample size. This subject is still in need of more compassionate, testimony-centered research into the sexual lives being lived by queer individuals with a larger and more diverse population, particularly the study of other, less inclusive, campuses and queer youth sexuality outside of

college environments. This study is deeply rooted in the everyday experiences of queer individuals, and to that end future goals cannot only be scientific but also must include social and political goals. These data demonstrate the need for increased queer inclusive and medically accurate sex education in schools to reduce isolation and misinformation and shore up queer youth's defenses in a society made inhospitable for queerness.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Queer individuals' sex practices tread a difficult line between what is socially proscribed and what is internally felt. These interviews display the complexity and nuance within queer individuals' sexual ideations and practices. For many, queer sexuality is a lens through which new, more creative and equitable sexual paradigms can be constructed. For others, their experiences with queer sex reflected the reproduction of heteronormative sexual binaries within non-heterosexual relationships. It is perhaps unsurprising that queer sex is no one thing- neither all good nor all bad, neither entirely radical or totally traditional, and certainly not free of the human foibles and flaws that impact all aspects of social life.

This study began with the assertion that sex outside of sexual norms forces us to rethink what sex can be. It was found that as respondents came into their identities and enacted sexuality within them, they also engaged in a process of self-discovery and norm-negotiation in which they could construct a sexuality that suited their needs and desires. This active unlearning and disruption of cisheterosexist norms and rejection of rote normative sexuality is necessitated by queerness' inherent otherness, but is not restricted just to LGBTQ people. We can all learn to unburden ourselves from these proscribed modes of sexuality and build new, more creative and

equitable sexual paradigms and, in the words of Fern, “if you can be aware of that, you can give yourself the freedom to not act like a straight person.” (Fern)

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