Odd Couples
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I feel like Guy is one of a handful of men I know who I feel like—I guess I'll just be extreme about it: he's one of a handful of men who I know who's not a shit head. I grew up kind of with men who weren't great. . . . He's emotional and communicative and real and you can talk to him, and I don't know a whole lot of men like that. So he's really special in that way.

—Wallis, a thirty-year-old white lesbian

MARK AND CRISTINA

Mark met Cristina at work a little over a year ago. At the time, Mark was working as a representative for a fragrance company at a large department store in San Francisco, as was Cristina. Theirs was not a “love at first sight” friendship: Mark thought Cristina was snobby and “bitchy” when he first met her; Cristina thought Mark was a “prissy little bitch.” The story goes that when Mark heard Cristina talking to someone else in Tagalog, a Filipino language, he approached her because he was surprised to hear her speaking in a language dear to him. Cristina is Latina; Mark is half-Filipino. They started talking and quickly developed a deep friendship. Mark says he knew that Cristina was straight when he first met her because they both are attracted to the same type of men. Cristina never had to ask whether Mark was gay. She just knew.

Now Mark and Cristina are inseparable. They talk to each other on the phone several times a day and discuss topics that range from makeup and sex to what they are having for dinner or buying at the grocery store. They both enjoy going out, drinking, clubbing, and shopping together. They also like to travel together. Both Mark and Cristina fondly spoke about a recent trip to Miami, where they both had their bodies waxed by a skilled aesthetician. They were so impressed by the experience that they purchased the aesthetician’s wax and used it to wax each other back in San Francisco.

Since they met, Mark has moved to a town an hour east of the Bay Area and now works as a hairstylist. Still, he visits Cristina in San Francisco every weekend. Mark is several years
 younger than Cristina—he is twenty-four to her thirty-two—and he explained that she is like a big sister “leading me and guiding me.” Cristina and Mark have met each other’s families and have spent major holidays together. Both have very close family bonds. Mark’s mother refers to Cristina as his “auntie.” Cristina admits that she treats Mark in a very maternal way, tucking in his shirt and giving him advice.

Both of the friends admit that one of the reasons they get along so well is that they both have strong personalities. They think this makes them intimidating to others. Mark explained that his relationship with Cristina makes him a more confident person.

We cannot talk about intersectional friendships without addressing how gender shapes and influences expectations and interactions. The common media depiction of gay men and straight women being the best of friends, while true for many of the interviewees in this study, is largely based on gender norms. Often gay men and straight women are presumed to be a variation of “girlfriends” who talk about men, go to clubs and bars together, shop together, and overall have very superficial relationships. There is no comparable expectation for lesbian and straight male friends. Many people were skeptical that I would find such friends to interview in the early stages of researching this book because of the common perception that such friendships do not exist. Both of these perceptions stem from conventional gender norms for men and women of all sexual orientations.

The goal of this chapter is to focus on how gender norms and identities operate in intersectional friendships. I examine both how gender norms shape expectations about these friendships and how the intersectional friendship context (to a degree) serves as a space in which individuals are able to enact less traditional gendered behaviors. Also, I address two significant ways that gender is regulated within the intersectional friendships in this study: participants both act as gender police and encourage their friends to be gender outlaws. Gender policing refers to the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that intersectional friends reinforce conventional gender expectations; through their actions and expectations, all categories of friends in the study police and are policed by others. The same is true for gender outlaws, a term introduced by Bornstein (1994) that refers to a non-traditional gender identity. Those who serve as gender outlaws both encourage and embody gender-nonconforming attitudes and behaviors. Both processes occur side by side in intersectional friendships and thus highlight how gender operates in this context.
The existing expectations for gay–straight friendships are based, in part, on our society’s binary gender norms, in which individuals are viewed as either masculine or feminine (West and Zimmerman 1987) and are hierarchical, where masculinity is valued over femininity (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Hegemonic masculinity, which is based on men’s dominance over both women and other men, is the social norm of masculinity under this binary system (Connell 1995). Gender norms are organized around the assumption of heterosexuality for both masculinity and femininity, as well (Connell 1995; Myers and Raymond 2010; Thorne 1986). These norms do not reflect the actual ways that individuals experience or identify with either masculinity or femininity; rather, they define ideals that are difficult, if not impossible, to live up to (Fee 2000). Hegemonic forms of gender are reinforced through everyday social interaction; gender norms are informally and formally enforced by rewarding conforming behavior and punishing nonconformity, which limits gender variation (Corbett 1999; Halberstam 1998; Lorber 1994). For example, informal enforcement of a gender norm takes place when people stare at an individual whose gender cannot be easily identified; formal enforcement occurs when a person is asked to leave a women’s restroom or risks arrest because she or he does not appear sufficiently feminine to be perceived as female.

Friendships are also subject to a social context of heteronormativity, which is defined as the “mundane, everyday ways that heterosexuality is privileged and taken for granted as normal and natural” (Martin 2009: 190). The lens of heterosexism is applied to gender in such a way that gay men and lesbians are viewed by society at large as being inherently different from heterosexuals not only in their sexual practices, but also in their gender identities—that is, sex and gender are coupled (Connell 1995; Pharr 1988). Yet gender identities are complex for all individuals: lesbian women, gay men, and straight men and women all have myriad gender expressions and identities. Scholarship about transgender issues and experiences is useful in highlighting strategies to disentangle gender, sex, and sexual orientation. In particular, transgender female-to-male individuals understand that a male body is not necessary to masculinity and, by extension, that a female body is not necessary to femininity (Vidal-Ortiz 2002). Instead, according to Green (1987), masculinity and femininity can be found in body language, behavior, occupation, speech, inflection, and cultural
stereotypes for appropriate actions, which ultimately become incorporated into an individual’s personality.

While sex, gender, and sexual orientation do not neatly coincide, gay men and lesbians may be more likely to display gender nonconformity than straight individuals. Previous research has found that many gay men reject traditional displays of masculinity in favor of a range of masculinities that vary from hyper-masculine to effeminate (Kimmel 1996; Nardi 2000). Likewise, many lesbians reject traditional forms of femininity and instead identify their gender identity on the continuum of butch to femme (Butler 1991; Levitt and Hiestand 2004; Stein 1997). Presumably, these varying forms of gender identity affect the social relationships of all gay men and lesbians, including those with straight men and women. In fact, throughout my interviews, the participants’ comments implied that their gendered behavior was influenced by and negotiated within intersectional dyads. The friends demonstrated an ongoing tension between the reinforcement of gender norms and the encouragement of gender nonconformity in these friendships. In these ways, these intersectional friendships are both unconventional and traditional.

GENDER POLICING

Policing Straight Women’s Appearance

One of the ways the gay men and straight women I interviewed police gender is by reinforcing the appearance norms for straight women. Many straight female participants indicated that they value the attention their gay male friends pay to their appearance, in addition to other aspects of their friends’ personalities. “They’re the best friends,” said Nadia, a thirty-year-old straight Iranian American woman. “They are complimentary; they’ll tell you when something doesn’t look good on you; they’re polite; they’re courteous; they’re kind. . . . They’re just good friends.” An emphasis on appearance was also present in the friendship between Mark, who is gay, and Cristina, who is straight. Mark identified some of Cristina’s positive qualities: “A lot of my gay friends say, ‘You’re living vicariously through Cristina. You want her height, you want her boobs, her body, figure.’ . . . She’s very much a woman. Very much a girl. . . . She shaves every day. We call Sundays ‘pedicure Sundays.’ We get them every Sunday. There’s not a masculine bone in her, honestly.”

In the next breath, Mark focused on Cristina’s gender-nonconforming behavior: “But she does things for herself. She can check oil and do stuff like that,
but her mannerism, her nails, everything—she’s just a girl. She’s every gay man’s fantasy of being a woman.”

Here, Mark praised Cristina’s accomplishment of conventional femininity (West and Zimmerman 1987) and noted the cultural cachet that comes with it. While Mark also commented that he admires Cristina’s independence and values her opinion on career matters, on balance he characterized Cristina according to her feminine traits throughout the interview.

In turn, Cristina discussed why gay men and straight women make good friends: “Well, sometimes the gay man wants to be a woman; perhaps some of the physical attributes. . . . Sometimes that brings a gay man and a straight woman together.” In this case, Mark and Cristina serve as mutual gender police: they both reinforce straight femininity as essential. Moreover, Cristina’s comments imply that she views Mark through the principle of consistency, a cultural construction that understands sex, gender, and sexual orientation as synonymous and consistent (Ponse 1978), with heterosexuality being normative; as such, a man who is sexually oriented toward men defies these norms. By extension, under the principle of consistency, because he is sexually attracted to men, Christina infers that in some capacity, Mark must want to be a woman.

In their interviews, gay men sometimes focused on conventionally feminine aspects when describing their straight female friends and glossed over the ways the women defied gender expectations. Simultaneously, many straight women applied a feminized set of attributes to their gay male friends without acknowledging the shades of gender identity that exist for gay men. Both tendencies appear to be related to internalized heterosexism, where norms related to sex, gender, and sexual orientation are interconnected so that straight women are expected to embody only femininity and gay men are viewed as a stereotype of gay masculinity. According to Szymanski (2004: 145), internalized heterosexism includes sexism as an important component in the oppression of sexual minorities. Internalized heterosexism was present in some of the generalizations by gay men and straight women in the study, who connected sexual orientation and sex to a set of limited and fixed characteristics. Exposing this aspect of intersectional friendships is significant because it underscores the tension between gender convention and resistance in intersectional friendships.

Gay Man Trapped in a Straight Woman’s Body

One of the primary ways that straight women in the study policed gay men’s identity was by describing themselves as a “gay man trapped in a straight
woman’s body” as a means to explain their own personal identity. Monique, a thirty-year-old straight white woman, provided the most multidimensional explanation:

I call myself queer in a way because I’m very, very queer-identified, and I know what it’s like to have it hard—you know what I mean? To be told that there’s something fundamentally wrong with you?—and I think maybe that’s something [gay men] identify with.∞ [I also have] the ability to code switch: the affinity for music, for urban life, but also a certain refinement. You know what I mean? There’s a difference between being street smart and being able to code switch and being ghetto—you know what I mean? Like, I don’t identify with being ghetto, and to me that’s a state of mind, not a place. And I like men, so that’s another way of saying a fag in a woman’s body.

Monique’s identification as a “fag in a woman’s body” encompasses her ability to move in and out of marginalized identities. In her interview, Monique indicated that she had worked as a stripper in young adulthood and was raised in an unstable home; both experiences made her feel socially marginalized. In adulthood, she relates to and values gay men’s culture, partly because she relates to the aesthetics and partly because she understands the marginal place it occupies in society. Throughout her interview, Monique described gay culture in purely positive ways, yet she also applied stereotypical and homogeneous characteristics to gay men, which are not universal experiences that all gay men share.

Jesse, Monique’s thirty-one-year-old gay Latino friend, provided a description that similarly relied on the essential nature of what it means to be a gay man: “I always tell Monique she is a gay man trapped [in a straight woman’s body]. She’s more of a gay man than I am sometimes! . . . Just the shit she says, just her orientation toward life. I mean, when I say that, that’s kind of a gross stereotype, because Monique doesn’t necessarily flow with the established paradigms of acceptable behavior and notions. She’s very liberated. She’s sex-positive, you know; she fucks three guys in one week. She would be OK with that.”≤ Jesse’s description of Monique is similar to Nardi’s (1999) discussion of women being described as “gayer than gay,” a label used to connote a woman who acts in instrumentally masculine ways with regard to sexual behavior. This label differs from the colloquial term “slut” that typically is applied to women perceived as overtly and actively sexual. Although it was Jesse who directly attributed Monique’s being a gay man trapped in a straight woman’s body to
her views on sex, Monique also characterized her past sexual life: “I don’t like to use the term ‘big 'ho,’ but I was, definitely. You know. [I] didn’t spend any time in steady relationships and, you know, chronic monogamy.” Monique also identified her behaviors as more common for gay men.

The “gay man trapped in a straight woman’s body” label is shorthand that both Monique and Jesse used to describe Monique’s feelings of marginality and her gender-nonconforming behavior, which is indicative of gender outlaw behavior. However, this characterization also reinforces an essential identity of gay men as hypersexual. Doing so presents a paradox in some of the straight women’s understanding of gay men: gay men are thus stereotyped as both feminine and hypersexual, which are generally viewed as mutually exclusive characteristics. An open attitude toward sex and sexuality is an element of gay male culture that many straight female interviewees valued in their gay male friends, yet the assumption that gay men are not just sexual, but hypersexual (Gross, Green, Storck, and Vanyur 1980), also inhibits the potential resistance of gender norms.

Other straight women relied on different stereotypes to describe themselves as gay men trapped in straight women’s bodies. Zoë, a thirty-year-old straight white woman, was straightforward in acknowledging some of her traditional beliefs about gay men: “I feel like I am a gay man inside. I’m completely anal-retentive. I mean, I know that these are totally essentialist categories that I’m creating, but for the most part they’re true. I’m totally anal-retentive and very keyed up. I like things very pristine in my environment. I love show tunes, I’m just—I’m not entirely glamorous enough to be a gay man, but, you know, other than that, I feel like we are pretty much right there.” Zoë’s characterization of what it means to be a gay man focused primarily on the aesthetics of gay male culture as a means of self-identification rather than on sex and sexual-object choice.

Another way the straight women identified themselves as “gay men in straight women’s bodies” was with respect to their gender identity. This was the case for Crystal, a thirty-year-old straight Latina, who said, “Because I identify with gay men, I feel like inside I am a gay man. I feel more masculine than some other women.” Crystal adopted this descriptor because she identifies her feelings as “more masculine” or insufficiently feminine. Again, a contradiction about gay men’s expected gender identity surfaces, with Crystal’s attribution of being a gay man centered in feeling “more masculine than other women,” as gay
men are often stereotyped as feminine. Still, in adopting the “gay man” label, Crystal articulated her own feelings of gender nonconformity.

The straight women who described themselves as “gay men in straight women’s bodies” relied on their interpretations of the (often stereotypical) social identities of gay men. Interestingly, some gay men in the sample voiced frustration because their straight female friends perceived them as virtually indistinguishable from, and largely interchangeable with, other gay men. One gay man, who asked that his comment remain anonymous, noted the discomfort he sometimes feels:

I think maybe she sort of buys into the kind of the gay stereotype a little too much. . . . Sometimes I get the feeling that she sort of sees me almost [as] not identical, but, you know, as stereotypical, sort of having more in common with her other gay friends than I actually do. So that’s kind of been an issue on occasions in the past; just certain assumptions she’s made. There have been instances where she’s thought, you know, just because something is gay or other gay guys like it or thought it was cute or funny that I would [laughs], and I haven’t. I think sometimes she doesn’t always get that. . . . Like, every time she meets a gay guy, she tells me how much I would love him, and of course I don’t at all. And you know, that makes me wonder about our friendship. Does she really know me?

Other gay male participants recognized that their straight female friends expected them to embody gender identities that did not feel genuine. For example, Seth, a twenty-seven-year-old gay white man, commented: “It seems like [Shayna’s] friends are all straight, [and sometimes I feel] a little out of place . . . unless it’s with her straight girlfriends. Then I can just be, like, their little gay boy, you know, and that’s fine. I can play that role for a little while.” Seth acknowledged his willingness to play “little gay boy” but also that this is a role and not his genuine identity. Both of these men’s comments indicated that they feel uncomfortable with the friend’s expectation that they embody a prototype of gay maleness rather than being valued for their individual personalities. Thus, in characterizing themselves as gay men trapped in straight women’s bodies, many straight women reinforce gender stereotypes. Moreover, some gay men indicate that their straight female friends sometimes see them as caricatures of stereotypical gay men and expressed different degrees of discomfort with that perception.
Realistically, when going about daily life in our heterosexist society, it is unlikely that being a “gay man in a straight woman’s body” is a consistent identity for these straight women, though they may be conscious of the ways in which they do not embody traditional femininity. The straight interviewees’ use of the gay man label, however, should not be disregarded as merely a symbolic means of expressing affinity or connection with their intersectional friend. According to Strauss (1959: 15–21), language is essential to the realization of identity. Furthermore, the way one feels in relation to one another depends on what is singled out, what is given a name, and the connotations of those names.

The label “gay man trapped in a straight woman’s body” appears to be related to these straight women’s perceptions that they are not successfully performing or accomplishing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) and heterosexuality (Schilt and Westbrook 2009) because they do not successfully accomplish heterosexual femininity. In describing themselves as gay men, these straight women were commenting on the rigid and limiting gender expectations surrounding heterosexual womanhood. The women’s use of such language implies that the existing gender categories they occupy are too limited to encompass their felt identities to such an extent that they feel marginalized and instead relate better to alternative gender identities. Yet with the exception of Monique, many straight participants choose to use the “gay man trapped in a straight woman’s body” label instead of calling themselves “queer,” an identity that would place them in a more known, marginal, and broad identity category. In so doing, they reinforce their identities as straight women and thus, to some degree, maintain the heterosexual privilege that allows them to discard their “gay man” label, meaning that in most interactions the women are simply viewed as straight women—albeit, straight women who do not see themselves as able to fully accomplish femininity.

Unconditional Love

Gender also was policed in the study by both gay and straight men, by reinforcing the social expectation that women are nurturing, which has positive and negative dimensions. Being nurturing is one of the essential qualities often assigned to women because of their potential for procreation and motherhood. In discussing their friendships with straight women, the gay male interviewees focused on the emotional benefits they gained from the friendships. Many gay men pointed to a lack of sexual tension as a purely positive quality, as it facilitated a deep connection with straight women. Manuel, a forty-two-year-old gay
white man, commented on his friendship with Barbara, a fifty-nine-year-old straight white woman: “There’s definitely a safety. The whole sexual tension thing is gone, you know, does not exist. And therefore I think there can be an intimacy between a gay man and a straight woman that can’t exist otherwise.”

The fact that both interviewees were in midlife and nearly twenty years apart in age also could have prompted the perception of safety in this bond.

Other interviewees focused on security, comfort, and stability as key benefits of the friendship. Frank, a thirty-two-year-old white gay man, explained the comfort he found in his friendship with Rebecca, a thirty-two-year-old straight mixed-race woman: “No matter how I screw up or bottom out or what horrible things I say or do or how horrible I feel about myself, I know she will always be there for me. Even in the worst situation, I know I can count on her to come help me out.” Similarly, Pete, a gay Asian American man who is thirty-two, stated that his straight female friend Karyn, thirty-one, provides a sense of “comfort knowing that she’ll always be there for me.”

From these friendships, many gay men receive unconditional emotional support and stability, an ideal characteristic of all friendships; yet simultaneously, some equated this nurturance with motherhood. Mark described Cristina as “very maternal. That’s the main thing about her. Like, she helps tuck in my sweater. I think that’s not necessarily a uniqueness, but it’s something that draws me to her.” Hence, in some cases the emotional support is taken to the extreme, where straight female friends are viewed as embodying a mother-like role. On the one hand, this dynamic may create a positive and equal way for women to express nurturance without all of the responsibilities of motherhood, because they choose to nurture a peer. On the other hand, the characterization of the straight women as motherly or maternal seemingly equates nurturance to motherhood in an essential way. At stake here is the potential to challenge gender norms for straight women within friendships with gay men. Hence, while these intersectional friendships are contexts in which some gender expectations are relaxed, other norms are reinforced.

A related dynamic exists for lesbians in the study, but with different gender norms in place. Many of the straight men identified the benefits of their lesbian friends’ emotional support in terms of their own freedom from masculine gender norms rather than describing the women as motherly. As I discussed in chapter 2, Patrick and Emily have a workplace friendship in which he discusses his perceived shortcomings because he does not worry about her judgment of his masculinity. This bond also is emotionally safe because of the lack of sexual
tension between the friends. Patrick’s description of his friendship with Emily, discussed in detail in chapter 2, illustrates how sex and sexual orientation regulate the tone of their friendship. As a straight man constrained by heterosexual masculine norms, Patrick is able to share his feelings of self-doubt with Emily without compromising his masculinity, because this is gender-appropriate behavior, particularly for a cross-sex friendship situated in a work context (Fine 1986; Werking 1997). What makes the intersectional friendship an even safer context for such admissions is that neither member mistakes this intimacy for romantic or sexual attraction, because, as Patrick said, the friendship lacks sexual undertones.

The preservation of gender norms is complicated in friendships between lesbian women and straight men. Many of the straight men in the study treated their lesbian friends gender-atypically by talking freely about their need to treat all women, except the lesbian friend, as sexual objects. In their interviews, many of the lesbians suggested that in their company the straight male friends had explicitly admitted to feeling released from pressures to embody masculine norms. Debbi, a thirty-nine-year-old white lesbian, explained that Carl, a forty-three-year-old straight white man, articulated this sentiment: “He actually told [me] one time that it was easier for him to hang out with lesbians because he said that he doesn’t feel that need to try to figure out where he stands on the ‘man meter.’ He’s said before that it’s also a safe place for him because he doesn’t have to feel like he has to puff up or act different or whatever. He can just be himself.” Debbi further explained that she perceives Carl as sizing up every woman he meets in terms of either having or lacking sexual potential and commented, “I think it’s sad for him.” Charlene, a twenty-eight-year-old white lesbian, similarly characterized her straight male friend, Alec: “More than anyone else I know, he’s interested in every woman he meets, in a sexual way. He either dismisses them immediately or is interested in them. There’s not a whole lot of in-between, and I think I was the exception: . . . ‘Here comes one who won’t sleep with him.’ I’m the one that’s going to stick, right? Everyone else is ruled out.” These passages illustrate the complicated gender norms that lesbian and straight male participants play out in the context of their friendships and help to illustrate the strong pressures that hegemonic masculinity places on straight men more broadly.

In these examples, the straight male participants assigned a dual identity to lesbian friends, which constituted gender policing. On the one hand, the lesbian friends are viewed in a traditional feminine role, which allows the male
friend to discuss his feelings of frustration about masculinity and be vulnerable without threatening his masculinity. On the other hand, the lesbian women are simultaneously viewed as inherently and essentially different from the straight male interviewees’ objects of desire. To some extent, these men have it right: lesbian women experience different gender roles than straight women (Levitt and Hiestand 2004). Yet these same straight men often turn to their lesbian friends for insight into romantic relationships with women. Jill, a thirty-one-year-old mixed-race lesbian, explained how this surfaces in the friendship with her thirty-seven-year-old straight white friend, Paul: “He’s asked me advice about being in a relationship with a woman. ‘What do they want?’ I’m trying to figure it out, too, and I’m a woman. [Women] want to talk a lot; they want to, you know, talk about their feelings, and, you know, it’s like its maintenance, you know. Give me the oil change on the car, you know. It’s like you have to maintain it. . . . They just want you to listen; they don’t want you to solve the problem.” Paul also admitted to asking Jill for advice about having sexual relationships with women and said he often says, “OK . . . come on—give me some pointers.”

This aspect of the relationship does not work in the reverse; none of the lesbians in the study said that they ask their straight male friends for advice about relationships with women, even though many of the straight men were in long-term relationships and marriages. Specifically, Vanessa explained that she never talked about sexual relationships with Bruce; instead, she talked to her lesbian friends. The lesbian participants likely understand that there are differences between lesbian and straight women’s experiences and embodiments of gender, which affects their romantic relationships, and which therefore makes asking men about how to behave with lesbian partners illogical. In particular, lesbian gender expressions include femme and butch identities, which position women differently in terms of appearance and how they engage in romantic relationships with other women (Levitt and Hiestand 2004, 2005). While we may try to heterosexualize the lesbian genders of femme and butch by viewing them as equivalent to masculinity and femininity, they are not the same (Levitt and Hiestand 2004, 2005).

For many of the straight men I interviewed, however, the friend’s sex was sufficient to confer authority about women’s desires in relationships; the men did not necessarily recognize the gender distinctions among lesbians as being potentially different from those of straight women. Antonio, a twenty-eight-year-old straight Latino in a friendship dyad with Justine, a thirty-six-year-old
mixed-race lesbian, aptly characterized the dynamic: “With a lesbian, you have the benefits of you get to talk to this woman, you get to know [the] inside and see the world that women have. At the same time, since you know there isn’t that sexual tension there, you might be willing to be more open with her than with someone who you might consider a potential girlfriend or something.” Hence, in this context many straight men indicated that they felt freed from some constraints and expectations of hegemonic masculinity in terms of needing to impress women as potential sexual partners. The perception that hegemonic masculinity is somewhat relaxed in these contexts allows straight men to be more open and honest about their feelings than they are with straight women. Antonio’s statements indicate that having a lesbian friend allows him to know women and their worlds more fully, yet in their behavior the straight men do not consistently view their friends as female and lesbian—at least, in terms of viewing their sex as distinct from their genders and orientations.

Many of the lesbian participants’ comments suggest that through their intersectional friendship they gain benefits of association with a straight and male perspective. For example, Debbi remarked that when she is with Carl, she feels a sense of personal safety:

There have been times that I was really glad that he was with me or us because I felt safer, because he’s, like, six foot three or six foot four. He’s a little on the thin side, but he’s very athletic, so I do kind of feel safer. So there’s kind of that escort thing going on, and I think that there’s kind of a sense—I’m not a small person, but I think there is kind of a sense that it’s nice to have a big guy around. . . . There is also—I mean, if I were to go someplace with him, you don’t have to worry about being approached by other guys, because they think you’re with him, whereas if you’re with a group of girls, it’s kind of like open season.

Debbi thus enjoys the security of being in public without having to worry about her safety and being approached or leered at by men when she is with Carl.

Other participants noted that their friendships with straight men allow them to gain insight into men’s lives. Cassandra, a twenty-nine-year-old queer white woman, relied heavily on her friendship with her thirty-five-year-old straight white friend, Stuart, when her transsexual partner transitioned from female to male. “I probably would have had a really hard time with Leo’s transition, whereas I didn’t so much,” Cassandra recalled. “I mean, there were issues, a lot
of them I talked to Stuart about, because he’s a bio[logical] guy. . . . I made him answer all these questions about puberty, because Leo’s going to go through it. I’m like, ‘How often did you think about sex when you were this age? OK, so how fast did your penis grow?’ Do you know what I mean? I was asking all of these crazy questions. And he would answer all of them. So I think Leo’s transition would have been really difficult for me and maybe even impossible [without Stuart].”

While a transitioning female-to-male (FTM) individual likely will experience gender and sexual development very differently than a straight person born male, a FTM physical transition includes a period of puberty. Cassandra turned to Stuart to coach her through what she could expect of Leo’s body during this period because she felt comfortable asking him about his experiences in puberty.

Debbi’s and Cassandra’s accounts illustrate another paradox in intersectional friendship. As previously discussed, many straight male participants benefited from relaxed hegemonic masculine norms through friendships with lesbians. Yet the lesbian women in the study also identified access to male privilege and traditional masculinity as an asset of their intersectional friendships. Clearly, there are benefits of maleness and masculinity, one of which is men’s privilege to be able to walk in public without fear of harassment or violence. Unlike the other friendship compositions in the study, some lesbian participants situated the unique benefits of having a straight male friend as centered in the intersection of the social and physical experiences of being a man (i.e., the meanings and experiences of safety and puberty in male bodies). Perhaps, the lesbian participants focused on their straight male friends’ essential elements of masculinity because they were more likely to expect emotional connection elsewhere—from women, in particular. What is distinct in the friendships between lesbians and straight men is that the level of emotional support does not appear to go both ways. Justine explained that she and her straight male friend, Antonio, “don’t get emotional. I save that for my female friends.” In any event, some lesbians in the study served as a respite from, and reinforced, some traditional aspects of masculinity in their intersectional friendships.

To summarize, in these friendships, gender is policed in various ways, according to the sex and sexual orientation of the dyad members. Gay men in the study reinforce straight women’s femininity by focusing on their appearance and expecting nurturance. Straight men who were interviewed also expect their
lesbian friends to be nurturing and reported that their intersectional friendships are contexts with relaxed expectations of masculine norms. Yet these straight men see their lesbian friends’ sex as their primary status while also viewing them as fundamentally different from straight women. In particular, these straight men look to their lesbian friends to provide insight about women and overlook the possibility that there are differences between lesbian and straight women in general, as well as in their expectations about relationships. Many of the lesbian interviewees noted that they value straight men’s physical contributions but do not seek emotional support from their intersectional friends when they are having problems; rather, they seek out other lesbians for emotional assistance. This dynamic reinforces the stereotype that straight men are not as emotionally adept as women and, particularly, lesbians. Finally, straight women in the study police gender by reinforcing the stereotypical expectation that gay men are hypersexual and effeminate and by treating gay men as a homogenous group.

GENDER OUTLAWS

In these friendships, gender outlaw behavior co-occurs with gender policing. To promote or embrace gender outlaw behavior is to encourage and embody gender-nonconforming attitudes and behavior. This is to say that intersectional bonds in the study have elements that promote both gender transgression and convention. One challenge to gender norms is present in the shared activities of the lesbians and straight men. Many of the lesbian and straight male participants share interests and engage in various activities that, arguably, are related to hegemonic forms of masculinity (though these norms are changing rapidly). Debbi listed the activities she participated in with Carl: “We used to play basketball together; we’ve actually run together; we swim together.” Likewise, Charlene stated that she and her friend, Alec, “play pool a lot. That’s the fundamental common interest.” I am not suggesting that playing sports is fundamentally not feminine, but in terms of normative gender, activities such as playing pool are associated more with masculinity than femininity. When men and women participate in sports together free of the presence of potential romantic or sexual interest, the behavior constitutes gender transgression because it challenges normative expectations of male–female interaction, given strong social pressures toward compulsory heterosexuality (Connell 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987).
The lesbian interviewees also challenged social norms that require being female to coincide with conventional forms of femininity. For instance, Antonio described his friendship with Justine: “[She] sort of fills the male niche in my friends here. I share the interests with her that I would share with other [guys].” Charlene discussed her affinity for male friends: “More of my friends have been straight men than anything else. . . . My best friends were always boys, partly because I was a tomboy, [though] I don’t think that was all of it. . . . I never liked the doll stuff and just wasn’t into that sort of thing, so I could play better games with boys. I think that was mostly what it was about. So maybe that’s the basis for it now. I don’t know.” When men and women perform the same activities together, particularly if the activities they mutually perform are marked by gender, they disrupt the essential nature of these activities and thus constitute a radical gendered act (West and Zimmerman 1987). By participating in activities socially coded as male, a lesbian friend challenges the male domain of activities as masculine. In such contexts, lesbians participate in—and, perhaps, create—a female form of masculinity, which Halberstam (1998: 9) described as “a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity.” The friends themselves do not seem to recognize themselves as challenging gender norms in these contexts, however. Consistent with prior research findings, these friends enjoy similar activities and report their friendships to be full of camaraderie (Levitt and Hiestand 2004).

A Woman in a Man’s Body

Gender and gender expression were sometimes confounded in the lesbian–straight man pairs. The lesbians in the study enjoyed the masculine-coded activities in which they engaged with their straight male friends at the same time that they valued their male friends’ gender-nonconforming behavior. While not as common a characterization as a “gay man trapped in a straight woman’s body,” some straight men in the study were described as being women or lesbians in men’s bodies. This label was invoked not by the straight man but by his lesbian friend. For example, Vanessa characterized the differences between herself and Bruce: “He watches films, and I watch movies. Something’s got to get blown up for me to be interested [laughs]. I think maybe he’s really a lesbian and I’m really a straight guy. It would explain so much.” Here, Vanessa playfully comments more on their inversely gendered interests than on Bruce’s sexual orientation; but she also jokingly refers to herself as a “straight guy.” The
humorous way that Vanessa describes both her own and Bruce’s behavior seemingly reflects her awareness that she is applying stereotypes rather than questioning gender identity in an authentic manner in this instance.

Straight men who freely display emotions are seen as breaking gender norms. For instance, Jill described her friend Paul: “He’s so nurturing, and I always say that he’s very in touch with his feminine side; he’s a woman in a man’s body.” Jill is not the only one who has noticed Paul’s gender-nonconforming behavior. Paul explained: “I definitely understand [Jill] and try to understand the things I don’t understand, and people tease. Like I said, I have some [jock friends] who call me a woman in a man’s body or stuff like that. . . . I’ve been hanging out with [Jill] for so long. I’ve [also] been single for a lengthy period of time, so friends who aren’t used to seeing that ask me if I’m gay, that sort of thing.” Paul’s defying of gender expectations and showing of emotional characteristics typically associated more with femininity thus has caused his sexual orientation to be questioned, a common example of social sanctioning for acting as a gender outlaw (Kimmel 2000). Many of the lesbian participants attributed the closeness of their intersectional bond to the straight man’s tenuous relationship with conventional masculinity. As Margaret said about her affection for her straight friend, Guy: “The thing I love about him so much is that he has no insecurities about stuff, and there’s nothing macho about him. And he’s totally a guy. He’s very much a guy’s guy, but . . . we were hanging out one time, and he ended up trying on this dress, kind of hippie-ish, and he totally tried it on and said, ‘I don’t know, it’s a little airy.’ He is just so cute.”

Other lesbians in the study explained that their straight male friends had played important roles in helping them to trust men. Cassandra identified one of many ways that her friendship with Stuart has affected her: “[Stuart] changed how men could be in my head because he’s gentle and loving and we have absolutely no weird sexual anything. You know, I grew up thinking that men were fucked up sexually—I guess, really not thinking that intellectually, but kind of knowing it and knowing that I was a sexual something for them to consume. There’s never been anything like that with him, so he really did help me kind of accept that there could be men who were sexual but were not disgusting.” In their friendships with lesbians, straight male participants who countered expectations of hegemonic masculinity were supported and valued for their transgressions. This process contradicts the perception that masculine behavior (and gender) corresponds with sex and thus exposes the friendship’s potential to challenge gender norms.
The “Fag Hag”

Many of the straight women I interviewed noted that in their friendships with gay men they experience a relationship that has a different set of expectations from bonds with straight men. Karyn explained how she views gay masculine norms: “I think just the behaviors and encouragement that you get in the gay culture to sort of cultivate connections and sort of being verbal—you kind of get to drop a lot of the masculine walls for things that I think just benefits relationships. And [gay men] get to sort of not feel like they have to hold back, and they’re sort of encouraged by one another to do that, so I think that just makes you closer.” Some of the straight female friends seemed to idealize gay men as a substitute for heterosexual relationships. Crystal identified the benefit of having a close gay male friend: “I think that it can be really, really good for a woman like me, who’s single, to have that kind of a male energy and that male relationship in my life, because I don’t feel . . . deprived of male companionship, even though I’m a single woman.” Women like Crystal who seek out the attention of gay men are often considered “fag hags,” a derisive term used to characterize women who associate with gay men (Moon 1995; Nardi 1999). The fag-hag characterization has varying meanings, from straight women who simply like the company of gay men to women who want to date and be sexually involved with gay men (Nardi 1999).

An alternative meaning of the term “fag hag” is that a woman is acting in gender-non-normative ways (Maddison 2000). Both Ruth and Monique referred to themselves as fag hags, but almost as a term of pride. Zoë shared her insider perspective: “I know all the terms. I hate ‘fag hag,’ but I do like ‘fairy princess’ and ‘queen bee.’ I don’t like ‘fruit fly.’ There are all these terms. I can be down with some of them; some of them I find really offensive. I kind of typify [these labels] not by any kind of conscious choice; it just kind of has happened.” Zoë’s description that such relationships just “kind of happen” does not account for the possibility that she and other straight women in the sample actively promoted gender outlaw behavior through their friendships. In fact, some of the straight women in the sample seemed to seek out men who act in gender-nonconforming ways and who encourage the women to do the same. Maddison (2000) identifies such behavior as acts of “gender dissent,” because these women dis-align themselves with heterosexual patriarchy.

The intersectional friendships between the gay male and straight female participants allow women to express and be appreciated for gender-atypical
behavior. Zoë described the significant benefits she reaps in friendships with gay men:

You get to be a whole person. Back when I was younger and more concerned with these things, I didn’t have to be feminine. I could be myself, and I could be loud, and I could be funny, and I could be bawdy, and all of those things would be totally embraced. That’s what people would think was great about me, as opposed to [being considered] unfeminine. . . . I think I gave up that whole concept, but earlier in my evolution, I think I thought I had to be a certain way—how you’re supposed to eat like a bird and all that stupid stuff; do aerobics; be a certain size and all of those things. None of that mattered. And, you know, my gay friends certainly will aesthetically appreciate that perhaps in somebody, but it wasn’t going to be a part of my being in their life, because they thought I was great, and I could take up space and be myself.

The benefits of being a gender outlaw that Monique, Zoë, and other straight female interviewees have experienced draws attention to the gender policing to which they are subjected on a daily basis. Through intersectional friendships, these straight women are encouraged to “take up space” and be themselves by gay men who also act as gender outlaws.

Earlier in the chapter, I discussed how gay male interviewees police gender with respect to a straight women’s embodiment of conventional attractiveness. Yet gay men also urge women to be gender outlaws by accepting and celebrating their bodies. Jesse explained that he encourages Monique to reject social pressures about appearance and feel good about her physique: “Monique hasn’t always been as confident as she should be. I think I’ve played an essential role in helping her to feel more confident. You know, ‘cause she’s beautiful, and I think a lot of times, especially with women, they don’t realize their own inherent worth. ‘So you’ve got a big ass. Be one with it!’ That’s what I told her. That’s a quote. She’s like, ‘My ass is so big. I can’t wear this.’ I’m like, ‘Be one with your big ass! Ain’t nobody want a fucking bone but a dog, and he buries it!’”

Monique agreed that Jesse has had a positive influence on her self-confidence: “My friend and I are more like big, strapping Amazons, not VIP house music club-type girls, and he’s always been like, ‘Girl, you’re a queen. Go with it.’ You know what I mean? He’s always encouraged us to be one with our hips.” From Jesse, Monique receives positive male attention that simultaneously encourages her to buck gender norms by feeling confident about herself, whatever her size.
Another expression of gender outlaw behavior in these friendships occurs in relation to sex. Friendships between gay men and straight women in the study were contexts in which sexual behavior and desire were frankly discussed and encouraged, which counters norms of conventional femininity but reinforces expectations of gay masculinity. Karyn considered the effect of gay male sexuality on straight women:

[Gay men] talk about sexuality so much, and they’re just so open and you share things, so it sort of elicits that from you in a way that I don’t think I would ever literally talk about my sexual habits with my straight male friends. Even though they’ll occasionally make jokes or innuendos or whatever, we sort of stay at that level, where at times, when we [Karyn and her gay male friends] have all gone skiing or are drinking wine or whatever, it gets very literal, and I [don’t] mind that as much, and I think it’s like I will never sleep with any of you; therefore, I can actually say this stuff in a way that I won’t worry that it’s going to come back to haunt me at some other point.

In the company of gay men, Karyn feels free to discuss her sexuality and sexual behavior without fear of reproach. This enables her to act outside normative expectations for women and freely acknowledge sexual aspects of her life.

According to the interviewees, many gay men advocate sexual activity and satisfaction for their straight female friends. Leyla explained that Ethan has encouraged her to be more willing to see herself as a sexual person and to be physically intimate (as far as her comfort level allows) in her relationships: “So [Ethan] helped me become more comfortable with my own sexuality, so there you go. . . . But I’m more comfortable now; I mean, I decked a guy once for trying to kiss me, and now I don’t do that. Well, number one, [if I hadn’t met Ethan] I probably wouldn’t be so open to this whole idea of, like, physical intimacy. In all honesty, I probably wouldn’t be dating. He’s really opened my mind to that.” During the course of her interview, Leyla reported that she was in a relationship with her first boyfriend, a development encouraged by Ethan. For Leyla and other straight women in the study, gay male friends urged them to be open and positive about sex and claim sexual agency.

What the gay men gained from these intersectional friendships with respect to being gender outlaws was less apparent overall, but particularly in discussions about sex, as they reported turning to other gay men to discuss sex and
relationships. Candid conversation about sex is a gendered expectation of men, and even more so of gay men. Thus, they may be less reliant on their straight female friends for such discussions. Gary, for example, said he does not share intimate details about sex with Zoë: “Certainly I’ll talk with other friends, or especially other [gay] guy friends. You know, I’ll talk [about sex] in much more detail. . . . I mean sexually ’cause other guys are having sex with other guys, so they sort of get it.”

Seth held a similar view: “It just seems like it’s a lot easier for me to talk to my gay male friends about sex and relationships than it is to talk to [Shayna] because they relate [better].” Thus, straight women in the study value the context of their intersectional friendship as a space to talk freely about sex and sexuality, while the gay men I interviewed turned to other gay men to talk about their own sexual behavior. In this example, the norm-breaking potential of intersectional friendships is realized for straight women, but not for gay men.

In general, the gay men in the study placed less emphasis on the opportunity for intersectional friendships to encourage gender-nonconforming behavior, perhaps because norms of gay masculinity consider a broader range of emotions and activities to be acceptable than do norms of hegemonic (straight) masculinity (Nardi 1999). Thus, gay men are less likely to turn to intersectional friends for gender outlaw support. Moreover, as Nardi (1999: 117) discussed, gay and lesbian social movements often have been a source of redefining traditional gender roles and sexuality: “So, for example, when gay men exhibit more disclosing and emotional interactions with other men, it demonstrates the limitations of male gender roles typically enacted among many heterosexual male friends. By calling attention to the impact of homophobia on heterosexual men’s lives, gay men’s friendships illustrate the potentiality for expressive intimacy among all men.” In their interviews, gay men rarely identified support for gender nonconformity as an asset of their intersectional friendships. However, the straight women in the study consistently named this as a valued part of relationships with gay men. This finding suggests that many intersectional friends in the study positively reinforce gender-nonconforming behavior, even though gay men do not identify this practice as an asset unique to relationships with straight women.

The support of gender outlaw behavior and identities is evident in each type of intersectional dyad in the study. The gay men I interviewed encouraged straight women to be comfortable with their bodies and to claim sexual agency. They also provided straight women with male company that felt free of sexual
expectations and full of acceptance. Many straight men in the study reported that their relationships with lesbian friends allowed hegemonic gender norms to be relaxed. As a result, in their friendships with lesbians, they felt able to share feelings of personal weakness, a dimension that counters norms of hegemonic masculinity. The lesbians in the study acted as gender outlaws in their friendships with straight men by engaging in mutually enjoyable activities. In addition, the lesbians I interviewed gained insight and developed a greater understanding of the heterogeneity of straight men’s lives through these friendships, which results in a greater degree of empathy toward men.

Gay men and lesbians in the study did not benefit as gender outlaws to the extent that straight individuals do vis-à-vis these friendships. This is not to say that the straight friends do not value the gay men’s and lesbian women’s gender nonconformity; rather, it likely reflects support of gender nonconformity by other gay men and lesbian women. Overall, the straight men and straight women I interviewed reaped the greatest benefits in terms of support for gender nonconformity in intersectional friendships. The lesbians and gay men in the study appeared to have greater support for gender nonconformity or outlaw behavior within their lesbian and gay communities, so they may have been less reliant on their connections to straight people to provide this avenue for acceptance.

GENDER COPS AND ROBBERS

In my critique of gender policing and gender outlaw behavior, my intention is not to downplay the benefits that gender policing can sometimes have in bolstering individuals’ esteem. When gay men value and praise straight women for their appearance, they make the women feel good about themselves. Given the social context, in which women’s appearance is regulated informally, receiving compliments about one’s comportment can provide a very real ego boost and promote self-acceptance. Likewise, being someone to whom friends turn for nurturance and unconditional emotional support can make an individual feel valued, which is an important part of belonging to communities. On a related note, many straight men are proud of their male bodies and gain esteem from providing a sense of security to their female friends. My scrutiny of each of these dynamics is not intended to downplay or disparage the positive benefits that some individuals reap from gender policing; indeed, these cases represent successful accomplishments of gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). My intention is to critique the gender norms that exist and show the durability of gender
within our social context. The benefits that arise from successful performances of gender reinforce social inequalities based on the ways that men and women “do” traditional forms of gender, so that they emphasize the cultural norms that men and women are inherently and essentially different. That many of the interviewees valued the dimensions of intersectional friendships that allowed them to act as gender outlaws illustrates the limitations that exist in the traditional gender norms that are policed in various ways.

My emphases on the incomplete gender transgressions in intersectional friendships are connected to broader scholarship about intergroup relationships. According to prior social psychological studies, close contact between people from different social locations is expected to increase tolerance of social differences (Herek and Capitanio 1996). Hence, we expect intersectional friendships to challenge social norms. By forming close friendships across sex and sexual-orientation categories, intersectional friendships challenge compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980). Indeed, intersectional friends who participated in this study encouraged gender outlaw behavior; however, they also policed gender within the friendships. All categories of interviewee (gay men, lesbians, straight women, and straight men) both reinforced and challenged gender norms by policing and encouraging gender outlaw behavior. This tension exposes the strong structural aspects of gender; even in friendships that challenge social norms, it is nearly impossible to escape conventions. In revealing this tension, the intersectional friendships I studied demonstrate how people create and re-create gender in everyday interaction. Specifically, in the moments in which individuals acted as gender outlaws, they disrupted social expectations that dictate an innate connection between sex and gender. Within these intersectional friendships, individuals do not “do” gender in a traditional sense, because their behavior does not easily align with predictable sex and sexual-orientation categories (West and Zimmerman 1987). Instead, they reinforce the idea that masculinity does not need to coincide with a male body, and femininity does not need to coincide with a female body (Green 1987). Still, the interactions within these intersectional friendships are not wholly transgressive or conventional. Rather, they have the potential to transform men’s and women’s interaction within a structural context that closely regulates gender and sexual orientation.