Our sexuality is just a small part of our lives, and people need to drop that issue. I think gender and sexuality both shouldn’t be a factor. And the more the close friendships occur, the less those things matter.

—Janet, a thirty-five-year-old white lesbian

JUSTINE AND ANTONIO

Justine and Antonio met in a comic book store in Miami in the early 1990s. Antonio is a twenty-eight-year-old straight Latino, and Justine is a thirty-six-year-old mixed-race lesbian. One afternoon more than a decade ago, Justine rode into the store on her skateboard and met a group of guys who were role-playing game regulars. Antonio was part of that group. Justine sat in on the game and before long she started showing up regularly to role-play. Shortly thereafter, Justine and Antonio strayed from the group, playing games and going to movies together. Antonio recalls that he knew that Justine was a lesbian when he met her because of her appearance (she had a shaved head and wore baggy clothes), but he did not know what to say to her about her sexual orientation. About a month into their friendship, she came out to Antonio by introducing him to her girlfriend. Justine always assumed that Antonio was straight, though she did not say why that was the case.

When asked to chronicle the development of their friendship, each has a different recollection about how it progressed. What is clear is that after a couple years of intensive time together, Antonio and Justine started spending less time together. Antonio attributes these gaps to changing interests; Justine attributes their drifting apart to rebuking Antonio for making a romantic overture toward her. Justine recalls that at some later point, they talked about the incident; he apologized; and their friendship resumed, stronger than before. The pair lost touch when Justine moved to the Bay Area in 1997. When Antonio relocated to the Bay Area a year later, Justine contacted him through a mutual friend, and they rekindled their friendship. Now they see each other at least once a month and talk on the phone weekly.
When Antonio and Justine spend time together, they most often play videogames. Some of their favorite times together have been sleepovers when they played games into the early morning hours. They also go to amusement parks and gaming conventions. Justine notes that they have cruised women together at these conventions but usually are unsuccessful because people assume they are a couple.

While they share interests, Antonio and Justine are not always equally on board with sharing intimate details about relationships and emotions. Antonio is more likely to share his feelings than Justine, who talks to other lesbians about what is on her mind. They also do not talk about politics or religion because they have dramatically different and conflicting views: Justine is the more politically progressive of the two and practices a pagan religion, while Antonio is admittedly more conservative and was raised Catholic. Yet Justine’s friendship with Antonio provides a unique space for her to be genuinely herself because she does not feel judged by him. She views Antonio as a respite from what she calls the politically correct lesbian culture of the Bay Area. Justine likes that she can say whatever she wants to Antonio without having to process the meaning of her comments, as would be necessary if she were talking to other lesbians. At the same time, Antonio credits Justine with helping him to become more open-minded.

While they share many interests, Justine’s and Antonio’s differences limit the scope of activities they do together. For example, Justine often balks at the conventions of straight relationships that are the backbone of much of mainstream popular culture. For example, they went together to see the opera La Bohème but found that they experienced it in vastly different ways. Antonio describes this and similar incidents as “culture clashes.” These clashes keep Antonio from inviting Justine to events that are considered more mainstream or cultured, such as going to high tea or a fine restaurant. As a result, Antonio’s and Justine’s lives are not enmeshed. Instead, Antonio and Justine compare their bond to that of Bert and Ernie on Sesame Street or Han Solo and Chewbacca from Star Wars. They are each other’s sidekick, partner in crime, or playmate, but not each other’s primary support.

One of the guiding themes in the film When Harry Met Sally was the much pondered question, “Can men and women be friends?” Presuming universal heterosexuality, Harry claims that men and women cannot be friends because the man always wants to have sex with the woman, which limits the extent to which they can truly be friends. Sally argues the counterpoint but develops romantic feelings for Harry after they have sex. While Harry and Sally had been platonic friends for many years before having sex, the film culminates with their wedding and thus answers the question with a resounding “No!” Indeed, in the movie, sex intervenes and confirms that friendship between men and
What's sex got to do with it?

Women is possible only within marriage. Sociological research, however, has determined otherwise and concludes that straight men and women maintain meaningful, long-term friendships (Allan 1989; O'Meara 1989; Swain 1992; Werking 1997), although they often endure conflict in the defiance of social norms that dictate that such relationships should be romantic pairings.

What happens when men and women from different sexual orientations come together? Can they be friends? Presumably, such friendships would be characterized by the absence of sexual tension and possibility. Would that not open up the possibility that men and women could unproblematically maintain a friendship? While these questions have infused the entirety of this book, in this chapter I focus specifically on the complex ways that sexuality and emotional intimacy shape intersectional friendships into “queer relationships” that provide connection and commitment in defiance of norms of compulsory heterosexuality.

Given representations in popular culture, it appears that the ideal friendship exists between gay men and straight women. If we look to television’s now defunct Will and Grace, for example, the answer to the question “Can men and women be friends?” changes to an unquestionable “Yes! Gay men and straight women are the best of friends.” Yet even in this simplified portrayal, all is not what it seems in terms of sexuality and sexual tension. Through flashbacks and discussions, we learn that Will and Grace had been romantically involved in the past, even though the story’s arch clearly shows that, despite Grace’s best efforts to seduce Will, they never had a sexual relationship. Still, in the show the friendship was often portrayed in sexualized terms, as one episode had Will fantasizing about Grace, while another had the pair share a romantic kiss amid wedding decorations. Although these dimensions of the show have been (very appropriately) attributed to efforts to heterosexualize it (Quimby 2005), they can be read as depicting a more complicated relationship than one that is entirely free of sexual tension. Instead, the show hinted at the complicated negotiation of both sexuality and intimacy that many people navigate in intersectional friendships. This is not to say that all intersectional friendship dyads experience sexual tension; rather, it acknowledges that like sexuality itself, desire, attraction, and identity are experienced on a continuum, where meaning is not necessarily fixed.

Resisting Romantic Scripts

Complex social identities such as sexual orientation exist within a society that holds heterosexuality as the norm and in which the only acceptable context to
experience sex and intimacy is marriage between a man and a woman. As a
result, expressions of sexual orientation and attraction rarely manifest in con-
sistent ways, both in society at large and, particularly, within the intersectional
friendships I studied. The intersectional friends I interviewed negotiated sex-
ual boundaries and struggled with and against fitting these friendships into
accepted heterosexual relational norms. While earlier chapters showed the
unique dimensions of intersectional friendships in resisting social norms and
expectations, we have yet to fully explore how these friendships often resemble
heterosexual romantic pairings, even as the participants struggle to define
themselves differently. Typically, these relationships are platonic, and partici-
pants do not view them as having romantic potential, but as these friendships
assume the tone of intimacy and commitment that is commonly understood as
the domain of romantic couplings, the meanings of such relationships become
less clear.

Society is built on norms of compulsory heterosexuality—that is, the expec-
tation that women will be oriented toward men as sexual and romantic partners
and men will likewise be oriented toward women (Rich 1980). Due to the cross-
sex nature of these friendships and the existing norms of compulsory hetero-
sexuality, the line between what constitutes a friendship and a romantic rela-
tionship can become blurred, both for those in the relationship and for those
who interact with the pair. Furthermore, similar to friendships between cross-
sex heterosexuals (Allan 1989; O’Meara 1989; Swain 1992), these relationships
are scriptless, meaning that there are no commonly understood norms for how
gay men and straight women and lesbians and straight men who maintain close
ties (and are not biologically or legally related) are to behave. In some in-
stances, sexual tension or attraction, imagined to be impossible for some-
one identified as attracted to people of the same sex, complicated the inter-
sectional friendships in this study and sometimes obscured the fact that, while
sexuality is imagined to be a fixed identity, it is in fact more fluid than we often
acknowledge.

Scripting theory can elucidate why intersectional friendships are subject to
expectations of romantic coupling. According to Gagnon and Simon (1973),
sexual behavior is enacted and interpreted according to external and internal
dimensions, which comprise scripts. With respect to the external, individuals’
actions are guided by mutually shared norms that allow them to interact suc-
cessfully with others. The external dimension encompasses the cultural de-
nitions of sexual behavior, from language to actions. The internal dimension
of sexual scripts occurs when individuals apply their own meanings to interactions according to the external norms of sexual behavior. Gagnon and Simon (1973: 19) illustrated how sexual scripts guide behavior: "It is ... our collective blindness to or ineptitude in locating and defining these scripts that has allowed biology to explain sexual behavior. ... Without the proper elements of a script that defines the situation, names the actors, and plots the behavior, nothing sexual is likely to happen. ... Combining such elements as desire, privacy, and a physically attractive person of the appropriate sex, the probability of something sexual happening will remain exceedingly small until either one or both actors organize these behaviors into an appropriate script." In organizing behavior into scripts, social actors decode ambiguous and overt sexual behavior, define boundaries for their own sexual responses, and link nonsexual to sexual aspects of life. Sexual scripts thus drive sexual behavior and help individuals to learn social and sexual roles.

Sexual scripts help us to identify circumstances as potentially sexual so that we know how to interact with and give meaning to social exchanges and relationships. Scripts serve as a guide for understanding behavior and circumstances. For example, when I interact with another person, I may assess the sexual potential of the interaction in various ways. Is the person I am interacting with an “appropriate” sexual partner for me? Do I feel sexually attracted to this person? Is the context of the interaction imbued with sexual possibility? Why? If I go to dinner and a movie with a man, as a straight woman, how do I know that this is or is not a romantic interaction? How should I interpret strong feelings of affection for a man? How about for a woman?

Most of us have had interactions that deviated from our known sexual or romantic scripts. We know that our interaction has been guided by a defective script when we question why we perceived an individual’s actions as sexual when they were not or when we were oblivious to another’s sexual come-ons. This occurs because we rely on sexual scripts to outline expectations and decode behavior. However, sexual scripts are not “one size fits all.” Norms of compulsory heterosexuality guide sexual scripts so that we often deem interactions between all men and women as having sexual potential and ignore the possibility of same-sex sexual scripts: this practice occurs in the segregation of men and women into same-sex bathrooms and college dormitories. Furthermore, the same actions have different scripted meanings depending on who is doing the acting. When I spend the evening drinking and dancing at a bar with a female friend, I am having a “girls’ night out.” When I spend the evening
drinking and dancing with a man I just met, I am abiding by a sexual script that says we may end up having sex. Conversely, a lesbian who is following a same-sex script likely will view these behaviors in a different light.

Sexual scripts are significant in how we, and the members of the friendship dyads I am discussing, understand intersectional friendships. Because they exist outside compulsory heterosexuality norms, the available scripts may be inadequate; we may not understand how to interpret intersectional friends’ actions in the way that we more readily understand the scripts in other cross-sex relationships. As a result, some intersectional friends who share intimate bonds may find themselves unable to distinguish how these bonds of friendship differ from sexual and romantic bonds, since the behavior and feelings may resemble those in other relationships, even as the context remains different. For instance, Jill discussed her decision to stop sharing an apartment with Paul because their relationship had begun to resemble a heterosexual romantic relationship:

One of the most difficult times I’d say would be deciding whether or not to move out, because we had lived together for about five years. . . . I just felt like I was overly dependent on him. I had been with him for five years, and I just felt like I really needed to be independent, separate from him, just find my own identity, because it just became enmeshed. It was just such a—You know. I cleaned the house; he did the grocery shopping. It just felt too couply, you know? And I just really felt like it would be stronger if we just took some space from each other and did our own thing, and I think it was a really good thing, because now we have separate identities, and we come together and be separate people and still are really solid friends. . . . It just became confusing, and people were just telling me from the outside—I mean, I sort of felt that way—but people from the outside were saying, “Jill, you know, you guys are boyfriend and girlfriend without having sex.” And that didn’t feel good to me, because I felt like I was blocking other people out of my life because he was such a big part of it.

Here, Jill was uncomfortable with both her own and others’ observations that she and Paul were essentially acting as a heterosexual couple. Arguably, their behavior, division of household labor, and interdependence could be identified as those of friends or roommates helping each other. However, the social expectations of male–female interaction scripted their behavior as that of a romantic couple. With that powerful lens, no other interpretations were as viable.
Overall, the participants described their friendships in three distinct ways with respect to their perception of romantic feelings, sexual tension, and expectations of emotional intimacy within the relationship. The majority of participants articulated that their friendships were free of sexual tension, a feature that was presented as strengthening the friendship. A second group of participants acknowledged hints of sexual tension or sexualized behavior within their friendships and, perhaps, some feelings of unrequited romantic attraction by one or both of the individuals at some point during the tenure of the relationship. The third, least common group of participants had ongoing, sexual relationships or had experienced a degree of sexual tension or romantic interest that influenced the overall relationship. In the next section, I address the unique aspects of each grouping of individuals and highlight the benefits and challenges of friendships in which sexuality is actively and passively negotiated.

**NO SEX EQUALS CLOSER FRIENDSHIP**

For most friendships in the study, sexual interest and attraction were not issues that needed to be negotiated or managed. In fact, a lack of sexual tension and possibility benefited many friendships by allowing close relationships to flourish, according to the participants. That is, to the participants in these dyads, removing the possibility of a sexual component in the relationship allowed the close relationship to develop. One way that a lack of sexual tension influences these friendship dyads is by removing the possibility of a sexual component in the relationship. According to the participants, this allows close and uncomplicated friendship interactions to develop. Karyn, a thirty-one-year-old straight white woman, described the lack of sexual tension between her and her thirty-two-year-old gay Asian friend, Pete, as “completely liberating,” allowing for the closeness of their friendship.

The gay men in the study uniquely noted how a lack of sexual tension differentiates their intersectional friendship from gay male friendships. For instance, Ethan, a twenty-three-year-old gay Latino, discussed gay male–straight female friendships more generally: “I think that there would be no element of, you know, sexual frustration there—at least, not on the gay man’s part. I don’t know about the straight woman. But I think that there is probably more of a freedom there, just because there’s not that way that straight men and straight women would interact.” Ben, twenty-eight, similarly explained how the lack of sexual tension with Ming, who is also twenty-eight, has enhanced their friendship: “If anything, [my being gay and her being straight] probably got us closer. Had I
been straight, there might have been a weirdness. There could be jealousy from her partner’s side, and there might be some sort of tension, you know? Knowing that there will be no possibility of any personal—you know, couple-type—relationship, it’s really broken down all barriers. So that’s probably gotten us closer.”

Intersectional friendships also provide a context in which sexual expectations can be relaxed. For example, Scott, forty-six, explained the benefits of his friendships with straight female friends such as Ruth, also forty-six, particularly in contrast to his friendships with other gay men in which sexual tension has existed: “I would think for a lot of gay men, [friendship with straight women] would be a good thing, because for gay men there’s a lot of sexuality involved, and if you want to remove the sex question—It’s just like a man and a woman in a straight situation that are friends. Is there sexual tension there? And if you act on that sexual tension, will it make things so awkward that things crash? So you don’t have to deal with that. You can just have a friendship beyond question.” Scott appreciated the asexual nature of his friendship with Ruth, contrasting it with previous experiences of having sexual friendships with other gay men: “I can say with my friend Todd, who I said I felt very much the same way [as I do about Ruth], there was that sexual tension, and there was a time when we had to ride through [trying to have a sexual relationship] . . . after knowing each other fifteen years and then finding out that this doesn’t work and the awkwardness that it builds when you hurt someone going through that. It makes you not want to do it in the first place. I think it’s comforting to know that [Ruth and I] don’t have to deal with that. We just are friends.” While many gay men sustain satisfying same-sex friendships that include a sexual component (Nardi 1999), Scott’s account is representative of other interviewees who value their friendships with straight women because of the absence of sex. Straight women in the study also voiced appreciation of gay male friends because they could be emotionally intimate with them without worrying about how to negotiate sexual tension and expectations.

Several partnered interviewees recognized that the intersectional nature of their friendship provided a measure of freedom because the presumed lack of sexual tension alleviated the potential jealousy a spouse or partner might otherwise feel. James, a thirty-five-year-old straight white man, acknowledged the effect that Melissa’s lesbian identification has had on their friendship while referring to his wife’s friendship with a gay man:
I can’t help but wonder, if Melissa was straight, [would our relationship] be an issue? . . . I mean, Kent is a friend of mine, and he’s gay. [My wife] Sheila and I see him a lot, and Sheila and Kent click really well, and I think if he wasn’t gay, I wouldn’t feel comfortable, but as it is . . . I only feel that mild kind of jealousy that goes with the fact that they get along so well. They click in a way that Sheila and I don’t all the time; they click on a different level . . . So, I’m just saying, if he was straight, it might be an issue, so if Melissa were straight, you know.

Because Melissa is a lesbian woman, she and James can maintain a very close friendship without causing Sheila to feel jealous of a potential sexual or romantic attraction. James also recognized that his wife’s friendship with Kent posed no threat to their marriage because Kent is gay.

Interviewees in committed romantic relationships were cognizant of how their friends’ sex and sexual identity made their partners feel comfortable. For example, Jill acknowledged that Paul’s identity as a straight man allowed them to have a strong connection without suspicion or jealousy from her partner: “The person that I’m with now is very cool with Paul. I mean, she’s glad that [he’s] a guy and not a woman, because . . . I think she’d feel threatened by it. [She’s] like, ‘Who are you hanging out with? Paul? Oh, that’s OK.’ You know, ‘Paul spent the night.’ ‘Oh, that’s OK.’” Hence, these friends are given the freedom to forge close connections without arousing a partner’s suspicions of infidelity.

Even as a friend’s sexual orientation is liberating to many participants and provides reassurance to partners and spouses, some interviewees described their efforts to speculate about how their relationship would differ if they or the intersectional friends were of a different sexual orientation. Pete stated: “I’m glad with the way things are because we’ve got such a strong bond, but then I wonder, if I were straight, would I be attracted to Karyn, and would that have changed things? I’m guessing that would have changed a lot. She’s a beautiful woman, and she’s got a great personality, so I don’t know.” Similarly, Frank, a thirty-two-year-old white gay man, pondered how his friendship with Rebecca, who is thirty-two years old, straight, and of mixed race, might be different: “It’s difficult to speculate. If I were straight, would we still have the same sort of relationship? I tend to think probably not, just because I don’t think you could maintain the kind of intensity and duration of a relationship . . . if there was a sexual underpinning or undercurrent to that relation-
ship. It would be difficult, if not impossible, I think, to maintain the kind of

closeness that we've had.”

Both Pete’s and Frank’s comments express an awareness of the difficulties

that men and women often encounter in the face of strong norms of compulsory heterosexuality. In each hypothetical exploration, the interviewees defaulted to discussing how their friendship might differ if the gay male or

lesbian person in the dyad were straight, rather than questioning how their friendship might be affected if the straight person were another sex or sexual orientation. This was evident in both Pete’s and Frank’s questioning of how their respective friendships with Karyn and Rebecca might differ if they were straight (instead of gay) men, rather than considering how changing either woman’s sex might also alter the dyad. This finding reflects heterosexuality’s normative social position; changing a straight person’s sex or sexual orientation to be in accordance with a same-sex object of attraction appears inconceivable. Such a perception also reflects the persistence of sexual and romantic pairing as the dominant social script for male–female interaction.

**SEXUAL TENSION EQUALS COMPLICATIONS**

Sexual orientation, like gender, occurs on a continuum. The spectrum of sexual orientation occurs between heterosexual and homosexual, with variation according to an individual’s behavior and identity (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948, 1953). For straight men and women in particular, an intersectional friend’s sex is consistent with that of his or her other-sex orientation; thus, it would seem more likely that sexual or romantic feelings might emerge from the straight friend. Yet because sexual orientation is experienced on the continuum, feelings of sexual attraction, both fleeting and enduring, can emerge on both sides of the intersectional friendships. Some friends in the study admitted that there are times when sexual desire, both unrequited and mutual, has arisen. Many referred to it as part of the history of the friendship. For example, while their friendship was free from any sexual tension at the time of the interview, Frank recalled the sexual tension between him and his straight friend, Rebecca, during high school: “We kind of avoid talking about one particular event. . . . It was right before we were both leaving for college, and we were both kind of considering whether we wanted to have sex and decided not to, and we’ve never really talked that out.” Others discussed random events as “sexualized.” For example, Guy, a twenty-nine-year-old straight white man, remembered one sexually charged situation with his lesbian friends, the partners Margaret and
Wallis, who are thirty-seven and thirty, respectively, and white. Guy recalled that they were washing his hair and he was undressed to his boxers, “and I’m not sure why I was dressed in my boxers to get my hair washed.”

Even though the participants identify as sexually incompatible according to fixed social definitions of sexual orientation, sexual tension sometimes exists. Were sexual orientation an absolute dichotomy with fixed meanings and preferences, intersectional friends could be entirely free from sexual tension in their friendship. As many interviewees explained, this is not the case. Furthermore, sexual tension is not considered a positive attribute by the interviewees. In fact, the participants reported that when either sexual tension or unrequited romantic interest was present in a friendship, complications arose. Pointing to the complexity of sexual attraction and desire, Ken, a thirty-five-year-old mixed-race gay man, explained, “I think the easy thing that people can look at is the sexual tension aspect and say in that kind of relationship, it’s not there, but as human beings, it is.”

Some of the participants reported having unrequited crushes on their intersectional friend at some point in the past. Zoë, a thirty-year-old straight white woman, for example, recognized that her feelings had origins in the friend’s being a safe object of her affection and did not expect reciprocation:

I mean you can be attracted to somebody. . . . [My gay friends] tend to be really attractive, wonderful, sensitive men, so sometimes it’s hard to keep, kind of shut down, what may be natural heterosexual feelings, especially if you’re not having an outlet in some other way, which I tend to not have. So it becomes very easy for me to kind of take all the feelings that normally would go into a relationship, and put them on a friendship. It puts too much pressure on a friendship, and I’m getting certain needs met, but I’m not getting them met with the same intention on the other side, and that can be really hurtful. Even when you know it intellectually, it doesn’t mean that you don’t still want more. So, yeah, you get to have that closeness, and in some ways it does feel like a relationship, and yet it’s like the pro and the con. . . . It doesn’t feel good, . . . and you don’t want them to be other than they are, so it’s not like you want them to be straight, either, so that part is really hard.

Part of the difficulty that Zoë expressed may be related to the difference in scripts that she and her thirty-year-old white gay friend Gary each used to guide their friendship. Since intersectional friendships are scriptless, one or both of the friends may have used a common social script, the sexual script, as a guide
for intense feelings of love, intimacy, and loyalty as a means for understanding their relationship. As Gagnon and Simon (1973: 23) explained, sexual scripts are complex: “The sources of arousal, passion, or excitement (the recognition of a sexual possibility), as well as the way the event is experienced (if, indeed, an event follows), derive from a complicated set of layered symbolic meanings that are not only difficult to comprehend from the observed behavior, but also may not be shared by the participants.” Because Zoë does not always have an outlet for her romantic feelings, the pieced-together script that guides her friendship with Gary becomes blurred with more traditional sexual scripts. She clarified that she does not want him to be different but is aware that the available script of love and intimacy involves sexual attraction.

Both Zoë and Gary stated that they had never wanted to have a serious romantic or sexual relationship together. Nonetheless, available social scripts of heteronormativity altered how others perceive them and could be differentially frustrating. This was a source of discomfort when they took a long road trip together, according to Zoë:

It drove him crazy when we were in the heartland driving across country. They were like, “You kids married?,” and I would find it really funny. I didn’t find it completely problematic in the same way he did. So it was hard when we were driving across country, because I could still have, you know, crush-type feelings for him. He was a very safe receptacle for that because, of course, he was never going to be interested and yet, you know, we could have the closeness that you could have with a partner and not have it be remotely threatening at all, you know, physically or anything like that.

Zoë’s recognition that she was able to view her relationship with Gary as a “safe” way to meet her needs for intimacy illustrates how she assumed and then discarded scripts as they fit the context of the friendship and her desire for emotional intimacy. She was able to wear the script placed on her by strangers and try out a heterosexual coupling but also recognized that the script did not, and would never, fit. This temporary role-playing may be more easily available to straight members of intersectional friendships because their friend is the same sex as their sexual object choice and of the script.

Other interviewees reported unrequited sexual or romantic interest as an issue in their intersectional friendship. Justine recalled how Antonio’s overtures nearly ended their friendship: “We lost touch... He basically tried to pick up on me, and I didn’t like that. It wasn’t the act of picking up [but] the context
of the situation that really pissed me off, so I stopped contact for a couple of months, and then [our interactions] became very superficial.” After several years, Justine and Antonio resumed contact, discussed the incident, and rekindled their friendship. Neither suggested that sexual tension has been a recurring issue in the relationship during their interviews.

**SEX AND SEXUAL TENSION**

Few participants in the study acknowledged that they had acted on sexual tension or had a sexual relationship with their intersectional friend. Those friends who had acted on their sexual tension admitted that it had shaped their friendship in both positive and negative ways. One such case was Janet, a thirty-five-year-old white lesbian, and her straight friend, Jon, a thirty-eight-year-old white man. After meeting at work, Janet and Jon became friends and then began a sexual relationship. “We had a relationship, . . . an affair for eight months, something like that,” Janet said. “That was obviously a great time. . . . Our worst time perhaps was right after [we broke up]. There was no reason for it, because it wasn’t a bad breakup. [Our relationship] was an unrealistic thing—we both knew that’s where it was going, but it just, you know, it wasn’t comfortable. Suddenly we had been so close, and now we weren’t.” Jon’s recollections provided a different perspective: “We had a huge crush on each other, and . . . it turned out to be intimate. [It] very shortly materialized into this short-lived relationship, which was a good thing. We were very attracted to each other, playful. . . . One of the things that wasn’t right, you know, the physical element; there just wasn’t chemistry. It was on every level except for the sexual part. I didn’t, I don’t have a sexual attraction to her, and, you know, really, really, there wasn’t a spark there.”

Janet and Jon’s romantic relationship ended, but the friendship continued. Both friends explained that the period between breaking up and resuming the friendship was difficult but that they were glad to have such a close relationship now. Though both Janet and Jon are involved in long-term relationships with other people, Janet continues to feel some measure of lingering sexual and romantic interest. “It flashes through my mind; it still does, you know, like, to be together,” she said. “I mean, it was a long, long time ago, but our sex life was great, and . . . I’m sure we would do really well. . . . There’s still an attraction there, at least on my part. So, you know, when Jon’s around, I light up. I have a great time and I feel very close to him and, you know, not in an obnoxious way, because I wouldn’t want to make [his wife] uncomfortable.” Despite the chal-
lenges, the friendship between Jon and Janet has remained strong, and they and their partners got along well and regularly vacationed and spent time together. Their friendship exposes a rarely discussed aspect of intersectional friendships: sexual attraction does arise and is negotiated by one or both members of some intersectional dyads.

The interviewees who indicated that they had felt attraction also reported that they had been able to mitigate sexual or romantic tension. They acknowledged feeling it but believed they managed it in ways that did not affect the friendship. Others described the ongoing challenges that unrequited attraction presented. Mitch, a forty-two-year-old Latino gay man, voiced his frustration with his straight friend, the thirty-one-year-old Latina Danae: “We’ve had a few challenges, . . . mostly around that whole issue of this whole romantic thing, and me kind of saying, ‘No, I’m gay. It can’t happen,’ and her kind of wanting a little more from the relationship, so much so that when gay friends have come around, she’ll be very jealous of them. . . . That was more so in the beginning, and I think now we’ve had seven years to deal with it, so now I think we’ve both just accepted that it’s a good friendship.”

Mitch feels that over time the issue has become less pressing. However, he recognized that Danae’s ongoing jealousy and possessiveness has negatively affected their friendship, in part because of her unwillingness to initiate other relationships: “Sometimes I actually feel a little constricted, like maybe some of my freedom is gone because of the friendship . . . and she doesn’t ever want to be in a relationship. [She says] that she loves our friendship and with our friendship she doesn’t need a relationship. I try to convince her, ‘No, no, no! We’re friends. You still need a relationship.’ . . . If I were straight, I would definitely consider Danae as a partner, but I’m not straight.”

Mitch and Danae each described the tension present in their friendship during their individual interviews. It also became clear that the tension was rooted in something more than mere unrequited feelings from Danae. Of all of the interviews, Danae’s was the only one that ended abruptly, after I asked whether she and Mitch had ever been sexually involved. In his interview, Mitch had responded sheepishly, “Well, not really.” I asked him to clarify, but he repeated his response, offering no further detail. When I asked Danae the same question in her interview, she told me to go with whatever Mitch had said. I probed further, trying to assess whether or not she was merely joking, but she became steely and refused to answer any further questions. The issues of unrequited (or possibly shared) attraction were clearly not resolved for Mitch and
Danae and seemed to present a serious challenge to their friendship—or, at least, to their ability to characterize their relationship.

**Constructing New Scripts?**

The difficulties that these intersectional friendships encounter as they navigate the available heterosexual scripts for cross-sex behavior are informative. Many interviewees pointed to a lack of sexual tension as a beneficial aspect that allowed for the formation of a deep emotional connection with friends. However, as these examples show, not all intersectional friendships are free from sexual tension. It is, in fact, the presence of these tensions—imagined to be impossible, given the limited scripts available for sexuality—that illustrate the fluidity of sexuality and sexual attraction in intersectional friendship. Ranging from moments of sexual tension to long-term sexual relationships, sexuality (like gender) has shaped interaction within these dyads in complex and dynamic ways.

The emergence of sexual tension and behavior in intersectional friendship serves to underscore the idea that relationships are situated in a particular historical and structural context (Stryker 1980). Heterosexuality is a valued social institution that shapes and limits individual identity development and interaction. Within our contemporary social context, interaction between men and women is prescribed to be a romantic or sexual connection (Rich 1980). The intersectional friendship challenges this construct but is not wholly successful in expanding the confines of structural influences and therefore struggles against norms of compulsory heterosexuality. This is an important element in exposing the construction of sexual orientation as a social category. By existing within a social structure that imposes false binaries on gender and sexual orientation, intersectional friendships provide evidence that such identities are neither entirely fixed nor essential.¹

Yet the general tendency to presume that sexual orientation is fixed seems to serve these friendships well. Put simply, sexual orientation matters in these friendships. A gay man is expected to be free from sexual thoughts about his straight female friend; thus, this friendship is presumed to be platonic in the past, present, and future. As such, the romantic partners and spouses of the friends are able to tolerate, if not celebrate, the intersectional friendship because they, too, perceive the friendship as free from sexual possibility. Whereas a close, emotionally intimate relationship between a straight man and his straight female friend may cause his spouse to feel jealousy and suspicion.
that he is cheating; when the friend is a lesbian, any possibility of a sexual relationship seems off the table and the friend is rendered non-threatening. Furthermore, the sexual impossibility of the relationship to the friends themselves appears to have facilitated the formation, intensity, and longevity of the intersectional friendship. In other words, despite the evidence that some intersectional friendship pairs navigate sexual attraction, the majority of the friends themselves view the friendship as free from any sexual possibility, which, in turn, is noted as a benefit to the friendship.

Even as attraction points to the fluidity of sexuality, most interviewees viewed sexual tension and attraction as both a nuisance and a threat to friendship. Such notions suggest that friendship and sex are antithetical—as the phrase “just friends” suggests. This further demonstrates how these relationships are situated in a social context (Stryker 1980). The current social and structural context in which these intersectional friendships exist is one that values sexual monogamy and treats sexuality without it as taboo, while identifying friendship as the very absence of sex. In other words, given cultural norms about both friendship and sexuality, non-romantic expressions of sexuality within friendship are viewed as anomalies. Previous studies also find instances in straight cross-sex friendships where the individuals have had sex but characterize the sexual dimension of the relationship as difficult to negotiate (Rubin 1985; Werking 1997). On the rare occasions that such intimacies occur, the friends are culturally referred to as “fuck buddies,” a term that downplays the strength of friendship and the potential intimacy of sex or “friends with benefits.” In both cases, the friendship is given a qualifier that clarifies the sexual component of the friendship. This demonstrates the acceptance of available scripts that insist that friendships are platonic and, if they cease to be platonic, they must be reclassified as a different type of relationship.

Participants were aware of these scripts and positioned themselves in relation to them. They did not question them. Perhaps, then, the inability of the intersectional friendship to fully defy compulsory heterosexuality lies in the near-erasure or denial of sexual attraction in all relationships except socially sanctioned dyads—romantic, monogamous relationships. Such social mores were evident throughout these friendships. Of the interviewees, gay men most openly addressed the positive aspects of sexuality, a finding that is consistent with other research. As Nardi (1999) found, in gay men’s friendships, not only were friendship and sex not mutually exclusive, but it also was common for men to have ongoing sexual friendships within gay male communities. Even
with this more flexible understanding of friendship, gay men repeatedly denied sexual attraction to their straight female friends and attributed this absence as facilitating close and stable bonds. This difference between gay men’s friendships having sexual potential that is absent in the intersectional friendships I studied may reflect a difference in sexual scripts based either on sexual orientation or on gender. One interpretation is that the scripts of those who have same-sex orientations may identify relationships with men, but not with women, as having sexual potential. A more likely explanation is that heterosexual scripts are highly gendered so that men are viewed as seeking love relationships for sex, while women engage in sex as a way to achieve love relationships. In such scripts, friendship does not include sex unless the bond will become a romantic relationship.

Most interviewees in this study—of all sexualities and genders—insisted that sexuality and sexual tension were disruptive to the friendship rather than something that they negotiated (e.g., Werking 1997). The acceptance of these mores without cultural interrogation is surprising, as these friendships’ very existence holds the potential to call these values into question. Moreover, the fully transformative effects of intersectional friendship are limited to those that exist within the bounds of our contemporary social context. Hence, while the intersectional friendship serves as an unconventional relational form in some respects, it also reinforces social norms about sexuality, sexual orientation, and friendship so that sexual tension or activity in friendship is viewed negatively.

The data also illustrate the complexity of sexual orientation. Sexual attraction and behavior are generally the determinants of sexual orientation; however, as the data suggest, identifying as a gay man or lesbian does not alleviate the possibility of experiencing sexual feelings with a friend of the other sex. This complexity is also what makes it possible for friendship dyads of straight men and straight women to exist without sexual tension. Thus, the data serve as an example of how sexual orientation, like gender, is a socially constructed identity that is not necessarily absolute or fixed. Rather, when sexual tensions arose, the participants navigated the situations and generally found ways to keep the friendship intact. Thus, the intersectional friendships can serve as a model for how men and women can navigate sexual attraction in intimate but not sexual relationships.