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"WE CAN WRITE THE SCRIPTS OURSELVES":

Queer Challenges to Heteronormative Courtship Practices

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Courtship conventions are premised on widespread and deeply held cultural beliefs that men and women need and want different things from their romantic relationships. Yet queer relationships challenge the notion of distinct gendered behaviors in romantic relationships, and queer people often explicitly seek to undermine conventional relationship practices. Using interview data from 40 LGBTQ-identified respondents, I examine how queer people negotiate culturally dominant gendered dating and courtship practices. My findings show that, rather than replicate heterosexual norms, respondents actively reject them, seeking new and more egalitarian ways of building romantic relationships. Significantly, the narratives drawn on to justify egalitarian dating practices are similar to those used in their committed relationships. Respondents emphasized egalitarian, flexible, and non-gendered care work in committed relationships, indicating that how people date may potentially set the stage for the dynamics in their relationships. The importance placed on these alternative norms in queer communities, however, contradicts respondents' assertions that they can create relationships free from cultural constraints, demonstrating how emerging norms can breed their own pressures for conformity.

Keywords: *gender; sexuality; dating; courtship; LGBTQ*

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Culturally dominant heterosexual courtship conventions dictate that men ask for, plan, and pay for dates, initiate sex, confirm the exclusivity of the relationship, and propose marriage, while women react to these advances (Eaton and Rose 2011; Sassler and Miller 2011). These practices are premised on a vision of romance and relationship progression embedded in unequal gender relations (Lamont 2014) and the assumption that men and women have fundamentally different needs and wants in their romantic relationships (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). In spite of these widespread cultural norms about how women and men "should" be in relationships, queer[1] relationships challenge the notion of distinct gendered behaviors in romantic relationships, and queer people often explicitly seek to undermine conventional relationship practices (Pfeffer 2014; Ward 2015). Consequently, queer people are "dually socialized"; they are exposed to queer politics that promote subversion of normative constructions of intimate life, while, at the same time, they are embedded in a culture that promotes a particular vision of romance, love, and family life (Green 2010, 401). Previous research shows that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer-identified (LGBTQ) individuals are more critical of normative relationship expectations (Carrington 1999; Pfeffer 2012, 2014; Stacey 2011), but it also indicates that we have very little research on how queer people, in particular, navigate their everyday lives and make sense of their identities and practices in relation to normative "social centers" (Pfeffer 2014, 9).

Drawing on data from in-depth interviews with 40 LGBTQ-identified individuals, this study examines how queer people negotiate gendered dating and relationship conventions during courtship. I demonstrate how queer people reject heterosexual dating and courtship norms in an effort to construct intimacy and relationship meanings *outside of* socially sanctioned relationship practices. Respondents instead expressed support for egalitarian and non-gendered dating and relationship practices, which they felt allowed them to craft more balanced relationships and provided relationship flexibility to better account for each partner's individual needs. In the process of contesting normative practices, however, queer people create oppositional alternative practices, building new norms within queer spaces. Thus, this study indicates that while a deliberate rethinking of gendered practices is an important component in crafting more egalitarian relationships, queer people face new relationship norms, undermining their claims of radical individualism (Orne 2017). This pressure to conform to community-level oppositional norms subverts the liberatory potential of their critique and demonstrates how goals of "liberation" can be constraining in

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their own right, highlighting the challenges inherent in constructing new norms.

QUEER SOCIAL ACTORS AND THE REMAKING OF INTIMATE LIFE

Heterosexual courtship practices are symbolic, cultural scenarios that make romantic interest and love "socially communicative" (Illouz 1997, 4). Interpreted through a culturally specific lens, these conventions signify particular meanings about relationships to the participants and broader audience. They are also heavily gendered, reflecting widespread beliefs about innate differences between men and women (Ridgeway 2011). Cultural stereotypes perpetuate the assumption that women are (and should be) more interested in committed relationships than men, and men are (and should be) more assertive than women (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Ridgeway 2011). As a result, women gauge men's romantic interest in them through men's satisfactory performance of certain courtship rituals, such as asking and paying for dates, making a follow-up call, progressing the relationship, and proposing marriage. Both men and women understand these conventions as practices used to screen a partner's interest and long-term relationship potential (Lamont 2014, 2015). This shared, cultural knowledge is widely known (Ridgeway 2011) and is thus a dependable way of communicating romantic interest and facilitating relationship progression (Eaton and Rose 2011).

During courtship, the expression of romantic interest through symbolic practices is delegated almost exclusively to men. Women are expected to simply react to men's gestures (Lamont 2014). As their romantic relationships progress, however, women also communicate interest and love in gender appropriate ways. In particular, women are expected to do more of the "labors of love" (Ward 2010). This labor is often routinized household labor and emotional work, both of which are romanticized and portrayed as care (Erickson 2005). The burden of sustaining relationships transfers to women in the process, as they are called on to perform affective labors that include nurturing their partners and their relationships, as well as recognizing their partners' desires and needs over their own (Erickson 2005; Rao 2017). Thus, men and women perform different types of work and, in the process, "gender is reproduced through routinized forms of care work" in the context of romantic relationships (Ward 2010, 239). Feminist scholars have called attention to how these gendered relationship

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practices disadvantage women and privilege men in heterosexual relationships, creating male-dominated relationships—rather than egalitarian peer relationships—that need to be challenged (Connell 1987; Risman 1998).

Although courtship and relationship conventions provide social actors with gendered instructions for how to behave in romantic relationships, same-sex couples express greater support for egalitarian practices than do heterosexual couples (Biblarz and Savci 2010). That said, as in heterosexual relationships, Carrington (1999) found that same-sex egalitarian narratives function as "family myths" and that the invisible labor performed in same-sex relationships is often deeply gendered and unequal, with one partner doing significantly more care work and emotional labor than the other. Thus, while gay and lesbian couples do tend to be more egalitarian than heterosexual couples in practice, gendered inequalities still exist (Goldberg, Smith, and Perry-Jenkins 2012; Moore 2011). In addition, many gay and lesbian individuals actively embrace certain normative relationship practices, including gendered behaviors, gender-differentiated relationships, monogamy, and legal marriage (Green 2010; Moore 2011; Ocampo 2012). Recently, the focus on same-sex marriage has led to divisions in the LGBTQ community, as some argue that same-sex marriage indicates a centering and privileging of problematic relationship norms (Green 2010; Yep, Lovaas, and Elia 2003).

For decades, feminist theorists have shown that normative and institutionalized sexual and relationship arrangements unequally distribute social and economic privileges to promote, and even celebrate, the patriarchal, heterosexual marriage (Connell 1987; Rich 1983; Rubin 1984). Queer theory builds on and centers this critique of normativity, showing how these cultural practices translate into a "regime of normalcy" that confers benefits to those who "conform to societal norms and expectations for living a 'good life'" (Schippers 2016, 6–7). In contrast, queer theorists argue that queerness is about making "life choices distinct from those considered more socially expected, celebrated, and sanctioned" (Pfeffer 2012, 578) and that, in spite of the option for legal recognition of same-sex and queer romantic relationships, formal inclusion in state-sanctioned institutions is far from what is meant by liberation (Conrad 2010; Walters 2014; Yep, Lovaas, and Elia 2003). Rather, they argue, queer meaning is about resisting normalization and radically transforming society in the process (Green 2010), making queer relationships potentially quite distinct from other LGBT relationships.

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Pfeffer (2014) points out, however, that the sociological examination of queerness has focused on the theoretical at the expense of empirical research on queer social actors and how they make sense of and engage with normative social practices. Recent studies have started to fill this gap, investigating how individuals navigate the tension between assimilation and innovation in their romantic relationships (Green 2010; Pfeffer 2012). Indeed, queer people regularly engage in both, with certain individuals challenging socially sanctioned relationship practices, others embracing or remaking tradition, and still others picking and choosing between these two approaches as they see fit or as necessity dictates (Green 2010; Pfeffer 2012). Given that queer identity is premised on a radical rejection of normativity, I ask: How do queer actors negotiate gendered courtship practices as they date and form romantic relationships? At the same time, courtship and relationship conventions are so widespread because they reliably facilitate relationship progression and signal romantic interest and care in easily recognized ways. It remains unclear, then, how queer people communicate their feelings absent these culturally intelligible scripts. Therefore, I also ask: How is romantic meaning made and caring shown in queer romantic relationships?

Moving beyond an approach that centers heterosexual relationship practices, I explore how queer actors construct their own practices, rather than solely resisting conventions. As Orne (2017) shows, queer people in predominantly queer spaces construct new normative centers premised on a "radical individualism" in which queer actors assert the right to self-define outside of societal strictures, and on an "alternative respectability" that dictates the "right" way to be queer, such as through the rejection of sexist practices (220). I find that through this active challenge of conventional gendered relationship practices, combined with this focus on radical individualism, queer people make space for reimagining romance and caregiving which, they claim, leads to more egalitarian relationship practices. As such, I show that a deliberate rethinking of symbolic practices lays the intellectual groundwork and creates the space for individuals to construct new meanings and practices and potentially build more equal romantic relationships. At the same time, queer people, embedded in queer communities, encounter emergent alternative norms based on being appropriately progressive and challenging normativity in an effort to achieve liberation. Thus, while queer people aim to build relationships based on individual needs and desires, their goal is undermined by this competing focus. The paradox between the rejection of gender norms and

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the enforcement of new relationship practices reveals the contradictory process of progressive social change and demonstrates how restrictive even "liberation" can be.

METHODS

I conducted in-depth interviews with 40 LGBTQ-identified individuals in the San Francisco Bay Area on their dating and relationship behaviors and attitudes. I recruited respondents in two waves. The first group of respondents were recruited and interviewed between June 2010 and June 2011 as part of a larger study on gender and courtship. I randomly selected and emailed individuals from the alumni lists of two universities in the San Francisco Bay Area and invited participants to take part in an interview if they were between the ages of 25 and 40, held an undergraduate degree from one of the two universities, and lived within two hours of San Francisco. Sixteen of the 81 respondents identified as LGBTQ, and their data are included here. I recruited and interviewed the second group of 24 respondents in May and June of 2015. In this wave, I only targeted subjects who identified as LGBTQ to increase their representation in my sample. I recruited respondents through online postings with LGBTQ organizations in the Bay Area, as well as through a snowball sampling technique on social media using the networks of friends and colleagues. In this wave, subjects received $50 for their participation. To maintain continuity with the original sample, I limited interviews to those who were between the ages of 25 and 40 and held at least an undergraduate degree.

The resultant sample was diverse. In terms of sexuality, 40 percent identified as queer, 38 percent as gay, 15 percent as bisexual, and 7 percent as lesbian. In cases where the respondents offered more than one label for sexual identity, I used the first one offered. In terms of gender, 40 percent identified as cis women, 33 percent identified as cis men, 15 percent identified as genderqueer or non-binary, and 12 percent identified as trans*.[2] In addition, 60 percent of the sample identified as white, while 40 percent identified as persons of color. Finally, while everyone in the sample had a college education, over a third came from a working-class or poor background. Descriptive information for the sample is provided in Table 1.

Given the percentage of respondents who identified as queer—an identity characterized in their narratives as a more politicized and progressive identity than gay, lesbian, and bisexual—this sample is likely more radical in their understanding of sexuality and relationships than the LGBTQ population as a whole. Even those respondents who identified as GLB

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TABLE 1: Description of Sample

Characteristic	*N*	*Percent*
Gender		
Cis woman	16	40
Cis man	13	33
Genderqueer/non-binary	6	15
Trans*	5	12
Sexuality		
Queer	16	40
Gay	15	38
Bisexual	6	15
Lesbian	3	7
Race		
White	24	60
Asian	7	18
Latinx	4	10
Bi-/multiracial	4	10
Black	1	2
Class background		
Middle to upper-middle	25	63
Poor to working	15	37
Relationship status		
Single	18	45
In a relationship	11	28
Cohabiting	9	22
Married	2	5
Age		
Mean age	30.2	

frequently referred to themselves and their relationships as queer in other parts of the interviews, and several of the cis women stated that they preferred to identify as gay rather than lesbian because they found lesbian too gendered a term. In addition, the sample is young, well educated, and resides in one of the most liberal parts of the country. Many of the respondents reported taking gender studies courses in college and participating in explicitly queer spaces such as groups for queer and trans people of color.

I conducted the interviews in person. They lasted an average of two hours and took place at a location chosen by the participant, usually their home or a coffee shop. Each interview started with the respondent providing an overview of their past and present romantic relationships. I then

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asked them to select what they considered to be their five most significant relationships. Respondents offered their own definition of both significance and relationship. Most used level of emotional investment and commitment. Many emphasized that monogamy was not necessarily a defining feature of either. Interview questions focused on dating, courtship, and relationship norms, such as who asked for the first date, who initiated sex, how relationship progression was negotiated, and how partners showed care for each other. To compare lived behavior to ideals, I finished the interviews by asking the participants questions about their dating and relationship preferences. I also asked them to discuss heterosexual dating and relationship norms and reflect on how they either enact or reject these norms in their own lives. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I coded the interviews using themes identified in previous research on both heterosexual and LGBTQ relationships (Lamont 2014; Pfeffer 2012; Sassler and Miller 2011). In particular, I looked for how respondents made sense of and negotiated normative dating and relationship behaviors and how these influenced their relationship practices. Quotes have been edited for clarity, but not content. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity, and all gender identities, sexualities, and pronouns (she, he, or they) reflect those used by the respondents.

CHALLENGING HETERONORMATIVE COURTSHIP PRACTICES

In spite of respondents' diverse gender, racial, and sexual identities, the majority explicitly rejected heterosexual dating and relationship norms and expressed support for egalitarian and non-gendered practices. The consistency of these beliefs across demographics indicates widespread support for these emerging norms in young, urban, queer spaces. First, I show how respondents presented heterosexual courtship and relationship norms as constraining and undesirable. Next, I look at the respondents' alternative approaches to dating and courtship, indicating that they challenge norms both ideologically and in practice. Finally, I show how the language drawn on to justify egalitarian dating practices is replicated in their committed relationships, as respondents emphasized egalitarian, flexible, and non-gendered care work. Throughout I demonstrate how these emerging norms, while more egalitarian than those in heterosexual relationships, constrain relationship practices as respondents attempted to conform to an "alternative respectability" premised on the rejection of heteronormativity (Orne 2017).

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Rejecting Normative Conventions

Tolerance narratives often imply that those who are LGBTQ deserve sympathy rather than scorn due to the assumption that they cannot help their orientation and would, in fact, be heterosexual if given the choice (Walters 2014). Yet, those in my sample indicated the opposite, stating that being heterosexual and following heterosexual norms would be an unappealing way to live life. Of the 40 respondents, two-thirds explicitly described heterosexual dating and relationship norms as both constraining and boring, emphasizing how heterosexual lives are predetermined by scripts with no room for change or individuality. Alek, a 38-year-old, white, gay cis man said,

> Jesus Christ. When I think about straight dating norms, I feel nauseous. This is so boring. What I see in the films or in the streets, how can you guys live like this? Because you do not have any space for imagination. All your family life is scheduled from the very beginning, especially when you are a woman. You know that you are going to have a date and gosh you're so obsessed about the wedding and what comes after the wedding. After that you should have kids and then kindergarten and the company of the other young moms and the kids go to college and then you need to separate from them somehow and in this way until death.

As Alek stated, he saw no room for deviation from the set pathways provided to heterosexual men and women, and no room to change course once on that pathway. He referred to queer relationship practices as both more "interesting" and "inspiring" than "that tomb of the traditional family." Indeed, as Ward (2015) argues, the appeal of queer life is "the promise of life outside the predictable constraints of heterosexuality" (202). Reflected throughout my interviews, heterosexual culture, rather than something to be desired or emulated, is something to be pitied. Respondents viewed heterosexual men and women as too interested in playing it safe within the constraints of normative culture to reimagine the possibilities for life outside the dominant narrative.

Like Alek, when respondents discussed constraining heterosexual dating scripts, they almost exclusively referenced the limits placed on heterosexual *women*. Thus, not only were the scripts viewed as too rigid, they were also seen as sexist in that they were more disadvantageous and obligatory for women than men. Jamie, a 30-year-old, Chicana, queer cis woman reflected on a conversation with a heterosexual female friend:

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> I remember talking to a friend who's also 30 and single. . . . She was interested in a guy and she'd be waiting for this person to ask her out. And I'm like, "Why don't you just ask him out for lunch or something?" She's like, "I could never do that, like that's completely inappropriate." People who are straight are really stuck in societal expectations where they're so rigid they can't move out of it.

Respondents emphasized how freeing it was not to worry about normative expectations and instead concentrate on figuring out what would make them happy as individuals. Adah, 34, white, queer, and genderqueer, said, "I feel privileged that I live in a place and a time that I get to more or less live how I want. Yeah, happy that I get to chase happiness in that way and I wish more people felt free to make up their own rules a little bit more of the time." Indeed, most respondents discussed how an important benefit of queerness was the freedom to make your life according to your own vision, not one that is predetermined. According to Emma, a 27-year-old, white, gay cis woman:

> We have explicitly said we're not normal or traditional so we can write the script ourselves. We don't have to buy into this belief that the guy is gonna be kinda dopey but well-meaning and enjoy sports and the woman is gonna withhold sex and demand to have things paid for. . . . And that feels really, really good to say we don't have to buy into this bullshit; let's craft our own relationship.

This individualism is a key element of a normative queer culture in which individuals position themselves as free from societal constraints and instead draw on a "'be true to yourself' philosophy" (Orne 2017, 220). Only one respondent expressed any resentment over not having a script to follow, although even he acknowledged the constraints that came with heterosexual scripts. Charlie, a 32-year-old, white, queer trans man said,

> I would definitely like to have some role models. Sometimes I feel it's so unfair I have to figure all this shit out for myself. I feel like I'm this total freak or something. Not that I want to be heterosexual necessarily, just having some benefits of it. But I could see also the harm I think of getting locked into that as well.

Because relationship and courtship norms *are* gender norms, broader discussions of rejecting norms often included critiques of gender norms. While heterosexual men and women face strong pressures to engage in

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heterosexual dating scripts, the individuals in this study expressed the opposite, indicating that there was an explicit pressure to *avoid* gendered dating scripts. Rather, those who subscribed to normative gendered behaviors might be openly taken to task. Ella, a 26-year-old, white, gay cis woman said:

> Even the butch-femme thing is antiquated. When I date women my own age, it's very much like I don't ascribe to butch or femme. I was at this music festival where there was this big fight because someone called someone else a floppy eared butch. Basically implying she wasn't butch enough. And there were genderqueer people there and trans people and they were so upset at this one old butch woman who called this girl a floppy eared butch because they were like, "We don't buy into that any more, you know?"

The relatively young ages of the respondents and widespread repudiation of gender norms indicates a generational shift in what is expected in LGBTQ relationships. As Ella discussed, in contrast to her relationships with older women, when she dated women her own age there was an expectation that the relationship be free of gender norms. As Orne (2017) argues, queer spaces often give rise to a "queernormativity" premised on an "alternative respectability" that dictates how to be the "right" kind of queer. In the process, "queer leftism has become its own form of tribalism, with its own rituals of purification and rites of flagellation. Like many ideologies, it shares features of religion, marked by a propensity to be 'more queer than thou'" (224). Thus, despite the assertion by respondents that they could write their own scripts, community-level pressures provided guidelines for how relationships should look. Aware of the condemnation that comes with falling outside this alternative "charmed circle" (Orne 2017, 222), respondents worked hard within their relationships to detect and avoid gendered behaviors. As Patricio, 25, Latinx, queer, and genderqueer, noted, "I notice it comes out in some of my relationships so I question it. Like patriarchy or like the person on top pays or whatever, you know? I'm like, is this a reenactment of heterosexual norms?"

Beyond gender norms, some of the respondents also reported pressure to avoid the heterosexual default of monogamy. Patricio described chanting in a circle with a group of friends: "I remember sitting in one of those art meetings that I used to go to a few years ago and we're just like, boo, monogamy. Like mono-go!" Just as gender norms were viewed as constraining, monogamy was seen as a relationship practice that involved restricting a person's needs, and expecting one individual

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to be responsible for these needs was understood as unrealistic (see Sheff 2014 for similar findings). That said, a number of respondents indicated that while they might want a monogamous relationship, they felt they would be looked down upon and seen as too normative among their peer network. Jocelyn, 36 years old, a white, bisexual trans woman, mentioned that when she broke up with a past partner who was polyamorous, she reevaluated what she wanted out of a relationship for herself, saying, "I realized when I stopped dating [my past partner] I was like, oh, I don't have to try to be poly anymore. Like is this something I want?" Manuela, 36 years old, mixed-race, queer, and genderqueer, noted that although polyamory was held in high regard in her queer community, in practice, as with monogamy, these relationships often failed to live up to the ideals. As she argued, polyamory, supposedly premised on mutual respect and discussion, was being used to shame people into accepting less exclusivity than they wanted from a relationship in order to be seen as appropriately progressive and nonnormative.

Thus, although almost everyone discussed rejecting heterosexual courtship and relationship norms, many also discussed anywhere from subtle to overt pressure to conform to alternative norms, such as the rejection of gender norms and monogamy. Patricio said, "I *used* to feel outside of the norm. . . . It's like everyone's non-monogamous, everyone's poly, like it's something that's very legitimate and very specific to the Bay Area." As Patricio makes clear, community-level norms can be just as constraining as those at the societal level. Scripts from polyamorous communities emphasize equal power among relationship partners and non-gendered relationship rules. But there is also a negative association with monogamists; they are viewed as "narrow-minded or stuck" (Sheff 2014, 65). And given their location in the Bay Area, which is considered a hub of polyamory (Sheff 2014), it is likely that respondents had more exposure to poly norms and people practicing consensual non-monogamies than those in other regions of the country. That said, only 15 of the respondents identified as polyamorous or non-monogamous. While the remainder did not, many still drew on some elements of poly relationship scripts, indicating acceptance of these new norms beyond poly communities.

Remaking Dating Practices

Along with rejecting heterosexual dating scripts, almost all the respondents emphasized egalitarian, non-gendered dating practices. There were no rules or set preferences over who should ask for dates, who should contact the other person first after a date, or who should pay for a date. Indeed,

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when I asked this question, it was frequently met with confusion and questions, such as: "What do you mean by rules?" For example, when I asked Adah if they tended to initiate contact after a first date or preferred to let the other person contact them, they asked, "Do I like the person?" After I replied in the affirmative, they said, "If I like the person, I probably will let them know right away." This is in direct contrast to the narrative of the heterosexual "game" in which a woman must play hard to get to generate a man's interest, a man lives for the thrill of the chase, and an easy "catch" is a turn-off (Lamont 2014). Instead, respondents said that engaging in direct communication was a crucial relationship practice. Assertiveness by either interested party was a positive trait, and the idea that one partner should make all the effort was a turn-off. As Jack, a 25-year-old, white, gay cis man, said, "If they're not going to give me signs that they're a communicator, that kind of is a turn-off to me. I don't like it when people wait for me to constantly initiate any kind of text message or phone call. . . . It's like tying your shoes. You have to have good house training."

Almost every participant stated that dates were paid for either by splitting the check or swapping back and forth by date, and almost no one indicated that this led to an awkward conversation or a decline in interest on either party's part. Only a couple of the respondents said that their default was to expect to pay on the first date. Amit, a 27-year-old, South Asian, queer cis man, said, "For the most part I pay . . . I don't feel like it's expected of me. It's something I *like* to do." Interestingly, all the respondents who said this were cis men. Just like Amit, while they were often very critical of gender norms in other aspects of their lives, this norm went unquestioned and was justified as a non-gendered practice. Amit suggested that his interest in paying was connected to his desire to choose the location of the dates so that he could pick a restaurant "with good politics and good sourcing," thereby turning a gendered practice into a progressive political act. In this manner, Amit skirted critique by emphasizing intention over impact, an attitude that allows anyone to perpetuate systemic gender inequality as long as they aren't what they think of as a sexist person.

But for the most part, there was discomfort with heterosexual payment scripts and a sense that these practices were disempowering to the recipient of the largess. Jamie said,

> Often the other person would pay. It was fun at first when they would pay, but then it felt like I didn't have any power, like there was a power dynamic where they insisted and I didn't have a voice in being able to pay. After a while it would feel frustrating. And I don't want them to assume that I owe

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> them something whether sexually or otherwise if they keep paying for dinner. It made me feel vulnerable and like I had very little power.

Unlike heterosexual women who see benevolent sexism as a practice with benefits for them or emphasize their engagement with it as an individual preference (Lamont 2014), respondents connected these practices to broader gendered power dynamics in relationships, arguing that the one who paid was also, in effect, buying a certain level of control in the relationship. Nevertheless, there were a few respondents who desired gendered scripts. Ella said,

> This one butch woman who was like early 50s, I loved it. She opened the car door for me every time. She always paid for our dates. She'd bring me flowers. It was so sweet and I love that chivalry. . . . God, cause it felt like this old fashioned 50s style romance. I'm not immune to it, even though I'm feminist and I'm a lesbian, I'm not immune to the man takes care of the woman script.

Given the shift among her generation to non-gendered dating scripts, Ella was the only person in the sample who admitted being raised with an image of courtship she still desired, and she felt she could only enact these scripts with older lesbian partners. This was in contrast to the majority of the sample, who instead discussed how foreign these scripts felt. Many of the respondents worried growing up that they would never find a partner because gendered scripts sounded so unappealing. Rather than emphasizing their desire for chivalry and elaborate marriage proposals, they discussed being alone for the rest of their lives.

While Ella was unapologetic about her desire for gendered scripts, she acknowledged that some might see a disconnect between this and her identity. More frequently, given the pressures to contest normative relationship patterns, respondents emphasized gender as play, possibly to undermine the potential critique they anticipated receiving for gendered behaviors. Andie, a 27-year-old, white, gay cis woman, said, "I sort of like that playful aspect of the gender dynamic. . . . I like the idea that I'll give you my jacket if you're cold because I'm so tough and cold doesn't matter to me, but I'll take care of you. But again, it's always in a little bit of a tongue in cheek way, but I still really like it." This narrative allowed Andie to have fun with the elements of gender she enjoyed while still maintaining a critical distance from a compulsory adherence to gendered scripts. This was important both for her understanding of herself as a queer person and to avoid the negative reactions from her queer community.

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Interestingly, cis women dating other cis women were the demographic most likely to engage in gendered dating practices, perhaps because courtship scripts resonate with women more than men, or possibly due to the historical legacy of strict butch/femme dynamics in lesbian communities (see Faderman [1991] 2012). In addition, a few of the cis women who dated both men and women reported feeling more comfortable enacting normative gender behaviors with women than with men. When I asked Melanie, a 29-year-old, multiracial, queer cis woman, what she might wear on a first date, she said, "I would definitely dress more down for a man and more up for a woman. I don't want to be leading with my looks with men and I don't want to be trying to be sexy for men. I really like the energy of dressing up for women and I just don't like it for men." While a few respondents indicated the opposite, those who said this tied it back to a resistance to heterosexual dating practices, aware of the heavy pressure they experienced to conform and looking for ways to actively reject these pressures. In particular, they didn't want to signal a desire for an unwanted gendered relationship script, giving male partners the wrong idea about the desired dynamics. These same dynamics in same-sex relationships just didn't raise the same concerns. But many of the respondents also acknowledged that they lived in a unique location that provided them with a space to challenge these norms. As Melanie said, "I feel like I live in this weird bubble of super, super, super progressive people like politically, sexually, gender, dating." Living in the progressive, urban Bay Area allowed respondents to feel more confident in finding like-minded individuals with whom they could successfully remake relationship scripts.

Finally, contrary to heterosexual courtship scripts, which dictate that the man should surprise the woman with a marriage proposal and wedding ring, only a few of the participants desired a one-sided marriage proposal. Instead, respondents explicitly discussed a reimagination of the proposal script. Riley, a 29-year-old, white, lesbian trans man, said of his fiancé:

> She's like, "This is really silly that I have a ring and you don't." And I was like, "I thought I was going to have to wait for that." 'Cause I really wanted one, but I was prepared to wait because I'm masculine or whatever, you know? And she was like, "That's stupid; we're queers and we write our own script." . . . And then a couple weeks later the ring came and she proposed back. . . . I like that it was important to her to propose back.

As in Riley's narrative, there was a sense that queer relationships could transcend gender and that identity and action did not have to match. Manuela said, "Masculine of center people are expected to be the ones to

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make decisions or take up more space or to be assertive. But I've noticed that in the queer community, people just do what they do, regardless of how they appear." Jamie had a similar reaction when she got engaged to her partner through a series of conversations:

> A lot of people assume that because [my partner] is more masculine presenting that she popped the question and it was a big surprise and there was this big to-do. And it wasn't like that at all. . . . Even though I'm very feminine and she's very masculine, we really don't want to get caught up in gender roles.

Yet Jamie also indicated that while she and her partner felt free to challenge scripts that did not feel right to them, they also felt free to embrace rituals they liked. They both wanted rings because they felt rings symbolized the seriousness of their relationship both to each other and those around them. She said, "It's assumed that because we're queer, we're gonna be very non-normative and nontraditional. . . . And it felt like this is a rite of passage for all people so why shouldn't we have a right to have engagement rings like anybody else." Thus, while most of the respondents focused on "normative resistance" (Pfeffer 2012), some also saw elements of conformity as acceptable practice when enacted with intention. Indeed, there was also a sense among participants, as voiced by Jamie, that queer individuals should not be excluded from important life milestones and practices simply because they were queer. These comments show a deliberate engagement with scripts by the participants, rather than a full-scale, knee-jerk rejection. In practice, people are picking and choosing what works for them rather than following expectations complacently. But, in some instances, respondents also view themselves as "queer enough" to engage in normative relationship practices free from critique.

Changing Patterns of Romance and Care

Romance and caring activities are crucial to the maintenance of romantic relationships as people "do" love through both everyday acts and symbolic gestures used to signal one's attention to a partner's emotional and material needs (Carrington 1999; Illouz 1997). These acts and gestures are gendered, as certain behaviors are expected of men and others of women in heterosexual relationships (Ward 2010). Given their commitment to challenging conventional heterosexual behaviors in their dating and romantic relationships, queer people also must then engage in the productive process of meaning making in their romantic relationships, finding new ways to communicate romance, love, and care to their partners.

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Frequently, normative practices were simply reimagined as egalitarian. In heterosexual dating relationships, for example, chivalry is a way for men to show care for their partners. Women aren't expected to show the same level of care in return at this point in the courtship process. Respondents, however, expressed that these behaviors should be mutually performed. Adah, when asked about gender norms in courtship, said,

> That doesn't sound fun to me, but what does sound fun is certain aspects of that—like people showing care and consideration in those little ways, like opening the door for each other. . . . Like not that one person needs to do it for another, but when both people are doing those little considerate things for each other.

Indeed, Kylie, a 29-year-old, queer, Asian cis woman, indicated that heterosexual conventions were a way for people to avoid the real intimacy work required in relationships. She said, "You just come up with some cheesy romantic gesture and it's okay. . . . I just feel like cookie cutter dating assumptions are harmful." As she argued, partners should be approached as individuals with specific needs, instead of simply viewed and reacted to through the lens of gender stereotypes.

Indeed, the focus was on mutual gestures, and respondents frequently discussed the romantic practices that they and their partners did for *each other*. As Santiago, 34 years old, Latinx, queer, and trans stated, "We're big surprise oriented. I surprised him and flew his brother out here for his birthday. We picked him up from the airport and surprised him with this blindfold, rented this beach house, and invited all his friends. He surprised me and took me to Hawaii for my birthday. We're pretty into grand gestures." Blake, a 33-year-old, white, queer trans man, said, "We make cards for each other. . . . And I like to cook for him and he likes to cook for me." Jane, a 27-year-old, white, bisexual cis woman, said, "We have a running poetry contest together where we'll each take a different form of poetry each month and write to the other person in that." Thus, the emphasis was on romantic practices they valued as a couple and which they *both* used to show care. Many of the examples given were private rituals that partners used to communicate love in personal, relationship-specific ways.

But many respondents also emphasized how care work changed throughout the relationship, focusing on flexibility and renegotiation. At different points in time, one might need to give more than receive, but respondents indicated that this should even out over time. Santiago discussed their relationship in the following terms: "The first year was definitely about him. [My partner] came out as trans to me, came out as a

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survivor of sorts. There was a lot of crying; there was a lot of processing trauma." Yet later in the relationship, Santiago discussed how their own needs took priority and their partner was there for them during a hard time, saying, "He'd just do everything for me. I wouldn't ask and he didn't hold it against me; he would just do things because he knew I needed them and it was hard for me."

Finally, participants emphasized providing partners with space to be who they need to be as an individual. Instead of reenacting scripts, the focus was on constant communication, evaluation, and renegotiation of the relationship. Nothing was considered set in stone, but, instead, it was always up for discussion. Checking in with one's partner consistently was paramount, and a way to allow space for each other's changing needs. Patricio discussed renegotiating the terms of a relationship with a partner, something they felt a previous partner had not done for them:

> At that time [my partner] had said she didn't want to have sex with me anymore. I was like, "Oh, okay, well, I still want to be with you and if you don't want to have sex with me, that's perfectly fine." That was the issue with [my ex-partner]. I told her I didn't want to have sex with her, but I still wanted to be with her. And she was like, "Well if you don't want to have sex with me then what's the point of being in a relationship." So I was making sure with [my partner], I was like, "Look if you don't want to have sex with me right now, that's okay. . . . But don't ever feel like you have to have sex with me to have this type of relationship."

What Patricio offered their partner was an opportunity to change the terms of the relationship to fit their partner's current needs, without holding the relationship hostage to the originally discussed arrangements. Jessie, 28 years old, Asian, queer, and non-binary, made a similar point, stating, "My very important relationships with people tend to be a flowing, adapting, flexible, always changing kind of thing. Or how people feel at the moment. And I feel like that is much more honest."

Flexibility and the willingness of partners to move away from scripts and reimagine possibilities as needed can be a boon to relationships, providing space for new and changing needs and allowing for greater relationship resiliency (Sheff 2014; Stacey 2011). When I asked Riley how often he and his fiancé discussed what they wanted out of the relationship, he said, "I think all the time. We negotiate." He explained that his fiancé had entered the relationship wanting it to be open. As he said,

> I've had a lot of exposure to the idea so the idea had crossed my mind in the past, but I wasn't sure it was something I actually wanted to do. So

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> when she brought it up, it was a stretch for me. . . . I was like, well, let's give it a shot. But it hurt the relationship. . . . And so we closed it. And we constantly reevaluate and we're always talking about it.

Participants viewed this flexibility as a form of care work, in that it gave partners the understanding that their needs were important and that they had space and support to grow and change as a person. But people also aimed to make this process balanced, as both partners discussed working to accommodate the changing needs of the other.

Thus, respondents found ways to demonstrate care that reflected their deeply held beliefs about what relationships should do for the participants. Their critiques of heterosexual relationships centered on how gendered, non-egalitarian, and constraining these were, so they sought ways to avoid reproducing these patterns in their own relationships. Romance and caregiving, therefore, centered on balanced relationship practices rather than reflecting gendered assumptions about what women and men supposedly need and want in their relationships. Participants stressed a give-and-take approach, with relationship flexibility as paramount. The emphasis on communication and renegotiation was understood as a form of caregiving and emotional labor, as the needs of the partner were seen as more important that any predetermined notion of how that relationship *should* look. In this manner, participants turned defiant queer practices into productive practices that utilized norms of constant communication and flexibility to provide meaning to relationship practices.

CONCLUSION

The battle over the right to same-sex marriage effectively rewrote the public narrative on gay politics, turning it into the "rights of the romantic couple" (Ward 2015, 199). Proclamations that "love is love" and a variety of mainstream cultural images reveling in the wedded bliss of white upper-middle-class monogamous couples worked to normalize certain LBGTQ relationships, situating them as strikingly similar to straight relationships (Walters 2014; Ward 2015). These relationships became the face of the movement, telling heterosexual people they had nothing to fear and that queer people just wanted access to the same immensely desirable institution of marriage so they could be just like them (Conrad 2010).

Contrary to the voices of liberation through assimilation, however, this study shows that some LGBTQ-identified individuals, in particular those in more radical, politicized queer spaces, are rejecting the presumption

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that they should mimic heterosexual practices. Indeed, most of my respondents viewed heterosexual relationships with feelings ranging from pity to contempt. They viewed the norms guiding these relationships as constraining, unimaginative, and heavily gendered, thereby promoting and celebrating gender inequality. Instead, respondents sought to engage in reciprocal dating practices; they emphasized that asking and paying for dates, communicating interest, and facilitating relationship progression should be undertaken by both partners. By making the conscious choice to reject the normative practices so easy to inadvertently fall back on in heterosexual relationships, respondents created a mindful space that allowed them to seek new ways to demonstrate romance and care to their partners. In the process, they sought to incorporate the elements they felt were important to a successful relationship, emphasizing constant communication, evaluation, and negotiation of the relationship. The aim was greater individuality and equality in their relationships, as respondents actively worked to balance their own needs with the needs of their partners in ways that didn't rely on unequal gendered scripts.

While my findings make clear that participants are rethinking relationship norms and certainly indicate an ideological commitment to egalitarian relationships, it is unclear whether these narratives reflect a wholesale shift in practices. As shown in other studies on LGBT relationships, this commitment does not always translate into practice (Biblarz and Savci 2010) and may instead serve as a "family myth" (Carrington 1999). Future research should investigate whether these egalitarian goals translate into practice. Interestingly, a number of respondents appeared to feel that they were "queer enough" to embrace certain desired gender norms. While they might harshly judge heterosexual couples as "sheep" for engaging in these practices, this sense of their own radicalism allowed them to view their own participation in normative behaviors not as part of a systemic problem but rather as personal preference and gender play.

The language of queer dating suggests that liberation is about individualistic self-determination and going beyond norms. While respondents discussed a lack of rules, community-level queer norms encouraging the rejection of socially sanctioned practices have supplanted heterosexual norms. This constrains the range of available acceptable relationship practices and, in many ways, respondents found these new norms just as imperative as those they were attempting to transcend. Those who did choose to engage in gendered practices were forced to reframe these preferences in ways that would insulate them from critique and accusations of

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homonormativity. Given the variation in gender, sexual, and racial and ethnic identity in the sample, the lack of variation in narratives indicates how widespread these new norms are becoming for queer young adults, at least in progressive social environments.

This article contributes to the empirical gap in knowledge of queer people, showing how they make sense of and navigate heteronormative dating and courtship practices. Yet it also demonstrates the potential present in direct challenges to these entrenched symbolic relationship rituals and how these may be relevant to the broader goal of gender equality. When heterosexual partners fail to deconstruct gendered practices, they inscribe inequality into their relationships even as they express the desire to be egalitarian (Lamont 2014, 2015). Because many queer relationships do not rely on well-established practices and ideologies, the symbolic norms are often questioned, evaluated, and then rejected, with the goal of making space for the creation of egalitarian practices instead. Although these findings are not generalizable to the population of LGBTQ individuals as a whole, they *do* reveal the potential embedded in building relationships based on the expressed needs and desires of each partner rather than on the default expectations many continue to use to make meaning. At the same time, these findings demonstrate the challenges inherent in contesting norms and creating new ones. In their effort to reject heteronormative practices and write the scripts themselves, queer people struggle with the paradox that liberation can itself become a constraining norm, as the pressure to contest societal-level norms translates into a pressure to always be radical, a goal ironically at odds with radical individualism.

NOTES

1. I use *queer* to signify both non-heterosexual sexualities and a politicized identity premised on resistance to normalization.

2. I use *trans** as an umbrella term for those respondents who identified as trans men, trans women, trans, or on the trans spectrum.

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