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Queer Dilemmas of Desire

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Journal

Feminist Studies, 45(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2019-05-16

Peer reviewed

Queer Dilemmas of Desire
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The dilemmas of desire confronting young women in contemporary US society are all too familiar. In the face of the persistent double standard that separates sluts from good girls, young women mobilize a variety of strategies: they lack desire, deny desire, restrain desire, police desire, and sometimes embrace desire. They confront expectations to be sexy but not too sexual even as they insist on the right to be just as sexually active as men. Even in the hookup scene on college campuses, potentially liberating in its facilitation of noncommittal sexual encounters, young women worry about hooking up too much. It is a familiar story, but one that most often leaves behind young women with queer desires. Where they do appear, there are hints that they are not as likely to suppress their desires as straight women, no doubt because it is hard to ignore one's desires when they fly in the face of heteronormative expectations.

But it is also hard to come to grips with queer desires, and that is why the dilemmas I explore here are different. Unlike young straight women working to control their desires, the queer students whose stories I tell report awareness and acceptance of their attractions, sometimes from a very young age. Yet they encounter other kinds of dilemmas, especially uncertainty about the boundary between erotic love and intense friendship, a dilemma harking back to an earlier world of romantic friendship. And in the end, despite a contemporary social context in which nonnormative sexualities are

more visible than ever before, experiencing queer desires continues to elicit confusion. Much has changed, but much has not.

We know a great deal about straight dilemmas of desire. On the one hand, the double standard that separates sluts from good girls has persisted, despite the loosening of restrictions we associate with the sexual revolution of the long 1960s. In the face of slut shaming, young women continue to mobilize a variety of strategies, which Deborah Tolman has documented so eloquently in *Dilemmas of Desire*. Young women of color face additional obstacles to enjoying their desire, as the Latina girls we encounter in Lorena Garcia's *Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself* make clear through their policing of their own and other girls' sexuality in the face of racist stereotypes of unrestrained sexuality and teenage motherhood.¹

On the other hand, a whole raft of commentators depict young women increasingly insisting on the right to be just as sexual as men. From Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs* to Peggy Orenstein's *Girls and Sex* to Nancy Jo Sales' *American Girls*, critics lament young women embracing sex as a form of empowerment.² The tension arising from the contradictory responses of young women to the demands placed on their sexuality is nowhere clearer

¹ See Leora Tanenbaum, *Slut! Growing up Female with a Bad Reputation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000); Emily White, *Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and the Myth of the Slut* (New York: Berkeley Books, 2002); Sarah A. Miller, "'How You Bully a Girl': Sexual Drama and the Negotiation of Gendered Sexuality in High School," *Gender & Society* 30, no. 5 (2016): 721-44; Deborah L. Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Lorena Garcia, *Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself: Latina Girls and Sexual Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

² Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005). See also Peggy Orenstein, *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016); Nancy Jo Sales, *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016).

than in the ongoing debate about the impact of hookup culture on women. Is hooking up good for women because it allows them to be sexual while pursuing their studies and career goals unencumbered by intimate relationships, as Hannah Rosin has suggested? Or is it, as Kathleen Bogle first argued in *Hooking Up*, exploitative in fashioning sexual encounters around men's preference for sex without commitment? Or is it somewhere in between, with some women embracing the practice as enthusiastically as men but nevertheless encountering gendered obstacles, as Lisa Wade proposes in *American Hookup*?³ Whether young women guard against being labeled sluts or embrace slutty behavior, they must struggle with fitting their desires to the social expectations they encounter.

³ Hanna Rosin, *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012); Kathleen A. Bogle, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Lisa Wade, *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017).

The literature on hooking up, and the debate about its impact on young women, is growing at a rapid pace. See especially Rachel Allison and Barbara J. Risman, "A Double Standard for 'Hooking Up': How Far Have We Come toward Gender Equality?" *Social Science Research* 42 (2013): 1191-1206; Rachel Allison and Barbara J. Risman, "'It Goes Hand in Hand with the Parties': Race, Class, and Residence in College Student Negotiations of Hooking Up," *Sociological Perspectives* 57, no. 1 (2014): 102-23; Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton, *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Laura Hamilton, and Paula England, "Is Hooking Up Bad for Young Women?," *Contexts* 9, no. 3 (2010): 22-27; Laura Hamilton, "Trading on Heterosexuality: College Women's Gender Strategies and Homophobia," *Gender & Society* 21, no. 2 (2007): 145-72; Heather Littleton, Holly Tabernik, Erika J. Canales, and Tamika Backstrom, "Risky Situation or Harmless Fun?: A Qualitative Examination of College Women's Bad Hook-up and Rape Scripts," *Sex Roles* 60 (2009): 793-804; Julie A. Reid, Sinikka Elliott, and Gretchen R. Webber, "Casual Hookups to Formal Dates: Refining the Boundaries of the Sexual Double Standard," *Gender & Society* 25, no. 5 (2012): 545-68; Arielle Kuperberg and Joseph E. Padgett, "Partner Meeting Contexts and Risky Behavior in College Students' Other-Sex and Same-Sex Hookups," *The Journal of Sex Research* 54, no. 1 (2017): 55-72; Janelle M. Pham, "Beyond hookup culture: Current trends in the study of college student sex and where to next," *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 8 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12499>; Sarah A. Spell, "Not Just Black and White: How Race/Ethnicity and Gender Intersect in Hookup Culture," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 3, no. 2 (2017): 172-87; and Arielle Kuperberg and Alicia M. Walker, "Heterosexual College Students Who Hookup with Same-Sex Partners," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 47, no. 5 (2018): 1387-1403.

But young queer women encounter different challenges that have mostly flown under the radar.⁴ In order to understand how they negotiate their own complicated terrain, I use the stories of how queer college students at the University of California, Santa Barbara, first experienced same-sex attraction and desire in order to explore the dilemmas they encounter. I use “queer” as an umbrella term to describe a variety of nonheterosexual identities on the part of students assigned female at birth and identifying as women or as genderqueer.⁵ Before they even set foot on campus, nearly all of the queer students interviewed for this project had already experienced, acknowledged, and/or acted on their physical attraction to and longing for intimacy with other girls. Although colloquial phrases such as “Lesbian Until

⁴ Tolman briefly addresses the greater awareness of desire on the part of the few lesbian or bisexual girls she interviewed and the ways they could articulate the power of compulsory heterosexuality in *Dilemmas of Desire*; Orenstein has a chapter on queer girls in *Girls and Sex*. See also Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, “Straight Girls Kissing,” *Contexts* 9, no. 3 (2010): 28–32; Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, “Queer Girls on Campus: New Intimacies and Sexual Identities,” in *Intimacies: A New World of Relational Life*, ed. Alan Frank, Patricia T. Clough, and Steven Seidman (New York: Routledge, 2013), 82–97; Leila J. Rupp, Verta Taylor, Shiri Regev-Messalem, Alison C.K. Fogarty, and Paula England, “Queer Women in the Hookup Scene: Beyond the Closet?” *Gender & Society* 28, no. 2 (2014): 212–35; Jamie Budnick, “‘Straight Girls Kissing’? Understanding Same-Gender Sexuality beyond the Elite College Campus,” *Gender & Society* 30, no. 5 (2016): 745–68; Shaeleya D. Miller, Verta Taylor, and Leila J. Rupp, “Social Movements and the Construction of Queer Identity,” in *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research*, ed. Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 443–69; Leila J. Rupp, Verta Taylor, and Shaeleya D. Miller, “Learning to Be Queer: College Women’s Sexual Fluidity,” *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*, ed. Nancy L. Fischer and Steven Seidman (New York: Routledge, 2016), 195–206; Ellen Lamont, Teresa Roach, and Sope Kahn, “Navigating Campus Hookup Culture: LGBTQ Students and College Hookups,” *Sociological Forum* 33, no. 4 (2018): 1000–22; Rachel M. Schmitz and Kimberly A. Tyler, “LGBTQ+ Young Adults on the Street and on Campus: Identity as a Product of Social Context,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 65, no. 2 (2018): 197–223; and Janelle M. Pham, “Campus Sex in Context: Organizational Cultures and Women’s Engagement in Sexual Relationships on Two American College Campuses,” *Sociological Forum* 34, no. 1 (2019): 138–57.

⁵ The original call for interviewees went out to “lesbian, bisexual, or queer women students.” Some of the students interviewed identify as genderqueer or somewhere on the trans* spectrum.

Graduation” presume women become lesbians in college and leave the identity behind when they graduate, only a handful of students interviewed had no experience with same-sex sexuality before coming to campus.

Coming out is a complex process that generally begins with desire and, contrary to the linear schemes moving in lock-step through stages to accepting an identity and announcing it to others, occurs in a wide variety of ways.⁶ The messiness of the process is especially true for young women today, exposed to the concept of sexual fluidity and living in a society where diverse sexualities and genders are much more visible than in the past.⁷ The impact of research on new sexualities emerges clearly in the stories college students tell, making the campus an especially productive venue for exploring new intimacies and identities.

⁶ For a classic coming out model, see Vivienne C. Cass, “Homosexual Identity Formation: Testing a Theoretical Model,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 4, no. 3 (May 1984): 219–35. For a discussion of alternative models of coming out, see Susan B. Marine, *Stonewall’s Legacy: Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Students in Higher Education* (San Francisco, CA: Wiley Subscription Services, 2011), 35–58. Critics of a linear model include Lisa M. Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women’s Love and Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Kristin G. Esterberg, *Lesbian and Bisexual Identities: Constructing Communities, Constructing Selves* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997); Mignon R. Moore, *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Paula C. Rust, “‘Coming Out’ in the Age of Social Constructionism: Sexual Identity Formation among Lesbian and Bisexual Women,” *Gender & Society* 7, no. 1 (1993): 50–77; and Arlene Stein, *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also Mary Robertson, *Growing Up Queer: Kids and the Remaking of LGBTQ Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

⁷ On sexual fluidity, see Kath Albury, “Identity Plus? Bi-curiosity, Sexual Adventurism and the Boundaries of ‘Straight’ Sexual Practices and Identities,” *Sexualities* 18, no. 5-6 (2015): 649–664; María Victoria Carrera, Renée DePalma, and Maria Lameiras, “Sex/Gender Identity: Moving beyond Fixed and ‘Natural’ Categories,” *Sexualities* 15, no. 8 (2012): 995–1016; Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity*; and Breanne Fahs, “Compulsory Bisexuality? The Challenges of Modern Sexual Fluidity,” *Journal of Bisexuality* 9, nos. 3–4 (2009): 431–49. On visibility, see Suzanna Danuta Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); and Sue Jackson and Tamsyn Gilbertson, “‘Hot Lesbians’: Young People’s Talk about Representations of Lesbianism,” *Sexualities* 12, no. 2 (2009): 199–224.

I begin with the different pathways students take to experiencing and acknowledging queer desire, some familiar from previous generations and others perhaps new.⁸ For most students, something happened in middle school or high school to begin the process of rethinking sexual attraction and identity. When asked when they first experienced same-sex desire, students' answers ranged from kindergarten, or even before, to college. Whether they think of their attractions as entirely biological, the product of a balance of biological and social factors, or socially constructed, students point to a range of experiences that, at the time or on later reflection, mark the beginning of a realization or acknowledgement of their desires. By far the most common were falling in love with a friend or developing a crush on another girl or woman, but others included making out with another girl in the party scene, feeling masculine, and watching pornography. Often, as we shall see, several of these experiences combined in the stories of first attraction. Rather than denying or restraining their desire, queer students generally describe acknowledging their feelings. Yet what their desires might mean in their social worlds left many confused.

I began collecting stories from queer women as part of a class assignment and found myself so intrigued by students' interviews that I kept

⁸ Research that addresses pathways to queer desire and identities includes Esterberg, *Lesbian and Bisexual Identities*; Carla Golden, "What's in a Name?: Sexual Self-Identification among Women," in *The Lives of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals: Children to Adults*, ed. Ritch C. Savin-Williams and Kenneth M. Cohen (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 2006); Moore, *Invisible Families*; Elizabeth M. Morgan and Elisabeth Morgan Thompson, "Young Women's Sexual Experiences within Same-Sex Friendships: Discovering and Defining Bisexual and Bi-Curious Identity," *Journal of Bisexuality* 6, no. 3 (2006): 7-34; Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*; and Verta Taylor and Nancy E. Whittier, "Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

going. The University of California, Santa Barbara, struck me as a perfect location for a case study because the student body is diverse and the queer community visible and active. With just over twenty thousand students—about 85 percent undergraduates—over half are students of color, mostly Latinx and Asian American, and over 40 percent the first in their family to go to college. So although they are all college students, they came from a variety of racial/ethnic and class backgrounds. There is a large, visible, and diverse queer community on campus, revolving around numerous student organizations serving various constituencies. The Resource Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity flyer announces that the center provides a community space on campus for “self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, queer, questioning, two-spirit, same gender loving, as well as people with intersex conditions.” Student organizations include the Queer Student Union and Associated Students Queer Commission. Groups for different identities include Black QUARE; La Familia De Colores; Queer Asian Pacific Islanders (QAPI); and Keshet, the LGBTQ Jewish student group. More specialized groups include Friendly Undergraduate Queers in It Together (FUQIT); Kink University: A Fetish Fellowship (KUFF); and Students for Accessible and Safe Spaces (SASS). There is a residence hall for queer students, Rainbow House; gender-inclusive housing for trans* and genderqueer students; and an LGBTQ studies minor, housed in the Department of Feminist Studies. The university has a top ranking as queer-friendly on the “campus pride index.”⁹ Queer

⁹ <https://www.campusprideindex.org/searchresults/display/707516>, accessed 3/7/2019.

student activists are a diverse group in terms of gender identity, sexual identity, and race/ethnicity. As a progressive California research university with a party school reputation, UC Santa Barbara is by no means representative of all universities, but there is also no reason to think that it is unique in terms of the queer community on campus.¹⁰

I ultimately collected 120 interviews between 2006 and 2012, some by students in classes and the rest by undergraduate and graduate research assistants. Students in the course located their own interviewees, and research assistants mobilized their personal contacts and used snowball sampling to find queer students. I relied on student interviewers because the similarity in age and status facilitated rapport. In terms of race and ethnicity, the students interviewed are close to the current campus profile: 55 percent are students of color and 45 percent white (see Table 1). Sexual identities include bisexual, lesbian, queer, fluid/pansexual, gay, and uncertain or none (see Table 2). For both students of color and white students, the most common identities are queer, lesbian, and bisexual, although in a different order (see Table 3). While race/ethnicity and sexual identity played a significant role in shaping students' stories, no correlation between those factors and particular pathways or dilemmas emerged. The names I use here are pseudonyms.

¹⁰ Pham, "Campus Sex in Context."

I analyze these stories not as “real truth on sexual lives” but as “social actions embedded in social worlds,” in the mode of sociologist Ken Plummer.¹¹ Although Plummer shares with poststructuralism the commitment to looking beyond stories as truth, he rejects the concept of social reality as text. He insists that sexual stories are “socially produced in social contexts by embodied concrete people experiencing the thoughts and feelings of everyday life.”¹² That is, in this case the telling of stories of first awareness of same-sex desire is shaped by students’ social locations and by the larger economic, political, and social context in which they live. Stories of first same-sex desire do work for people: they make sense of how they came to experience desire, engage in sexual acts, and embrace particular identities. They are retrospective stories that situate students in their social worlds. As Alex, a white queer student from suburban Los Angeles who identified as a feminist in high school put it, “Once you actually do come out, or maybe it’s just when you’re a fem [feminist] studies major, but you start to think back a lot about your earlier experiences and what they might have meant.”

I begin with three stories of first coming to an awareness of attraction and desire to illustrate the complexity of individual experiences.

Kacy Knows Early

¹¹ Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995), 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, 16

Kacy is black, was born in Costa Rica in a middle-class family before moving to California, and identifies as gay. She describes herself as “masculine presenting,” wears men’s clothing, and says she is “still figuring out” her preferred gender, sometimes wondering if she is trans* and is comfortable with both female and male pronouns. When asked about her first experience of attraction to women, she replied, “Man, kindergarten.” She had her first kiss in third grade, remembering it as “kind of weird” because she didn’t know any “girls who like girls.” She connects her same-sex desire to her masculine presentation and interests as a child. “Liking girls has always been natural and liking boys not so much.” She also reveals, when asked about her first sexual experience, that she had been molested by a female baby sitter when she was just four. Her parents, devout Baptists, assumed she was gay because of that experience, much to Kacy’s chagrin. Her identity as queer feels natural, because she experienced attraction so early, but she also references wanting the kind of gendered power she witnessed her father exercising in her family.

She played basketball in high school, and despite the fact that “everybody on the basketball team was gay, really masculine black women,” she was not out to anyone because of her family’s religious beliefs. She spent time with her gay history teacher and her partner and still texts them on a regular basis, calling them “like my gay grandparents.” But she didn’t come out to anyone until college. On campus, she went through a series of

relationships and jokingly describes hooking up with curious straight women attracted to her masculinity as a “community service.”

Now she’s out in Santa Barbara but not back home. She was sure her mother knew, because she used to ask Kacy if she wished she were a boy and in middle school asked her if she was gay, “which, looking back, I wish I would have answered truthfully.” When she finally told her parents directly, her mother responded, “No you’re not. It’s because of—I feel like the college is influencing you to believe that stuff is OK ... No, it’s because of what happened when you were a kid.” Her father told her he loved her no matter what but this wasn’t God’s plan for her. But, she says, it could have been worse in that she knew her parents weren’t going to throw her out or cut her off financially: “So I definitely have it a lot better than a lot of people here but at the same time, I’m not me when I’m with them.”

Missy Kisses Girls

Missy, who grew up in a working-class community in California, is multiracial, with Mexican, Japanese, and white heritage, and she identifies as queer. Her parents, neither of whom finished high school, divorced when she was young, and her father was in and out of jail. She describes his occupation as a “bum.” All through high school she made out with girls, “but you’re drunk and it’s considered...everyone does it, it’s normal.” Even checking out other girls didn’t seem that different, since her friends did it as well: “And because I was a cheerleader, we were really affectionate with each other. Girls would,

like, pull each other's thongs, undo their bras, [have] sleepovers, people would end up making out with everyone when they started drinking." She didn't think anything of it. Friends would jokingly say, "'Oh, you're a lesbian, don't lie.' I was like, 'No, it's just fun.' Because I didn't know that made me gay." She didn't think she was "into girls," although "maybe senior year I had a couple of, like, desires to be with women."

Missy continued to make out with women once she arrived at college, wanting to "do other things" and figure out how that felt. She met someone she thought was "into girls" and they started off "really slow." Then she found out that this was new for both of them. She recounts, "Eventually we became, well, we were really, really close, and then I fell in love with her, so that's when I knew for sure that I was into women." They were in a relationship for a year and a half and had just recently broken up when she was interviewed. She likes both women and men but thinks the word "bisexual" is "not appealing."

Missy describes her first same-sex sexual experience beyond making out as having been in a threesome her first year of college. The guy "never did anything to me, we just made out," but the woman went down on her. But then she says, "I wouldn't even count that," making her first time in her mind as "when I really cared for the person and we both wanted to do it." She and her girlfriend lived in the same dorm, slept in each other's rooms, and held hands, so the students they lived with pretty much figured out that they were in a relationship. She never directly told them anything. Now she

is out on Facebook but has not told her best friend from high school, who once said she could not accept having a gay child and voted for Proposition 8, the anti-same-sex marriage legislation in California, even though the friend made out with girls in high school, including Missy.

Phoenix's Afternoon Delight

Phoenix is white, grew up in a wealthy California community, and identifies as fluid. At first she says her initial same-sex attraction was in seventh grade, but then she backtracks to say she had her “first girl kiss” in second grade. It was with her best friend. They were inseparable, and “I guess you could say I was totally into her.” She tells the story of that first kiss, still totally vivid in her memory:

She was over one day and we were drawing pictures and we started drawing pictures of naked women. And, you know, neither of us really knew why but we were and we were giggling about it. And we heard someone coming down the hall so we shoved all the papers under my bed and, and then later we were sitting on the bed and we were just laying there, looking out the window and we weren't talking or anything, we were just very quiet. And I, I turned and I look at her and I'm like, “I don't know why but I kinda feel like kissing you right now.” And she just kinda blushed and, like, lay there and...then I, like, leaned over and just pecked her really quick. And we just started smiling and it was, like [laughing] really romantic.

Phoenix still keeps in touch with this friend but doesn't know if she is queer, since she has a boyfriend. But "just based on how she was when I knew her, I'd say there is totally a chance."

In seventh grade, Phoenix says, she discovered pornography. Later she adds that it was the first-kiss friend who, when they were in third grade, showed her a "dirty magazine" and ads for porn sites on the computer, setting her on the path. She worked her way through Googling "boobs" to watching porn by the seventh grade. She was scared to watch straight porn "because I was, like, scared of penises and I didn't wanna look at them," so she turned to girl-on-girl. About a month into this new viewing habit, she had "a minor panic attack," wondering if this meant she was a lesbian, since "I just sort of always assumed that I was straight." After that, she says "it was sort of always in the back of my mind, 'I guess I like girls.'" Much later she remembered that first kiss "as something that, you know, might have been the early sign of my sexuality."

As Phoenix was coming to grips with her sexual feelings, she did it without talking to anyone, because she was shy and didn't have close friends and didn't feel attracted to anyone she knew. That changed when she developed a crush on a senior girl her sophomore year in high school. She describes her feelings as subconscious: "I never really came to terms with the fact that 'Yes, I have a crush on this girl.' It was more, like, under the surface until one night I kissed her." A kiss again. What happened is the

friend would drive her home from color guard practice and they would sit in the back seat and talk for hours. One night the friend was upset and crying and saying that no one cared about her. Phoenix insisted that she did, and then she kissed her, saying “Do you believe me now?” They kept kissing. A few months later, when the friend returned from a summer away, they had sex for the first time. She remembers, “God, that was a trip. Like, just being completely naked in front of someone for the first time. And being really fuckin’ turned on...the intense openness and intimacy. It was really overpowering.” She also notes how weird it was to be “making love in a room full of childhood memorabilia.” They were in a relationship for two-and-a-half years.

At the very end of the interview, Phoenix told the story of her first girlfriend’s first orgasm. They were in her bedroom in the afternoon—“I guess I’m an afternoon delight kind of person”—and they finally got it right. “I just remember thinking in that moment, this is the most beautiful thing that I’ve ever experienced. The most beautiful thing I have ever shared with someone else. And this was the most right I have felt, ever.” She sighs. “And I think for some people their sexuality is something that they’re ashamed of or something they feel like they have to hide.... When I get to express my sexuality is when I feel the most like myself.”

No three stories, of course, can do justice to the range of pathways that young women take to queer desires and identities, but Kacy’s, Missy’s,

and Phoenix's point to some of the connections students make and some of the dilemmas that confront them.

Falling in Love with a Friend

Falling in love with a friend, whether acknowledged at the time or not, is the most typical pathway into acknowledging queer desire. More than half of the students in this study describe this as the way they came to think of themselves as queer. Margaret, a white bisexual who grew up in a small town in California's Inland Empire, describes falling in love with her best friend. "I know that happens a lot," she says, adding, "It's a cliché." Bisexual Kara, born in Hong Kong, also says of falling in love with her best friend in middle school, "It was really cliché." Aldara, a Greek American queer student who grew up in a conservative city north of San Francisco with a military base and big Mormon population, tells a pretty typical story: "I had all of these crushes in elementary school, and I also just thought that I wanted to be friends with all these girls, but it was definitely more than that." Given the traditional importance of friends and "best friends" for girls and the acceptability of physical affection between girls, not to mention the historical precedent of romantic friendships between women, the move from friendship

to lover is not surprising.¹³ What is critical for the stories students tell is the move across an unclear boundary between loving friendship and erotic love.

Some students fell in love with their friends without thinking that their feelings had consequences for their sexuality. Mary, a white student, describes herself as “a really gay three-year-old” who fell in love with her best friend and “didn’t know what it meant.” Shae, a queer Korean American, had a best friend in sixth grade who lived next door in Orange County, with whom she “spent just every single waking moment together.” Shae didn’t think anything of it then because she thought everyone felt that way.

Madison, who identifies as bisexual and grew up in Taiwan and then moved to Orange County, suddenly realized she had the same feelings for her best friend as for her boyfriend. Emilia, a queer Latina, attended a Catholic girls’ school that she describes as very queer-friendly and dates her first “girl crush” to her freshman year in high school, but adds “and I think after that happened I realized I had them before.” From that perspective, she remembers that when she was a little girl, she had a best friend and “we would kiss all the time.” Danny, a Filipina student at a very white and heavily Catholic high school where she was bullied, had a crush on her best friend in eighth grade and didn’t know what to make of it. She knew about gay male

¹³ The literature on romantic friendship includes Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 1 (1975): 1-29; Leila J. Rupp, “‘Imagine My Surprise:’ Women’s Relationships in Historical Perspective,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 5, no. 3 (1980): 61-70; Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendships and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998); Karen V. Hansen, “‘No Kisses Is Like Youres’: An Erotic Friendship between Two African-American Women during the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Gender & History* 7, no. 2 (1995): 153-82; and Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

sexuality because she read Yaoi, Japanese gay porn comics, but she didn't know that "girls could get together with girls back then." For all these students, the traditional closeness of girls' friendships helped to obscure the nature of their feelings.

Other students describe recognizing the consequences of their attractions. Molly, a white student from Orange County, went on a camping trip her first year in high school and realized that she "had feelings" for one of her friends. She "freaked out" and thought, "I can't be a lesbian," but after coming to UC Santa Barbara, she embraced the identity. Carey, from an affluent Jewish family, lived in a northern California town where the high school was, she says, very safe. She had a really close friend from elementary school on. "I remember in middle school when we would hang out, I would ask her if we could make out. I realized I was attracted to her and she'd be, like, 'No that's disgusting,'" even though the friend masturbated to lesbian pornography. Students such as Molly and Carey knew that their feelings went beyond friendship.

For the relatively few women who became aware of attraction to other women after coming to campus, too, falling in love with a friend was a major pathway. Sally, a white bisexual who identified as straight when she arrived on campus, describes meeting women her freshman year and thinking how much she wanted to be friends with them. "I'd never even considered liking girls before," but looking back, "I think I had crushes on them." She eventually became lovers with a really close friend, starting out by going to

parties, drinking, kissing, and spending the night in bed together. Cassidy, a white student who is attracted to both women and men but prefers the term “queer” to “bisexual,” tells a story of getting really close to another friend who came out as bisexual: “I really liked hanging out with her” and “it was just one thing after another after another where it’s definitely building up a case that I am not straight” (she laughs). They went on a retreat with the Campus Democrats where they shared a hotel room and decided to sleep in the same bed. They cuddled in bed, they walked down the street holding hands, and “even then I’m so dense I was just like, didn’t even process, you know, straight people don’t do this.” But it wasn’t until Pride Week in the spring “where I really, like, just put, like, a name to what I was feeling.” Laughing again, she says, “It was just like I had to be beat over the head with rainbow balloons...to finally get it.” She named herself bisexual and wondered, “How did I not know this?” The love and attraction that are central to women’s friendships can make it hard to see when something more is going on.

Especially for girls who started to fall in love with their friends early, friendships could become very awkward, and this is one of the queer dilemmas of desire. Emily, a biracial (African American/white) lesbian, says that, growing up, “I never got too close to other girls because my feelings for them were too intense.” Renee, also biracial (Mexican/white) and identifying as queer, grew up in a tough working-class city where she hung around with gang members. She found it difficult around other girls. “I don’t know how to

explain it.... Because it's, like, really weird when girls are all touchy, you know what I mean? It's, like all these socialized things, like girls will braid each other's hair and do all these gentle things. That, you know, like if a boy and a girl did it is, like, 'Ooh, they like you?' but it's like if a girl does it, I'm just, like, OK." For these students, their attractions could keep them from the traditional closeness of women's friendships.

If students did feel "something more" for girls, they had to deal with potentially negative reactions from their friends. Shauna, a lesbian who grew up in a very religious biracial (African American/white) Baptist family, was fifteen or sixteen when she started realizing that "maybe the attachment and jealousy I felt about my best friends was something more." One day she asked them if they thought they might ever like girls and they all said no. She recalls, "And I was, like, 'Oh yeah, me neither.' And that was the way I sort of dealt with that. I was very into my religion and I didn't think that was what God wanted for me." After Alyssa, a lesbian born in Russia but raised in California, acknowledged her same-sex attraction, she "got a little more paranoid about being friends with girls, because if they knew about me, then they would think that I was sexually attracted to them all the time." Her undergraduate interviewer interjects sarcastically, "Of course. You want every single girl. You know that one." Dro, a black student who identifies as pansexual, was outed by a friend of her girlfriend, which upset her because "in high school, if you're gay, like, people *always* think you're attracted to them." Victoria, a white lesbian from an affluent family, had a hard time after

she recognized her attraction to other girls: “The part that it took me so long to reconcile was the fact that I loved my two best friends that were girls—not sexually, but we had and still have an amazingly close relationship—and it takes a lot of trust to tell someone you shared a bed with, people that you tell you love them on a daily basis that in fact you actually love women. I was so afraid that it would be awkward where they would be weirded out, or uncomfortable, or that our relationship would change.” Victoria was lucky, explaining, “Fortunately everyone I have told has been great about it.” Whether or not students encounter negative reactions from their friends, the fear can linger.

Students themselves didn’t always know if what they wanted was friendship or “something more.” Growing up in a suburban, white, middle-class family, Alex says that coming out as queer made her question all of her friendships growing up: “It’s, like, an iffy question whether or not you wanted to get so close to them ‘cause you wanted to be friends with them or because it was something more.” Margaret, a white student who identifies as bisexual, would get really big crushes in high school: “I just thought I really, really want to become friends with them but I actually want to become more than friends with them.” April, from a very traditional Vietnamese American family and identifying as queer, tells of her feelings in middle school for “this really, really gorgeous girl.” She “found myself wanting to be her best friend.... I didn’t know why, I thought it was just normal. Like you want to be friends with the prettiest girl in school.” Not until she developed a crush on

someone she thought was a boy but turned out to be a girl did she begin to question her sexuality. She corrects herself: “Actually, I knew I was attracted to girls, I just didn’t know there was anything wrong about it, until like my parents started telling me that it was wrong.” Not knowing what one’s feelings mean can be confusing.

The shift in relationship from best friends to lovers was not always acknowledged, at least verbally. Some students never even knew if the friends they loved shared their feelings. Mai, a Vietnamese American who identifies as bisexual, fell in love with her best friend in high school. They spent all their time together, were physically very intimate, said, “I love you,” and stared into each other’s eyes. But they had boyfriends and never “officially dated” each other. It is clear in Mai’s telling that she felt deeply in love, but she was never sure if her friend felt the same way or if to her it was simply an intense friendship. In the case of Ella, a white lesbian who had a crush on a girl when she was sixteen or seventeen, it was her friend who wanted more: “I’d go over to her house and we’d like make out and have sleep overs and do all that.” In retrospect, she calls it both “experimenting” and “pretty much, like, a friends-with-benefits kinda thing.” Then Ella went out on a date with a boy, and when her friend found out “she started spewing out all this stuff about how she loved me and that I cheated on her and like I was completely lost.” Leaving a relationship undefined could leave both parties unsure about what was going on, another queer dilemma of desire.

A number of students talk about falling in love and even having sex and then acting as if nothing had happened. At fourteen, Shannon, a lesbian who grew up in an Irish and very Catholic family, fell in love with her best friend: "I didn't know that I was falling in love with her, I just knew that, like, I had this constant need to like be around her and this extreme need to like sit close to her whenever I could." During their sophomore year, Shannon "started to realize it was like super sexual too." So they progressed to "best friend sleepovers. Which turned into a whole lot more than sleepovers." She adds, "It's so weird to think back at it. Like to think that we would like hookup all the time and then pretend like nothing was happening. And I went through two different boyfriends while we were like in love and hooking up." Still they didn't talk about it. Lynne, a white bisexual, tells a similar story. "We were really close friends and we just kept getting closer and closer sharing more of ourselves until we couldn't stop telling each other how much we loved the other." Lynne used to stay at her friend's house and sleep in the same bed, and "eventually we started kissing, which led to other things. We didn't talk about it for a while, though, in the morning it was like nothing happened." They did eventually acknowledge their relationship and move in together in college.

For Hannah, an Asian American lesbian who grew up as a military brat and lived all over the country, "alcohol was involved" in this kind of pretending that nothing happened. She fell in love with her best friend her junior year of high school and explains, "You know, 'Blame It on the Alcohol?'

That was our theme song.” They were “really, really close best friends, and then it just turned into something a lot deeper,” but they never talked about it. They texted each other night and day but never acknowledged that they were in a relationship and having sex, even though “the way we talked to each other was not the way best friends talk to each other.” She explains: “Like, ‘I love you.’... Like ‘you’re the person who knows me in and out the most.’ Like ‘I wanna, wanna spend the rest of my life with you.’ Like ‘I wanna be, I wanna be those little old ladies that we saw at McDonalds in fifty years from now eating, eating the same exact ice cream that we did when we were, whatever, like seventeen.’” Leaving such intense feelings unacknowledged has a cost.

Falling in love or developing a crush on a friend is an age-old story and remains a dominant pathway into experiencing and acknowledging same-sex desire, albeit one filled with queer dilemmas of desire. The social acceptability of girls’ intense friendships can pave the way to erotic attraction even as it opens the door to awkwardness and worry that friends will read attraction where there is none. And the slide from friendship to erotic love and sex can be unsettling, creating the conditions in which what is not named may not exist.

Making Out with Girls

As we see in Missy’s story, kissing other girls sometimes preceded any acknowledgement of same-sex desire. Of course not all girls who kiss girls

are or become queer, so normative has the practice become, but it can be a pathway to queer desire.¹⁴ Sometimes the kissing begins as “practice” for kissing boys. Tee, from a biracial (Taiwanese/white) family and now identifying as queer and genderqueer, claims to have been “the best at practicing” kissing at church camp in middle school. Kelsey, a white student who grew up in a small agricultural town in California, started kissing girls when she was eleven, two years before she came to think of herself as bisexual. Laughing, she says, “I was that best friend that wanted to ‘practice.’ I liked it, I wanted to keep doing it. Didn’t know why my friends didn’t want to.” She laughs again. During her freshman year of high school, one of her friends announced that she was bisexual. Kelsey asked what that was, and the friend told her, “‘That’s when you kiss girls and guys.’ And I was, like, ‘Wait, I’ve been doing that since I was a little kid!’ Since I was, like, ten, like kissing my friends.... ‘Hey, let’s practice kissing.’” Now she is out as a lesbian.

Those who enjoyed “practicing” took advantage of the assumption that they were in training for kissing boys, much as the phenomenon of women kissing other women in the party scene is legitimized by men’s presumed pleasure in watching. Jasmine, a queer Korean American student, kissed her best friend at a party and thought it “was pretty cool.” She explains that it

¹⁴ Lisa Diamond, “‘I’m Straight, But I Kissed a Girl’: The Trouble with American Media Representations of Female-Female Sexuality,” *Feminism and Psychology* 15 (2005):104-10; Nicolas A. Guittar, “At First I Just Said ‘I Like Girls’: Coming Out with Affinity, Not an Identity,” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 11, no. 4 (2014): 388-407; Rupp and Taylor, “Straight Girls Kissing”; M. R. Yost and L. McCarthy, “Girls Gone Wild? Heterosexual Women’s Same-Sex Encounters at College Parties,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2012): 7-24; Budnick, “‘Straight Girls Kissing?’”.

wasn't for male attention: "I wanted to kiss her so I did." A white pansexual student, Lea, had a boyfriend who thought she might be bisexual or a lesbian and encouraged her to experiment sexually, so her first year in college she made out with girls, including her boyfriend's younger brother's ex-girlfriend. The acceptability of the practice of kissing other women in public allows queer women to experiment or act on their desires.

Given the social acceptability of making out at parties, students sometimes admit to being irked when they feel used to garner male attention. Brittany, a white bisexual student, remembers how all the girls held hands in elementary school and how much she liked it. By high school, handholding had moved to making out with girls. She recounted, "But they were mostly just for show and I'd get really pissed off. I'd be, like, 'Well, I actually like it, you're just doing it for all the boys.'" At fourteen, Todi, a white lesbian who went to a progressive high school in the San Fernando Valley, fell in love with her best friend: "I was really into her. And she got really drunk one night and she started making out with me. And I totally thought I was dreaming. Like I literally pinched myself several times to see if it was actually happening." As we have already seen happens with some regularity, the friend pretended nothing happened, and then "nothing happened" again.

Drinking came up often as a way to facilitate making out with other women either to experiment or to act on feelings in a socially acceptable way, as we see in the case of Missy. The hookup scene provides plenty of

opportunities. Dana, a white queer and trans*-identified student from New York, says that attraction to girls “was probably in the back of my mind growing up but the first time I came to terms or like experienced it was in college, drinking.” Laughing in reference to Katy Perry’s famous song, Dana adds, “I kissed a girl and I liked it.” Alyssa, the Russian-born lesbian who worried about her high school friends thinking she was sexually attracted to them, went to a party at one of the coop houses on campus known for being queer-friendly during the spring of her first year. She didn’t drink but the friend she went with got really drunk and wanted to kiss her. “And I, like, freaked out and kinda stood there looking like I was having an anxiety attack because I like wanted to and I didn’t know what was happening.” Isabel, a queer Latina who identified as straight in high school, describes her relationship with a good friend in college becoming “more than friendly.” When they partied, “She would always push me to kiss her and I never agreed. I was scared to. One day she got me drunk enough to agree and I did. So that turned into, OK, when were drunk we’ll make out, and soon enough we realized, OK, we’re not drunk and we’re making out. So we started a bit of a relationship and I never looked back thereafter. Well I took a couple glances to be sure.”

Zo, a Mexican American lesbian, identified as an ally in her Los Angeles area high school and says she thought about pretty girls in middle school and high school but her family’s Catholicism kept her from acting on her desires: “It wasn’t until college until I kissed another girl and I guess I liked it.

What do I mean I guess? I loved it!” Contrary to so many of the students who engaged in same-sex encounters before they arrived on campus, Zo says, “The rumors about college is true. I really did feel more comfortable expressing myself once I got here.... nights out in IV [Isla Vista, the student community adjacent to campus] were an opportunity to explore that feeling some more.” She giggles.

Both kissing other girls as practice for the presumed heterosexual “real thing” and making out with women in the party scene provide opportunities to try out same-sex physical intimacy. Students with queer desires seize the opportunity provided by the social acceptability of kissing other girls. Yet, as in loving best friend relationships, there remains uncertainty about what the intimacy means to one’s partner. In the hookup scene, drinking paves the way to less inhibited behavior, but also to less clarity about what is really going on. That is another queer dilemma of desire.

Feeling Masculine

As in Kacy’s case, some students bring up gender nonconformity to explain their sexuality. “Ever since I was a kid I’ve always been more masculine,” Kacy says, “I never ever liked Barbies.” Suggesting that her masculinity was socially constructed as well as innate, she adds, “In a way, I think I became more masculine when my brother was born, because I saw, I don’t know, I saw how much freedom he had being a boy and I just wanted to be outside with him.” Hannah, the Asian American military brat whose theme song was

“Blame It on the Alcohol,” was a “huge tomboy.” But she also explains her sexuality as potentially, at least in part, a result of her dislike of men based on her father’s behavior as “a beater and a cheater.” Dro, the black pansexual student, describes being a tomboy and in eighth grade kissing a girl and liking it. Although she doesn’t elaborate, she adds, “I think my relationships with men in my family like kinda turned me off to guys.” While Kacy emphasizes the freedoms of men, Hannah and Dro connect attraction to girls to dislike of men’s behavior.

Lea, whose boyfriend encouraged her to experiment sexually, also sees her sexuality as tied to gender: “Like I feel if I wasn’t such a tomboy growing up, then I probably wouldn’t have the same sort of attractions that I do.” Vanessa, a white lesbian who grew up in an area she calls “a rural desert full of Republicans,” answers the question about realizing same-sex attraction by saying, “I hated Barbies. Hated Barbies.” (It’s amazing how often Barbies came up in the interviews.) “And, like, I hated girl things. I always wanted to play with my brother’s action figures. And I always wanted to be a father. I think that’s when I realized. I always wanted to be a father, not a mother.... And then I started imagining myself in a tuxedo when I got married kind of thing.” Laughing, she adds, “So yeah, it kind of clued me in.” Joelle, a multiracial (African American/Native American/white) lesbian talks about dressing in baggy jeans and oversized T-shirts in eighth grade, “I’d discovered that I really like guys’ style.” When other girls were checking out boys at the basketball courts, “they were just like ‘Oh, he’s so fine, and oh,

look at his muscles, oh, look at his outfit,' I was just like 'damn, I need the outfit, I need those muscles, how come I can't do that?'"

As these stories suggest, being a tomboy comes up often in students' stories about their same-sex desires. In first grade, Amanda, a white lesbian, saw "this one little blonde girl" and thought she was really cute, adding, "I've always been a tomboy," always hung out with boys, and she didn't have any girlfriends except on her softball team. "And I grew up from a tomboy to a little gay boy," she laughs, "so yeah." Clara, a Mexican American student who identifies as fluid, also answers the question of attraction in terms of gender. She explains that she was "always a tomboy," and her mother dressed her the same way she dressed Clara's brothers, "which was fine by me." In seventh grade she had a best friend who dressed "straight up like a little boy," so that people mistook her for a boy. Clara really liked her, but "it was weird, because it took her being attracted to another girl, and me getting jealous to realize I was actually attracted to her." Om, a white queer student who now identifies also as genderqueer, tells of throwing tantrums over having to wear a dress and being mistaken for a boy all through childhood. Mary, the "really gay three-year old," thinks being a tomboy has everything to do with her sexuality: "As soon as I could speak I commanded that all of my hair be cut off and that I be allowed to—I mean I was like three and asking for my mom to let me wear those like three-piece suits that you, like, see for little boys in the like fancy section at Macy's."

There is, of course, no necessary connection between female masculinity and same-sex desire, as feminine queer students are quick to point out. But because of the longstanding societal association of gender nonconformity and sexuality, for some women feeling masculine clued them into their attraction to girls. Although being a tomboy is far more acceptable for girls than being feminine is for boys, being too masculine or masculine for too long can raise suspicions about women's sexual identities. Abigail, a white queer student who went to Catholic school in Sacramento, "brushed off" her attraction to girls because "growing up I was always, like, really a tomboy so people always spread rumors that I was a lesbian and I was super defensive about it." The line between acceptable tomboyishness and queer gender nonconformity is an uncertain one that can create confusion about one's identity. This, too, is a queer dilemma of desire and one that, like the blurry line between friendship and erotic attraction, has a long history.

Watching Pornography

Phoenix is not the only student who references pornography as part of her first experience of same-sex desire. She describes watching lesbian porn in middle school and thinking, "Oh my god, am I a lesbian?" Gabriella, who was president of both the Black Student Union and the Gay Straight Alliance in high school, was seven when a girlfriend invited her over to watch what she called "the nasty channels," and she recalls that experience in thinking about her first awareness of her sexuality. Joelle, the multiracial tomboy who

says she “found out” she was gay in middle school, got in trouble for bringing a photo from *Playboy* to school in second grade. She was attracted to the model’s breasts and noticed that her friends were interested only in how their own bodies would look when they were grown up. Jenny, a white bisexual, developed a crush on a senior when she was a freshman in high school and then realized “it wasn’t ‘normal’ for me to be looking at other girls in the locker room or secretly watching lesbian porn on cable.” A biracial (Korean/white) bisexual student, Jane, who attended a school she describes as religiously and racially diverse, talks about secretly watching adult films on television one summer. One night an ad for *Girls Gone Wild* came on, and she couldn’t look away and was “drawn to this” and was “getting turned on” but also had “so many weird emotions” because she was also thinking “they’re gross and they’re whores.” She concludes, “It’s just really the most awkward way you could really come out or, like, start to come out to yourself.” In contrast, Carey, whose friend wouldn’t make out with her because it was “disgusting,” introduced her to lesbian porn and was reassured by the films that lesbian sex “seems to be normal or accepted in some way.” The increased access to pornography on cable television and the Internet plays a role in some students’ stories of coming to awareness of their desires.

Kayla, a white student who identifies as fluid or bisexual, created her own style of do-it-yourself porn with her Barbies when she was little: “When I made my Barbies have sex with each other, like it would be chick on chick

sometimes.” Her undergraduate interviewer chimes in to say her Barbies and Kens were always having gay sex, prompting Kayla to say she is glad she isn’t the only one who did “weird pornographic things” with her Barbies. Like Danny, who knew about gay male sexuality from reading Yaoi, Elizabeth, a white student who went to a bilingual Japanese immersion school since kindergarten, learned about kinky sex from Yaoi. Her best friend in ninth grade introduced her to the genre. And to what she describes as “the wonderful, wonderful world of porn in general.... I found out ‘the Internet’s for porn, the Internet’s for porn, why’d you think the ‘net was born? Porn, porn, porn’ [paraphrasing the lyrics to a song from the musical “Avenue Q”].” She says of bondage porn, “I was, like, ‘I don’t know what’s going on, but I like it.’” When she arrived at the university, she found KUFF, the kink group, which she calls “awesome,” and she now identifies as bisexual.

The ease of access to pornography has no doubt made this a more common pathway into queer desire. Young people in general are learning about sex from Internet pornography, making it a new form of sex education.¹⁵ Students might specifically pursue girl-on-girl porn or come across it by accident. In either case, it can lead to an awareness and acknowledgement of same-sex attraction. At the same time, coming to same-sex desire through pornography, Elizabeth’s experience aside, can create anxiety about what it means to be aroused by queer pornographic

¹⁵ Jason S. Carroll et al., “Generation XXX: Pornography Acceptance and Use Among Emerging Adults,” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 23, no. 1 (2008): 6–30; Orenstein, *Girls and Sex*; Sales, *American Girls*; Janis Wolak, Kimberly Mitchell, and David Finkelhor, “Unwanted and Wanted Exposure to Online Pornography in a National Sample of Youth Internet Users,” *Pediatrics* 119, no. 2 (2007): 247–57.

images. Although some students feel relief in thinking that queer desire is normal, others encounter responses of friends that such images are “disgusting” or experience uncomfortable mixed feelings of attraction and repulsion. That is the dilemma of pornography as a pathway to queer sexual awareness.

At the Heart of Queer Dilemmas of Desire

Surprisingly, students had relatively little to say about the ways that the greater visibility of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer people in US society influenced their awareness of same-sex desire. Perhaps it is not surprising since they take that visibility for granted. But access to representations of queerness, including on the Internet and through social media, is a big difference in the social worlds of twenty-first-century students.¹⁶ So is the fact that many of the students met or knew queer people before they experienced their own desires.

What *is* striking is that, despite greater queer visibility and the existence of gay-straight alliances in at least some high schools, a surprisingly familiar refrain rings out from students’ descriptions of coming to grips with their attractions and desires. Over and over, they talk about having been confused. Jamie, a pansexual student who claims no racial/ethnic identity, fell for a girlfriend in sixth grade and says, “I kind of felt more confused about it.... I was a little confused.” Adrianna, a Latina who

¹⁶ Jackson and Gilbertson, “Hot Lesbians”; Sarah C. Gomillion and Traci A. Giuliano, “The Influence of Media Role Models on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 58, no. 3 (2011): 330–54; Walters, *All the Rage*.

rejects sexual identity labels, was attracted to girls in high school but “didn’t think it was anything that would stick. I thought it was a phase.” She was “confused, I guess.” Chloe, a bisexual who identifies as white but has a Filipina mother, uses the same language to describe her feelings for a girl: “I just, like, was so confused with why I may be feeling this way.” Alex, the feminist studies major who identified as a feminist in high school, too, says, “I was just confused. Really confused!” Emma, a biracial (Mexican/white) bisexual student, developed a crush on the setter on her volleyball team in high school. As she describes it, “she kept touching me and then I wanted to be around her, but I was really confused. I can’t think of any other feeling that captures it more than ‘confused,’ really.” Amber, a Latina unsure about her sexual identity, had a crush on a girl in fourth grade and says, “I was confused.” Asked if she realized it was a crush, she says she did, adding, “Wait, it was nothing sexual. But it was attraction, I know.”

As these comments make clear, most students didn’t articulate why they were confused, but the implication is that the difference between their attractions and the heteronormative expectations to which they are exposed resulted in confusion. A few students had more to say about their reactions. Brittany, who developed crushes on girls in elementary school but also was attracted to boys, knew what it meant to be gay but not what it meant to like girls and boys both. That’s what troubled her: “I, like, I was really, really confused.... Yeah, I was really confused for a long time.” Sara, who talks about how difficult it is to be a queer Chicana because of the expectation

that women are not supposed to be sexual, worried about the reactions of others. She started gushing to her best friend in high school about how pretty another girl was and then got nervous: “And so I said, ‘But not in a gay way.’ You know, that whole—it was kinda that whole ‘no homo’ kinda thing, and I just—I *hate* that now.... And then I just thought about it. She was my best friend and maybe I should just tell her what I’m feeling right now and that I’m confused.” Mercedes, growing up in a working-class Latino community, realized she was in a lesbian relationship in high school for two years only when someone asked her if she was a lesbian. She explains, “I don’t think about things a lot and so, and so it was, in a way I was, my answer is just, like, ‘I guess.’... You know, ‘cause I’m really confused.” And some of the girls who had sex but “didn’t talk about it” also suffered from confusion. Shannon, from the Irish Catholic family, had sex for the first time with her high school girlfriend. They had a sleepover and both woke up in the middle of the night and “realized that we were like hardcore cuddling each other, and like cuddling is being a little G rated about it.... And then all of a sudden it turned into sex and we fell back asleep after it and woke up the next morning and it was just super awkward. And I was so confused.” She wondered if she had been dreaming. They started doing this a lot and not talking about it. She decided not to think about it because she was so confused: “Yeah, there’s really no other word than ‘confused’ to explain that.”

This confusion, then, is at the heart of queer dilemmas of desire. How to explain that so much has changed, in terms of the social context for coming to awareness of same-sex attraction and desire, and yet queer students still tell stories of having been so confused, even though in so many ways they do not struggle with the same kind of dilemmas of desire that plague young straight women? Students developing queer desires do not speak—at least in retrospect—about worrying that their desires are too strong or will get them in trouble. They do not, for the most part, have to confront the gendered power imbalance in their relationships that is so typical for young heterosexual women. This freedom releases queer women from the dilemmas of desire that are grounded in the sexual double standard and the fear of crossing the line between good girl and slut.

At the same time, the stories of confusion reveal that there are other dilemmas of desire at work here. The unstable boundaries between friendship and erotic love, the unclear meaning of socially acceptable physical intimacies in the party scene, the wavering line between tomboy and queer or trans*, the mixed reactions to pornographic images—all of this has the potential, in the face of heteronormativity, to create confusion for queer students coming to an awareness of their same-sex desires. In listening to them make sense of how they came to their queer desires and describe what that process meant to them, we can learn a great deal about their diverse and changing social worlds.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the students who contributed their stories to this project and the undergraduate and graduate student interviewers, including Gloria Schindler, Okairy Lomeli, Brittni Tanenbaum, Carlene Wasserman, Sinead Kennedy, Carly Thomsen, Shannon Weber, Sandibel Borges, Robert Rodriguez, Isabella Restrepo, and, especially, Shae Miller. I am also grateful for earlier collaborations with Paula England, Shae Miller, and Verta Taylor, whose thinking about other parts of this project are reflected here.

Table 1: Race/Ethnicity of Interviewees

| Race/Ethnicity | Percent of total |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| White (n=54) | 45% |
| Latina (n=25) | 21% |
| Asian American (n=18) | 15% |
| Bi/Multiracial (n=16) | 13% |
| African American (n=5) | 4% |
| Middle Eastern (n=1) | 1% |
| None claimed (n=1) | 1% |

Table 2: Sexual Identities of Interviewees

| Sexual identity | Percent of total |
|---|-------------------------|
| Bisexual (n=32) | 27% |
| Lesbian (n=31) | 26% |
| Queer (n=26) | 22% |
| Fluid, Pansexual (n=17) | 14% |
| Gay (n=9) | 7% |
| one, not straight, uncertain (n=5) | 4% |

Table 3: Sexual identity by Race/Ethnicity

| Race/ Ethnicity | Bisexual | Lesbian | Queer | Fluid/ Pansexual | Gay | None, Unsure, Not Straight |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Students of color (n=65) | 21% n=14 | 23% n=15 | 25% n=16 | 14% n=9 | 9% n=6 | 8% n=5 |

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------|
| White (n=54) | 33% n=18 | 30% n=16 | 20% n=11 | 13% n=7 | 4% n=2 | 0 |
|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------|