Cruising Temporality:
Gay Dating Apps and Cultures of Usage

A Division III Project

by William Franzosa
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments 5

Abstract 7

Introduction 9

Setting the Stage 9

Outlining the Past, Present, and Future 13

## Chapter I – Nostalgia, Novelty, and Ghosts in the Machine

Situating Technology, Seeing Ghosts 19

A Lineage of Gay Space 21

Diagnosing the Past and Present 25

## Chapter II – Visibility and the Complexities of Being Seen

Locating the Now 31

Being Seen, Being Known 34

Safe for Whom, Risky for Whom? 39

## Chapter III – Looking Forward: The Virtual, the “Real,” and the Future

Defining the Virtual 45

Power in the Profile 47

Virtual Speculations: What Happens IRL? 51

Conclusion 55

Appendix 61

Interview Guide 61

Works Cited and Further Reading 65
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to take the opportunity to recognize and thank everyone who has helped me make this Division III project possible. What started as an off-handed question of “What if I wrote about Grindr?” during a meeting ended up becoming one of the most intense, important, and overall rewarding academic endeavors I have taken on. My wonderful advisors, Prof. Jennifer Hamilton and Prof. Stephen Dillon, have provided me with endless support, suggestions, and kindness as we worked through this process together.

Both Prof. Hamilton and Prof. Dillon also guided and assisted me throughout my earlier years at Hampshire in various classes I took with the both of them. Without those classes and my conversations with them, I would not have been able to connect the topics and ideas I did to create this project. I’d also like to thank Prof. Kim Chang for her guidance during the interviewing portion of my Div, and for the conversations we had both in and out of her Div III seminar.

I also want to express my love and gratitude for my parents, Stephanie and Paul Franzosa, who have shown nothing but support and care for my academics and interests my whole life. When I described my initial ideas for this project to them, I was worried they would think it was too outlandish or too “Hampshire.” However, they immediately asked what they could do to help me in completing it, going as far as to help reach out to potential interviewees and gather other resources I needed.

I’d like to thank Moe Mooney, Samara Rosen, and Namrata Jacob for their advice and support during the IRB process, as well as during the initial outlining phases. There are far too many friends and fellow students I could name who have helped make this project possible, but I’d like to give a special thanks to Aldyn Markle, Sarahi Silva, Ethan Donahue, Soren Moesswilde, Quinn Thomashow, and Piper Patterson for the conversations we’ve had that helped shape crucial parts of my work. Thank you to my classmates in both Prof. Chang and Prof. Dillon’s seminars as well for your advice, revisions, and kind words.

And last but not least, I am incredibly grateful for my nine interviewees who are the backbone of this project. Their enthusiasm and willingness to share their experiences and discuss the topics at hand made this Div possible, and I will be forever thankful for and inspired by their stories – those that did and did not make it into this project, those both told and untold.

This project was a collaborative effort, one that took months to conceive and many more months to carry out. Thank you to those who helped make it possible, and thank you to you, the reader, for taking the time to engage with this work.
Abstract

In recent years, authors and scholars have begun to investigate the cultures around gay dating apps, conducting user surveys and gathering data. However, there has been little critical engagement with these cultures of usage or connection to broader social contexts. This project stems from a connection made by David Gudelunas between the apps and cruising, a past queer sexual practice of recognition and connection, and examines the ways in which society and culture have influenced the apps. This project then explores the ways in which the apps influence users and create cultures of their own. Through investigating a lineage of past cultures and practices, present day modalities of visibility and safety, and future implications of digital worlds and cultures, this project will engage more deeply with the cultures of these apps. Analyzing temporality is a key window into understanding the reciprocal influences that the apps and their users have on one another when facilitating cultures. I argue there is vast potential for creation of culture within this virtual space of the apps, and that they should be more seriously considered as such cultural hubs.
Introduction

Setting the Stage

At fifteen years old, I knew that I was gay. I knew this was who I was, but I definitely was not ready to share it with anyone else, and I barely knew what I was doing. I saw my straight friends dating, kissing, and hooking up, talking about their sexualities and experiences with one another while I wasn’t. I found myself navigating my sexuality alone for the most part, working things through in my head and feeling most comfortable in the imaginary. I had no out gay classmates that I was interested in, and I was too timid to pursue those who I thought may not have been entirely straight. Whenever I heard someone talking about something gay, I was all ears and wanted to be a part of the conversation – even if I was just a silent observer. Despite being raised in a loving, accepting family and growing up in a fairly liberal area, I was afraid of potential homophobic retaliation from my peers. We all knew it was “okay to be gay,” but for the longest time it felt like we were only okay with it if it wasn’t one of us.

I remember reading scenes from Angels in America in my junior year drama class, and someone asked for clarification on what “cruising” was. I can’t remember the exact scene or discussion that prompted the question, but the moment has remained in my memory since that moment. Our teacher explained it as a way that gay men “found each other” in public parks and spaces, keeping his description PG-13 but heavily alluding to what “finding” entailed. The idea was thrilling to me. I knew I wasn’t ready to engage with anyone sexually, but at the same time I couldn’t help but imagine what it would be like to have that experience in a way that was only shared between the two of us, to not be displayed as a public spectacle.

Right after I turned sixteen, my friends and I started using Tinder. At first, I had my account set to “swipe” only on women, as if I was straight just like everyone else. Even in
private I never fully committed to only browsing through the men, as I had my account set to show me both. The resulting matches and conversations excited me, and gave me a glimpse into the gay community surrounding me. I did not necessarily find anyone from my own high school, but I was shocked at the number of other gay teenagers I was finding. There were teens with whom I had mutual friends, whom I had been following on other social media platforms – real live gay people my own age in my own area. I was too nervous to shift any of these digital conversations to real life, and I often found myself deleting and remaking my profile to avoid any sort of commitment or paper trail of my queerness.

Over time, I grew frustrated with the matching feature of Tinder, finding it time consuming with little immediate payout. I wanted to see people, I wanted to talk to people. But if I did not match with someone, I would never see them again and suddenly I was left with a small circle with my face in it radiating circles outwards with the words “No new matches in your area.” When I felt as if I had exhausted my capacity for Tinder, I remembered that during our class discussion of cruising, my drama teacher had alluded to dating applications and websites such as Manhunt or Grindr. He said something along the lines that he “expected us not to use things like that until we were old enough,” but I couldn’t help my curiosity. Having just gotten an iPhone 4S, I decided that I wanted to give Grindr a try and see how it felt.

Grindr describes itself as “the world’s largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people.” The app displays as a grid interface of all online users, listed from closest to furthest away. Profiles of active users appear on the grid with a green “online” marker, and once a user goes offline their profile remains visible with the green marker for ten minutes and then with a blank “offline” marker for another sixty. The app allowed me to add a photo to my profile,

---

a display name which appears on the grid, a 250-character space for an “About Me,” and several general statistics including age, height, weight, body type, ethnicity, and HIV status. The “I’m Looking For” feature allowed me to indicate what my general intention on the app was, ranging from chat, to dates, to relationship, to “right now.” I could fill out as much or as little of this as I wanted to, be as open or as anonymous as I desired.

I had repeatedly downloaded, deleted, and re-downloaded Grindr over the years, usually deleting it if I worried someone would recognize me and expose me. However, at seventeen, in the fall of my senior year of high school, I started using it more and more, growing bolder and talking to more. Despite my anxieties about being caught using or recognized on the app, I continued to use it – still never actually meeting anyone off the app until after graduation. Even then, in my freshman year of college, the process of starting to talk to someone and eventually meeting them felt wrong for some reason. It was exhilarating and satisfying, but I still felt that I was being too promiscuous, or too open about my sexuality with strangers on the internet.

As opposed to Tinder, the profiles on Grindr were not just fleeting snapshots of a potential suitor. All of the profiles were there, lined up in a perfect grid from closest to furthest. The local population of gays I had so often heard about and never seen was suddenly there, visible before me. I could see all of them and interact with them if I chose to do so. Even the blank profiles that incessantly messaged me to the point of me blocking them represented people who were seeking, at some level, the same things that I could only imagine up until this point.

Using the app showed me that there was a whole world of people seeking connection, that it wasn’t just me alone in my town, or even just in my school. Of course I knew there were gay people in the area, and of course I knew that they everywhere in my life – but up until that point I felt as if I could never see them. I had heard of them, and I knew they were there, but I
had never actually found them. Joel Simkhai, the app’s creator, stated “Before Grindr, finding other gay men could be a real challenge and I’m proud that we provide the fastest and easiest way to meet a guy,”\(^2\) expressing his intention in creating the app. Simkhai also explained, “you had a binary choice. You either would go out or you would use your computer. Grindr now gives you another choice, where you can be online and offline,”\(^3\) highlighting how the application allows for a merging of the on and offline worlds of the user. Digital technology evaluates offline practices and behaviors, and adapts them into an online format to streamline the procedures. In the case of Grindr, the sequence of seeking out and connecting with potential sexual or romantic partners offline is relocated to an online world with vastly more potential. With the creation and constant expansion of this digital world and the potential it holds, there come opportunities for new practices and behaviors to develop.

I have come to understand this potential and expansion as what I call “cultures of usage,” which I define as being the ways in which we use and shape objects (in this case, gay dating apps), and how these usages then shape us, our perceptions, and our sociality outside of those objects. This definition has been influenced by Tom Boellstorff’s writings on virtual worlds and culture, and by Sharif Mowlabocus’ writings on existing cultures behind gay dating apps and websites. These emerging cultures are continuously defined and redefined as online users navigate the evolving digital landscape, taking their offline practices and carrying them out on the apps. What do these cultures of usage look like, and what do they allow for? How have offline practices been reinvented and establish online? And as we move into the future, as technology continues to develop, what are the trajectories of these cultures?


\(^3\) Signorile.
Outlining the Past, Present, and Future

I derived the idea for this project from a passage in written by David Gudelunas hypothesizing that the act of “cruising” seen among gay men in pre-AIDS American cities “has moved online and to mobile phones.” He argues that, despite the relocation, “the effect is the same: Gay men can still hail one another within anonymous crowds in order to both solidify their real and imagined social networks as well as find partners for practical, sexual pleasures” (360). This, in concert with José Esteban Muñoz’s idea of queer futurity, or, “the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (1), came together in my head as the vision that Grindr and related apps provided a potentiality for a queer future. They harkened back to past practices and cultures, which may be gone from the public sphere but were being reinvented through the construction and usage of such technology.

With this idea, I started writing a utopic, hopeful narrative of gay dating applications, implying that this was the universal experience and that they acted as queer havens (83). Initially, I held a largely positive view of Grindr and related technologies, understanding them as the solution to the problems of my closeted youth and tumultuous young adulthood. At first my drafts reflected how I was feeling, and it felt liberating and empowering to weave my personal narrative into my analytical writing on the topic. I intended to do interviews for the project, but I knew I would not start them until at least around Christmas, so most of my writing came solely from personal experiences and ideas in conversation with the literature I had gathered. I was

6 John Edward Campbell, Getting It On Online: Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality, and Embodied Identity (Routledge, 2014).
confident in the direction I was going, and I was confident that my interviews would reflect these utopic imaginaries as well.

However, through cycles of feedback and review, I realized that I was writing in absolutes, unintentionally prescribing a monolithic experience of finding community and connection through gay dating applications. I found that my experiences did not all fit within this monolith either – sure, I felt more connected to my queerness and other queer individuals when making use of the apps, but I also felt vulnerable, even frightened at times. I remembered the time I was still closeted in high school and a classmate recognized me on Tinder and threatened to out me after we got into a disagreement over “hiding in the closet.” I reflected on how the constant accessibility of the grid of potential suitors may have stunted my abilities to go out and meet people in the “real world.”

Looking back my first draft, I now realize I was being overly hopeful in an attempt to justify the legitimacy of gay dating applications to myself and others. I didn’t want to admit that gay dating applications had their failures and problems, as I feared that would delegitimize my work and reinforce existing heteronormative ideas of queerness and queer individuals. I’ve had many conversations with straight peers where they refer to Grindr as “just a hookup app,” insisting that my experiences on the app are less than their heterosexual experiences due to the digitized nature of my interactions. Whenever I complain about the shortcomings of the apps, someone is always bound to tell me to quit them, or condescendingly explain “you didn’t really think it would work forever, did you?” In order to create this project, I needed to engage with the parts that were not as neat and pretty. If my goals were to better understand cultures of usage and to represent that understanding to my audience, I would need to engage with all facets of the experience and look beyond just the potential positives.
I interviewed nine participants who all have significant experience with gay-targeted
dating applications. These interviews were to give a wider scope of the participants’ usage of
gay-targeted dating applications, as well as how their experiences related to concepts such as
visibility, identity (re)presentation, risk and safety, nostalgia, and recognition. The interview was
divided into three sections: first, the participants described their identity to me and gave a brief
background on their experience with dating apps. For the second section I read a list of eight
terms, randomized in order to introduce them in a way that let the participant define them, rather
than have me project my own ideas on to their potential answers. The final section asked
participants to reflect more deeply on their experiences with dating applications.

Another problem I encountered while conceiving this project was how to depict online
worlds and interactions in a way that did not question their reality and impact. Tom Boellstorff,
an ethnographer of online worlds, interrogates the language used to discuss digital worlds in the
early chapters of *Coming of Age in Second Life*. Firstly, he finds “digital” to be a limiting
category when discussing the virtual, as he feels it only pertains to electronic technology. He
then chooses to define the online worlds he studies as *virtual*, while everything that exists offline
(or in the “real” world) as *actual* (16-24). Rather than looking at virtual worlds and spaces as
those *separate* from actual worlds, I believe Boellstorff wants us to recognize how they influence
and rely upon one another. In the case of gay dating apps, these cultures of usage develop both
online and offline, and I believe both hold equal weight. Just because we are not speaking face-
to-face when online does not mean the conversation lacks any of the importance or influence that

---

7 The terms were drawn from the theoretical reading and writing I had done in my first semester of Division III. The list was randomized using an online list generator before each interview to prevent any bias of my own in ordering them, and to avoid a specific, fixed order leading participants to make the same or similar connections between terms. The terms were as follows: *cruising, isolation, recognition, visibility, stigma, virtual/digital, privacy, and personal.*

offline conversations have. This is why I always resist calling anything off Grindr the “real” world, because for me it is all real, I see and experience it therefore it is real.

In conducting this research, I have come to uncover many tensions in these cultures of usage: that of past versus present, of safe versus unsafe, of online versus offline. This paper will combine an analysis of the literature with an analysis of the interviews across three chapters within the themes and tensions I have identified. The first chapter explores connections to the past within Muñoz’s framework of queer utopic imagination, and discusses how these dating applications have taken pre-existing behaviors and practices and digitized them. I consider the practice of “cruising” defined by Mark W. Turner as “the moment of visual exchange” (9) shared between seeking individuals that indicates interest, and analyze how that behavior has been modified and expanded upon by dating applications. I examine what I consider to be a lineage of queer space, looking at spaces that permitted public, anonymous sex and other queer-intended spaces. Using material from my interviews in concert with the writings of Muñoz, Turner, and other scholars of queer history, I will diagnose the present in relation to the past. How do the past and present interact, and how do we consider the two separately and in relation to one another? What does this lineage of space offer towards understanding the cultures of gay dating applications?

In my second chapter, I engage with the intertwined subjects of visibility and risk. How does visibility transform into recognition, and how do these modes of being (seen) affect our privacy and safety – and the other way around? Using Suzanna Danuta Walters’ chapter “The Explosion of Gay Visibility,” I investigate how visibility and recognition have functioned for queer populations across time, and analyze how they operate in terms of the dating applications.

---

Visibility can operate as a double-edged sword, in that it allows for connection and recognition but can require vulnerability and risk. Many of my participants linked their conceptions of visibility with their worries of privacy and security, and discussed the definition and display of self in a digital space. I also use this chapter to investigate exactly for whom such spaces are safe for, and for whom visibility is liberating versus dangerous.

My final chapter goes beyond the present-based scope of the first two chapters, and begin to imagine the futures facilitated by gay-targeted dating applications. Taking the second chapter’s ideas of identity construction, representation, and being seen online, I interrogate how online activity directly impacts offline development. How do we define online and offline – how do we define them in relation to “real,” and how do we even define “real”? What does the digitization of practices and cultures mean for the stigmas and toxicities that also exist offline? This chapter builds upon the imaginaries constructed by the scholars I draw from, as well as the musings of my interviewees, in order to postulate how these dating applications are facilitating our experiences, and how these cultures of usage translate into new, everyday cultures beyond the boundaries of dating apps and the online world.
Chapter I
Nostalgia, Novelty, and Ghosts in the Machine

Situating Technology, Seeing Ghosts

When I think about this project, I try to locate myself within it – who am I as the researcher, where is my point of entry? Yes, I am a gay man who uses dating applications such as Grindr. However, I want to interrogate at what moment (both currently and on a grander scale) I am engaging with them. Born in 1996, I grew up as the internet was coming into existence and evolving into how we now experience it. The AIDS epidemic was a distant shadow over my childhood, something I was born so close to yet never heard of until I was old enough to understand in the later 2000s. For the longest time, I did not think too deeply about how I interacted with technology and the internet, it just felt as if new websites and trends and apps emerged from thin air as I was developing.

During my semester in Copenhagen, however, I taught in a ninth grade classroom as part of a practicum placement and conducted my final research project on how social media usage created and informed the classroom community. As my research partner and I began our interviews and research, we began to notice that these students – only five or six years younger than us – understood and interacted with the internet in a vastly different way than we did. These youth had grown up into an internet culture waiting for them, one that they would define and develop on their own. The students made me feel like the stereotypical adult who knew nothing about the internet, despite the fact that I grew up with. My partner and I realized that it was not that we did not understand the internet, but that we were not literate in the same ways that the students were – just as they may not understand the ways in which our generation uses it. We all discussed apps like Tinder and Snapchat with a similar base understanding, but the ways in which the app functioned for the students was different than how they did for us.
For dating applications, the basic function is simple: use the app to connect with other people you want to talk to, date, or hookup with. Gay dating apps especially are often known as hookup apps, which shows that there is at least some universal understanding of what they do. However, I realized throughout my research, there seems to be a temporal dissonance in understanding the use and necessity of the apps. Some decry them for “taking over” person interaction, while others are intrigued as they may be “the next logical step.” Beyond the literature specifically on dating apps, there was a similar tension of past and present in my other readings as well, specifically those on queer theory and culture and on gay history. José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* informs much of my interest in this temporal framework, as he writes about queer futurity alongside what he calls “ghost theory,” or aspects of the past “haunting” the present.¹⁰

Muñoz introduces “ghost theory” as a way of thinking in which “specters” of the past live on and “haunt” or inform the present day (46).¹¹ These hauntings influence practices, behaviors, and individuals by reminding them of their origins and histories while highlighting where they reside within the current moment. He also writes of utopia and nostalgia, identifying that many idealized longings for a utopic future are rooted in a desire to return to a “better” past. These longings are, however, haunted by past memories that highlight the moments we would rather forget alongside those that we remember as closer to perfect. I believe that there is a nostalgic drive behind the development and use of apps like Grindr, one that seeks to rewrite space and time through digitizing past practices that may have been lost or erased. As a result of these spatio-temporal changes, there are also changes in sexuality and modes of connection. This first

---

¹⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.
¹¹ Muñoz.
chapter will draw from Muñoz’s conceptualizations of the past’s influence on the present, as well as the present and future’s desire to either stay in or recreate the past.

A Lineage of Gay Space

For a while, my understanding of Muñoz’s ghosts and haunting was anchored mostly in his writings on the AIDS epidemic, until I saw it resurface in the academic writing on gay dating applications. In a piece on the uses and gratifications of gay dating apps, David Gudelunas discussed how gay men across history consistently managed to find modes of communication that circumvent the restrictions of our heteronormative society. He identified cruising as one such mode of circumvention (360), using author Mark W. Turner’s definition of cruising as “the moment of visual exchange that occurs on the streets and in other places of the city, which constitutes an act of mutual recognition amid the otherwise alienating effects of the anonymous crowd” (9). Gudelunas and Turner suggest that cruising was (or still is?) a way in which gay men could locate and identify sameness in one another without alerting the rest of the public – and Gudelunas suggests that this has since moved online.

I was fascinated by this relocation of such practices to online worlds, and wondered exactly how and why such transitions came to be. Muñoz wrote mostly about affect and feeling in terms of haunting, but to me Gudelunas had described an entirely physical specter that haunted the invention and use of dating applications. While I agreed with Gudelunas’ understanding of cruising and dating apps, I was unsure whether my interviews would yield similar findings. To my delight, the topic of cruising came up entirely unprompted in the very first interview I conducted. I asked LJ, my first interviewee, to tell me about the dating applications they used

---

12 Gudelunas, “There’s an App for That.”
13 Turner, Backward Glances.
and to then identify which ones they specifically felt were targeted towards the gay community. They responded quickly, naming several apps but highlighting Grindr as the “quintessential cruising app.” Their matter-of-fact tone made me feel as if I should have already known that Grindr is not only the “quintessential cruising app” but also a quintessential part of gay life. Another interviewee, Ken, asserted that “every gay person knows what Grindr is,” reaffirming LJ’s notion that the app is commonplace in gay culture. Five of the other participants ended up making similar connections to cruising, both prompted and unprompted. The connection between the two was there, and I wanted to understand more about how and why that connection came to be – and why so many of the participants seemed fixated on the past, or how things used to be.

Much of the language used in the interviews was oriented more towards an act of replacing rather than just being connected. Michael argued that apps have “taken the place of person to person talking,” while Brian insisted, “Now it’s different… it’s all digital.” The two men sounded defeated, almost as if they had already lost hope that this transformation may be reversible or incomplete. The participants were noticing the connection, but identifying and describing it more as a tension or collision. They saw a more dynamic link between the present and the past, as if the present is seeking to reconfigure the past rather than just replace it. While I saw a world of potential within this tension, some of my interviewees – namely the older group – saw a world that had departed from their idealized past.

If LJ reasoned that this is the “next logical step of the internet age,” then I want to investigate what the previous steps were. Grindr is a more mobile and queer-specific version of websites like OkCupid and EHarmony, and, as Andy pointed out to me, a modern extension of personal ads on sites like Craigslist. Michael referred to Grindr as “the granddaddy of them all,” referencing that most other apps such as Scruff, Growlr, and Hornet are all offshoots of Grindr’s
grid-based, geolocative format. There appears to be a certain lineage of these spaces taking shape across history, seemingly dependent on the available technology but also related to the social climate of the time. I have to wonder if the technology or space is created in response to the need, or if the relocation to a new technology or space occurs after realizing the space is there. And, if so, what do these relocations hold – or, what is gained or lost (if anything) when these relocations took and take place?

Before mobile phones ven existed, interactions like those on Grindr – similar in frequency, anonymity, and accessibility – would occur in spaces both created for an anonymous sexual purpose and incidentally functional as. William Leap compiled a series of writings on gay sexual meeting spaces in *Public Sex/Gay Space*, looking at these spaces in a pre-AIDS, pre-internet era. In one chapter, Ira Tattelman speaks to the functions of gay bathhouses, environments that were constructed specifically to allow (sexual) connection between gay men in an often anonymous, covert manner. Tattelman argues “the baths establish an order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies… the interactions within begin to dispel notions of isolation, alienation, self-control, and loneliness” (77). These spaces were created with the intention of facilitating queer connection in a society that demonized it.

Laud Humphreys write in another chapter about the importance of “tearooms,” public bathrooms where men of all orientations would go to engage in same-sex activity quickly and anonymously (29). The act of cruising was also normalized in these spaces, as the assumption was that all participants were looking for the same kind of connection and action, even if not explicitly gay-identifying. There may still be potential for rejection, but the potential danger of homophobic retaliation was significantly reduced. However, if these were spaces where such

---

behavior was to be normalized and codified into a queer-friendly culture – why were they changing? If bathhouses were being shut down in the wake of AIDS, and gay bars and clubs were being frequently raided by the police, then the response is to increase mobility and discretion. I believe the spaces have changed and when they needed to do in order to maintain the cultures. This is not to say that these are wholly negative changes, in fact I believe the lineage that has lead us to Grindr is an important and valuable one.

My interviewees never explicitly mentioned these spaces, although many of them did touch upon cruising and areas in which cruising was more normalized. Much of the cruising discussions were in relation to the apps, more specifically how the functions of cruising had been relocated to and adopted by the apps. One participant, Michael, reflected upon how cruising “used to be just getting out...wherever the popular places were,” concluding that “it seems to have been taken over by the apps now.” Michael and Andy also both referred to how “we” (referring to the gay community) used to make such connections in bars and clubs, but that we now go out less and less, meeting people on the apps instead. Gay bars and clubs were (and are) sites where gay practices and behaviors are normalized, namely those like cruising that may not be as widely accepted outside of the space. In a sense, these bars and clubs were repurposed to specifically include and empower the gay community. A space that may have been a site of such queer activity before, where it may not have been entirely accepted or felt safe, was restructured to support that activity and those people.

Across time, this intentional space has been reconfigured and relocated as necessary, and I posit that its current iteration is located in an internet space of dating applications, specifically those with geolocative properties and functions. These spaces, although they have their faults,

---

have given participants opportunities to connect with one another. Many of the participants in my interviews acknowledged the benefits of spaces such as gay bars and clubs and had relatively positive outlooks on cruising and similar activities. However, four of my older participants – three who were over fifty years old and one who referred to himself as middle-aged – all spoke of Grindr and related applications in a somewhat negative light. Michael insisted that cruising had been “taken over by the apps,” rather than simply transformed or replaced. The other older participants seemed to agree, using similar negatively coded phrases and decrying the shift from offline to online interaction – despite admitting that they use the apps themselves.

Even the younger half of the participants, the other five who were all under thirty years old, seemed to hold negative outlooks towards dating applications with a focus on a “better” past. The reference to what “used to be” is intriguing when it comes from those that may not have necessarily lived through those times. At the same time, those who did live through them seem wary of the digital iteration of past practices despite still participating. I theorize that, through José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of queer futurity and utopia, nostalgia is creating a “back then” phenomenon that situates the past as “good” and the present (and future) as “bad.”

Alongside this theory of nostalgic imagination, I posit that novelty plays a role as well – there is a sense of wonder attributed to new(er) developments, in this case technology.

**Diagnosing the Past and Present**

Muñoz draws upon Douglas Crimp’s vivid recollections of moments in queer sexual history pre-AIDS, arguing that despite the moment passing, “its memory, its ghosts, and the ritualized performances of transmitting its vision of utopia across generational divides still fuels
and propels our political and erotic lives” (34). He identifies Crimp’s depictions as seeking a queer utopia, one of possibility and freedom. This seeking, while oriented towards achieving in a better, queerer future, is both informed by and fixated on dreams of the past. Muñoz sees this point of view as one haunted by the “ghosts” he mentions, explaining that this haunting “still nourishes the possibility of our current, actually existing gay lifeworld” (34). Nostalgia requires a connection to the past, a longing for it, and can result in – as Muñoz puts it – a rejection of a here and now. He envisions this nostalgic imagination as a path towards this queer utopia, implying that those who imagine in that mode envision a better future that holds aspects of the past.

I found this haunting occurring at points in my interviews through the used-to-be’s and the back-then’s – they are actualities, they are ways of thinking. But does this longing for the past always require a total rejection of the present, and of progress that does not exactly emulate the past? What happens when we consider novelty, namely the perceived novelty of technology, within this framework of nostalgic imagination? A framework of novelty focuses on the new, it emphasizes that everything new is original and unusual. Those who focus on novelty are intrigued and overwhelmed by the creations before them – as opposed to wondering if they may be re-creations.

Within this framework lies another tension between the past and the present, between nostalgia and novelty. When writing this chapter, I asked myself: “How am I diagnosing the present in relation to the past?” and I wonder if this tension is part of that diagnosis. Nostalgia diagnoses the present as a remnant of the past, acknowledging the looming specters of past cultures and practices – it longs for them to rematerialize in the current landscape. Alternatively,

---

17 Muñoz, Cruising Utopia.
18 ibid.
novelty diagnoses the present as a departure from the past, as a progression that only looks forward without considering where it came from. And I, an investigator of these temporalities, have come to realize that I am diagnosing the present (and the future) as both nostalgic and novel at the same time. More I believe that looking at a cultural object such as gay dating applications grants us a lens into this temporal duality.

The cultures of usage behind an app like Grindr are dependent upon this interaction between nostalgia and novelty. They are new cultures being dictated by evolving needs and desires of users, landscapes changing to satisfy those who inhabit them. Simultaneously, these cultures of usage are legacies of past cultures that have been reconfigured and repurposed to function in a modern context. During our interview, Phil described gay dating applications as “taking advantage” of hookup culture, emphasizing that they were adapting to it as well. He views gay dating apps as an extension of behaviors of the community, and that this extension into a digital, highly accessible realm amplifies the behaviors. His descriptions align with the nostalgic-novel framework, illustrating how the apps may be new but the culture they facilitate is a pre-existing, familiar one. It may be different and unfamiliar, but that is not always synonymous with new.

Fixating on the novelty of an object such as Grindr prevents us from understanding what facilitates its construction, but simultaneously we cannot fixate on the nostalgic “good old days.” If we do so, we fail to see the potentialities the object provides. There is a middle ground being overlooked, one that both considers and seeks to move beyond the past from which we, and the cultural objects we use, come from. Muñoz suggests that utopian/nostalgic longing requires a

---

19 It is important to note that Phil has never used any dating applications, however he is a licensed psychotherapist who has done work with many gay male clients involving their usage of such applications. As mentioned in the Interview Guide attached in the appendix (page 52), some of the interview questions were altered to better fit his experiences.
“rejection of a here and now,” but also urges “the present must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds” (27).\textsuperscript{20} He explains that while “the present is not enough,” we also cannot ignore the moment we are in. For Muñoz, the queer experience is this rejection of a static now – especially when rejecting a homonormative approach to achieving security through assimilating to the existing structures of power.

In diagnosing these temporalities, I am interrupting heteropatriarchal diagnoses. I am interrupting how they diagnose queerness, how they diagnose dating applications, how they diagnose \textit{us}. The “used-to-be” mindset attributes the present’s failures to modernity and its successes to the past. However, these past successes are seen as still in the past, and there is the missing step that identifies the past \textit{in} the present. This mindset also ignores that the failures of the present may also be directly linked to those of the past. Idealizing the past can remove us from the toxicities of the now, but I argue that we should shift from idealizing it to identifying how it shapes and lives within the present.

How the present transforms and develops is informed by the past, and it is often seen as an origin rather than as an influencer. I do not view the past as a fixed point in time that we pull ideas from, rather, I view it as dynamic resource that changes based on what we need from it. As seen in the interviews I conducted, the past functions as an anchor for some in that they saw the cultures of dating applications rooted in past practices. For others, the past was a utopia that we have strayed too far from with the novel inventions of technology. And for some, the past was a problem that needed fixing and dating applications have emerged as a solution. I view this as a way of queering temporality, departing from the common conception that time must flow linearly from then to now. The past and present are shaped by one another simultaneously, just as

\textsuperscript{20} Muñoz, \textit{Cruising Utopia}. 
the user and the culture of using the dating applications shape each other. Cultures of usage are a manifestation of one’s experiences moving presently through the application mixed with prior experiences – and those present (or future) experiences become those of the past almost instantaneously.

Gay dating apps and their cultures of usage are a hybridization of preexisting cultures that contributed to the apps and cultures that will later emerge from the apps. We shape based on what we do and see in that doing, but we also shape based on what we know from doing before. In a sense, this is how I see queerness being constructed. As Muñoz writes, “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality… The future queerness’s domain” (1), indicating we can only imagine an endpoint, as we are constantly moving towards it. I argue that the unreachable nature of this queer future can be applied to our ideas of the past as well – nostalgia allows us to move towards an ideal past that may have never existed. There is also then the argument that there is only the past and the future, that the present is an amalgamation of the two. By this, I mean that the present, as Muñoz suggests, is not fixed or static but rather it is constantly being created, broken down, and reconstructed.

---

21 Muñoz.
Chapter II
Visibility and the Complexities of Being Seen

Locating the Now

One of the dangers of focusing too much on the past is that we may lose sight of the current moment. We can allow ourselves to be nostalgic, to long for utopia rooted in past ideals, but we cannot ignore our present. I argue that we should be aware of and critique the here and now, rather than wholly reject it in the queer utopic that Muñoz writes of. In fact, rejecting it does not need to imply that we ignore or forget it – there is a way to reject the present moment while still being aware of it and working through it. But where is that here and now, where are we presently? How do cultures of usage manifest in a present setting? Whereas my first chapter examined how past practices may have influenced these cultures and how present usage is understood in relation to these pasts, this chapter will investigate the current intricacies and significances of cultures of usage.

Once in college, I wanted to be more open and expressive about my sexuality. I had been using Tinder at home, and then almost immediately downloaded Grindr when I got to campus, finished moving in, and my parents had left (or re-downloaded, considering I used it briefly then deleted it multiple times during my senior year). In my hometown of Arlington, Massachusetts, I was usually one of the few users under 25 years old in a five-mile radius – but here in the Pioneer Valley, there were vastly more profiles of people closer to my age.²² It felt strangely comforting to know there were so many others on the app, even if I wouldn’t talk to or hook up with the majority of them. In the moment of using the app, of logging on and utilizing its

---

²² On Tinder, users can set their mile radius anywhere between 1 and 100 miles, however Grindr shows only 100 users in order from closest to furthest for users with a free account. Those with a paid account (called Grindr Xtra) are shown 600 users, according to help.grindr.com.
functions, I could see others and they could see me. Even if that’s all we had in common, it was still something.

The only time I met these people outside of our digital conversations, however, was if we intended to do so. I definitely recognized profiles as people that I had seen or knew, but there was an added factor of if I had talked to that person on the app or not. I’d see people around campus that I’d seen online but hadn’t talked to, but it still felt like there was a moment of connection or recognition when we passed each other. Someone once came up to me at a party, claiming that we had matched on Tinder and spoken prior to that night – something that I was fairly certain had not happened but they insisted it did. More recently, someone I was with recognized that we had matched and spoken (this time we really had), but neither of us knew how to engage the other in an offline setting. I think a lot about what it means to be seen and recognized, to think about what people do and don’t know based on what they may hear from me (or about me), and how people construct an image of me.

I was taken aback when Andy, one of my interviewees, exclaimed “I delete them!” with a chuckle when I prompted him with the word “recognition.” He asserted that he immediately blocks profiles of people that he knows in an offline setting, which confused me initially. While I understood wanting to keep the two worlds separate, I did not completely understand the urgency with which he felt that. Andy continued on to discuss how he felt about profiles without pictures or other behaviors he perceived as “sketchy,” acknowledging that physical safety is often a concern when engaging on apps like Grindr. His connection between being seen and being safe started to make more sense as other participants expressed similar sentiments towards displaying their faces and personal information on the applications. Brian made sure to remind me in his interview that, specifically with pictures and personal information, the apps are not as private as
users like to think. While I felt that some participants’ wariness towards being recognized bordered on paranoid, I came to realize through historical research that there was good reason to feel that way. I explored the past through the histories of fighting for gay rights and visibility, looking to the pre-internet age as a reference. Visibility and recognition, specifically for gay individuals, are deeply linked to the privacy and safety of those individuals as well.

Brian reasoned that the apps can add to one’s visibility, but worried it can become difficult to protect privacy, that you can figure out “exactly who people are,” in terms of connecting their online activity to their offline identity. He mused that you “come to know people on the apps,” but did not specify whether he considered that a positive or not. At first, I viewed the increased visibility of gay individuals over time as solely hopeful and empowering. However, until I conducted my interviews I had not considered the other potentials of being recognized. What comes with that knowing, what does it mean to be recognized and understood by an outside body? If there are complications that come with being seen, what are those that come with being known – and how do these complications and understandings manifest in the modern context of dating applications?

This chapter will first explore exactly what it means to be seen, and if there is a difference between being seen and recognized. I believe that visibility is complex, and that although it is often coded as positive and progressive there are still dangers and complications that come with it. Later in the chapter, I discuss privacy and safety within the context of visibility, asking: For whom is visibility safe? I draw from examples from my own life and in the media that highlight the dangers of gay dating applications, as I believe it is one thing to discuss theory and another to put it into practice and examine its implications in the actual world. Grindr and gay dating applications can be liberating and empowering for some, but that does not mean
that the risks and dangers of the platform should be overlooked. Visibility and safety are both physical and emotional, and in this case digital, too.

**Being Seen, Being Known**

When writing on gay history, Suzanna Danuta Walters looks to the 1990s as the “explosion of gay visibility” – a moment she identifies when imagesy life suddenly burst into the public American sphere. Gays were icons, they were rebels, they were on television – they were being seen. Much of what Walters describes ties directly into the advancement of modern technology, showing that these developments contributed to this newfound visibility. Neither I nor Walters are suggesting that there was no prior knowledge or awareness of gay people before this “explosion,” rather, they were less seen and more imagined. The heteronormative public constructed an imaginary of what gay people were like – an imaginary based on noticing and identifying difference in others. But how did these unspoken, unconfirmed imaginations manifest once real, visible people were introduced into the mainstream? As Walters warns, “[This] moment provides us with a picture of a society readily embracing the images of gay life but still all too reluctant to embrace the realities of gay identities” (10). She implies that while the gay population may now be seen, there’s a key difference between seeing a person’s image and actually coming to know that person beyond just imagery and assumption. But does she consider the potential dangers of being known? Does knowing automatically lead to an understanding and acceptance, or does it just provide more fodder for stigma and hatred when stereotypes and assumptions are proven correct?

---

24 Walters.
In my interviews, I read each participant a randomized list of terms that drew from the major themes and concepts behind the theoretical portion of my project. Among these were the terms “visibility” and “recognition,” which may initially seem similar but, when discussing the terms, each participant made clear distinctions between the two. Some participants were confused by the inclusion of recognition, especially when read after visibility – aren’t the two the same? Or close enough to the same? However, some participants made key distinctions between the two, noting a more active quality in recognition whereas visibility – defined by most participants as “being seen” – is more passive. Recognition requires an active engagement with and an application of these contexts, allowing the viewer to make meaning of what they see. While Walters suggests something is being lost in only being seen and not known, my interviews would suggest that being known is not automatically the desirable outcome. Again, it matters who is doing the knowing, the recognizing – and it matters where and when that recognizing is happening.

Visibility is a complex relationship developed between the observed and the observer, one who sees through a matrix of their own experiences and understandings, influenced by power and position. Being visible means being interpreted through these contexts, being recognized and understood. Alongside being influenced by preexisting social constructs and contexts, the visible participant also has a hand in their visibility, as they are able to craft the image they wish to display. How they are viewed from the outside is a combination of what they have displayed and what the viewer casts onto them from their contexts.

For example, Ken wondered whether one can “feel good about being seen and not being visible,” acknowledging that there’s an “odd dynamic” to wanting to be seen but not wanting to be constantly visible. His thoughts play into the matrix of how and when one is being seen,
hoping to be seen for certain things but not others. Ken, who teaches in a Catholic school, worried about his students seeing his profile, since that could lead to him being disciplined or losing his job. What intrigued me there is that he always said “I could be seen,” but I always thought, wait – isn’t it just his profile being seen? One’s digital profile exists as an extension of one’s self even when not being operated by the user, since as long as one is active on the application their profile is visible which, by extension, means that individual is visible too. Whether that profile contains detailed information, a photograph of the user, or no photo or details whatsoever, it exists as a digital display of the self.

One participant, Michael, defined recognition as when “[people] know who you are...the things you’ve done,” continuing on to explain “being... visible is one thing but being recognized, having recognition is another.” Similarly, Andy attributed recognition to a certain kind of understanding, while Phil argued that recognition requires “brain functioning” in response to a visual image. He mentioned this in an effort to emphasize that recognition is a step further than just seeing, in that it requires more engagement with the viewed subject. Many of the participants asserted that they present themselves online in a similar, if not identical, way as they do offline. However, almost all of them also expressed wanting to keep their online and offline behaviors separate from one another, as they saw those behaviors as connected to their identities.

Phil identified Grindr’s accessibility in terms of these behaviors as a double-edged sword, in that it makes it easier to connect but simultaneously makes it harder to disconnect. He spoke of this disconnection in terms of those who may be struggling to quit using the apps, but I also considered it alongside my conception of Grindr as a potential technology of constant surveillance. This means that these applications allow their users to be perpetually viewed, to be monitored and seen within the context of a gay dating/hookup application. As long as an
individual is online, their profile appears in the grid of others, and stays visible for another hour
after the user has closed the application on their device. We may not always be using the apps,
but as our identities are linked to our profiles, and our profiles can be easily accessed, we are, in
a sense, easily accessible as well.

Samuel feared that as easily as one’s information can be accessed, it can also be
weaponized. He claimed that while vulnerability and visibility can be empowering they can also
be taken advantage of depending on who is the one viewing. LJ referred to the inclusion of a face
picture on one’s profile as “incriminating,” as providing a direct connection between profile and
person makes recognition and identification that much easier. One can desire to be seen, and
even take steps to increase their visibility, but that desire can easily get twisted into perpetual
visibility through manipulation of knowledge and information. By this, I mean that once one’s
information about themselves and their activity has been made available to outside parties in an
effort to be more seen, that information can be used against them and their visibility can turn into
a constant surveillance. Here is where I see Phil’s double-edged sword metaphor, with positives
to attaining recognition for one’s identity, but there are also dangers in the vulnerability it
requires to be seen in such a way.

Recently, as I have been writing the penultimate draft of this paper, there have been
disturbing reports of data breaches and unconsented sharing of data on Grindr. In one case,
Grindr was found to be sharing encrypted data with two companies “paid to monitor and analyze
how the app was being used,”25 data such as information users put on their profiles – most
notably their HIV status. A report from BuzzFeed News stated “Because the HIV information is
sent together with users’ GPS data, phone ID, and email, it could identify specific users and their

---

25 “Grindr Admits It Shared HIV Status Of Users,” NPR.org, accessed April 4, 2018,
HIV status,” as discovered by a researcher at a nonprofit in Norway. Grindr has since stopped providing that information to such companies, but also released a statement reminding users that “if you choose to include this information in your profile, the information will also become public.” This discovery follows on the heels of another recent breach, one in which it was found that there were security flaws present that allowed usually hidden data to be accessed, including “who had blocked them, deleted photos, locations of people who had chosen not to share that data and more.” These flaws allowed for third party sites and internet “traffic snoopers” watching who uses what Wi-Fi network and where to pinpoint locations and gather data on users. Again, Grindr responded that they have since patched the issues, but supplemented their statement with a similar reminder that any information shared is technically public information.

What disturbs me about these breaches (are they even breaches if Grindr itself knew the data was accessible and being shared?) is that it is unclear exactly who had access to the data. Sure, both reported situations were cleared up and taken care of once they were brought to light, but what happened before that? Samuel and LJ both expressed anxiety over their information being accessed or weaponized, and while there is no evidence of such information from these breaches being weaponized, it is still a possibility. Prior to the invention of dating apps, there have been similar situations where gay men provided information about themselves that was then used against them. Sharif Mowlabocus writes in *Gaydar Culture* about how many men divulged information about their sex lives and habits during the AIDS epidemic to medical professionals with the belief it would help them find answers. The gay population was just as afraid as the rest

---

26 ibid
of the country, and they wanted to know how HIV was spread and contracted just as much as everyone else. However, Mowlabocus states that this divulging and gathering of information rendered the gay male body and gay male sexuality visible – as well as accessible and wieldable – by the State (73). They made themselves and their identities visible in an attempt to get answers, but the answers came with unwanted exposure to a serophobic, homophobic public. If Michael, in his interview, states that recognition is when people “know things that you’ve done,” then Mowlabocus’ writing is a prime example of the dangers of that recognition. In the wrong hands, information gathered through the recent breaches on Grindr could be used again to identify and expose individuals already at risk due to their sexualities.

**Safe for Whom, Risky for Whom?**

The dangers outlined by my interviewees, Mowlabocus, and through these media examples focus on threats of defamation, misunderstanding, and stigma. Walters writes of a heteronormative, biased public that views and scrutinizes the gay community, and Mowlabocus writes of gay dating applications as a space where homosexuality is the norm and to view and be viewed as such is empowering. The threats I discussed in the previous chapter involved some outside individual utilizing the apps or information with the intention of causing some form of harm. However, I also have to wonder what risks exist within the space and within the community, between those who use the apps. Michael referred to “picture collectors” as being one of his primary worries on Grindr – users (or in some case, automated bots) that provide fake photos or information of their own in order to gain trust and collect photos of other users so they can spread them online or masquerade as them. I have recently encountered similar suspicious

---

activity while using Grindr, seeing photos that I know do not belong to the users or having people aggressively request my information without providing their own. Andy said “people’s responses cause you pause” when discussing safety, indicating that there can sometimes be hesitation when interacting with other users. Much of my discussions of safety and privacy in the interviews centered around the possibility of danger, acknowledging the potential.

We always hear stories about these potential dangers of kidnapping or, even worse, murder coming from dating applications – in fact, sometimes when I tell my friends I’m meeting up with someone from Grindr they’ll jokingly tell me “try not to get kidnapped.” But this is also a harsh reality, as a brief internet search revealed two cases of serial killers who located and met their victims through Grindr before murdering them. We often joke or stick to potentialities rather than address the realities because, as Walters would argue, we don’t want to confirm the stereotypes that already exist of the gay population. However, just because there are stereotypes and perceptions we want to avoid does not mean we should not address the risks that these applications have. If it has become easier to be visible to potential partners through Grindr, it also means it is easier for those wishing to do harm to see people as well. As I said, the party doing the seeing is just as important as the party being seen, and that harmful observer is being given a platform through which their twisted intentions can be streamlined and carried out more easily.

One of the cases, that of killer Bruce McArthur in Toronto, has been ongoing for eight years since his killing spree was alleged to have started in 2010.\textsuperscript{30} Many across the Toronto LGBTQ community have criticized the authorities for how they treated the case, stating that

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
\end{flushright}
since the victims were mostly gay, “brown-skinned, middle aged men”\textsuperscript{31} their cases were taken less seriously. An article reports that Toronto’s LGBTQ and South Asian communities have been protesting the treatment of the cases, with organizer Shakir Rahim asserting that “The LGBTQ, South Asian and Middle Eastern communities ‘should be treated no differently.’”\textsuperscript{32} He also argued that “the race or perceived sexuality of the missing men affected the resources and quality of the investigation.”\textsuperscript{32} While different than the tragedy of the AIDS crisis, this frustration with the wider response (or lack thereof) comes from a place of not being seen worthy of more attention or care on a basis of sexuality. The lack of response and care was also further exacerbated in both cases when it came to the race of victims – both in the McArthur case and in cases of the AIDS epidemic. I refer to this case mainly to show that there are actual dangers that exist in the offline world, not just looming online threats through anonymous profiles.

Many of my interviewees considered safety only in the physical sense, explaining their apprehensions towards profiles with little information or conversations that felt threatening. Nobody wants to share photos with someone that may exploit them, or meet up with someone who may give off “serial killer vibes” as one participant pointed out. However, none of them included safety from prejudice, from hatred aside from homophobia in their descriptions. Just because dating applications may remove us from a current physical moment does not mean they remove us from the contexts through which they were created, and from the contexts through which we have been raised and influenced.

In an initial draft of this project, I drew upon John Edward Campbell’s definition of a “queer haven” as a “[space] where gay and lesbian individuals can congregate, affirm their

\textsuperscript{31} Moon et al.
identities, and safely explore their sexuality” (83). I originally believed that Grindr and related dating applications acted as these havens, but through my interviews and further analysis I realized that it was not that simple, and this was not the case. Ira Tattelman wrote on how gay bathhouses, in a sense, rewrote the power structures that previously inhibited gay male sexuality, but also warned that systems of power found ways to reinstate themselves there through homonormative beauty standards (namely racism and fatphobia) (77-78). Several of my interviewees, when asked about stigma within the gay community, referenced similar hateful prejudices that manifest on dating applications. LJ even referred to the “race dynamics” of Grindr as perhaps one of the “most notorious” things that comes to mind when asked for their opinions on the app. Such digital spaces may hold those positive qualities that Campbell speaks of, but just because they have created a space where homosexuality is the norm does not mean that they have evaded or overwritten other normative standards and biases. For these reasons, I believe that they do not act as queer havens, just as I believe all of their precursors (gay bars, bathhouses, etc.) were not quite the havens some may like to remember them as either.

Similarly, Amia Srinivasan asks readers to “recognise that the very idea of fixed sexual preference is political, not metaphysical,” highlighting how Grindr recreates these structures of power. However, she also argues that this is not just “a peculiarly gay problem” and urges her readers to not ignore how other – if not at all – dating apps and websites encourage and enable similar hateful sentiments and preferences. Her claim that sexual preference is political is rooted in a discussion of sexual worthiness, and who has the right to sex. I believe that while her critique of the hyperfocus on such bigotry solely within gay communities is important, I do not

---

33 Campbell, *Getting It On Online.*
34 Ira Tattelman, “CHAPTER TITLE,” in Leap, *Public Sex/Gay Space.*
want that critique to imply that such hate should be excused or absolved. Rather, I think the focus can be shifted to further Tattelman’s point on how gay communities – and in terms of this paper, specifically online gay spaces – (re)structure themselves around existing axes of power despite the notion of gay existence and sexuality as inherently political and radical. This absence of intersectional thinking results in many turning a blind eye to bigotry occurring on the apps. Srinivasan points this out in her analysis of the web segment “What the Flip?”, where a white man expressed bewilderment after switching Grindr profiles with an Asian man for a day as part of a social experiment.36 There seems to be a strong desire for many (white) users to maintain Grindr as a queer haven, despite blatant racism displayed by other users and even racist features built into the app such as being able to filter profiles by race.37

I feel it is important to note that all but one of the nine participants in my interviews were white, and the majority of them were cisgender. Given that, I have to wonder whether or not the reason has to do with who was most willing to make themselves even more vulnerable through talking to me. In the interviewing process, participants had to make themselves visible in multiple ways, whether it was through commenting on my initial outreach post on Facebook or while answering the questions face to face over Skype. Taylor stated that “as a cis white male, I feel pretty safe,” as other interviewees highlighted how it may be easier or safer to be white and cisgender on the apps – and in general in our society. There is always danger in divulging personal information about oneself, but that danger is amplified when the information is from or about at-risk populations such as people of color and LGBTQ individuals. I have felt incredibly

grateful to have the opportunity to conduct this research, and grateful for my participants’ willingness to share their stories – and I also acknowledge exactly who felt comfortable, and who did not. There is an urge to feel as if what happens on a mobile application like Grindr is less real or impactful because it is digital and not physical, but as I have shown in this chapter there are many ways in which digital actions can lead to physical consequences. Visibility and safety on these apps are physical, they are emotional, and they are political.
Chapter III

Looking Forward: The Virtual, The “Real”, and the Future

Defining the Virtual

As I look towards the futures of dating apps and the cultures they generate and facilitate, I find myself generating more questions than answers. If past cultures of gay sex and sexuality influence the functions of Grindr, how will the present cultures of Grindr influence future functions and cultures? How does online visibility translate into an offline world, and what power (if any) does the online profile have in constructing an offline identity? Language in particular becomes tricky at this point, as I worry I am configuring online spaces such as Grindr as nebulous, vaguely defined yet influential spaces. I want to discuss the impact and influence they have in the “real” (read: offline) world, but I worry that doing so could delegitimize the realities users experience daily on the apps. During the term association in my interviews, Ken defined virtual as “real but not real,” and he continued to wrestle with that binary as he answered questions about how he presents and interacts with others online versus offline. Multiple of my participants referenced the “real world” when talking about offline happenings, often positioning online and offline as separate worlds that do not interact. The binary of real/unreal, offline/online is one that plagues discourse (both academic and not) about online worlds, as they explore the power and potential of the online without positioning it as secondary to the offline.

As mentioned in this paper’s introduction, I drew upon Tom Boellstorff’s definitions of virtual, digital, and actual when constructing the framework through which I conducted my research. Boellstorff claims that “digital” pertains to electronic technology, but does not necessarily imply that the technology is “virtual.” He then places “virtual” in opposition to
“actual” rather than words like “real” (18-19).38 Careful to state that he does not want to reinforce binaries, Boellstorff provides one of the Oxford English Dictionary’s definitions of “virtual”: “that is so in essence or effect, although not formally or actually” (19).39 He describes a “gap” between the virtual and actual, explaining “[it] is critical: were it to be filled in, there would be no virtual worlds, and in a sense no actual world either” (19).40 I believe the virtual and the actual are dependent on one another for development, that they simultaneously shape one another.

Although virtual worlds do hold actual impact and influence, there is still hesitation to consider them less “real” for several reasons. One of which, I believe, is due to their novelty, which I defined and discussed earlier in my first chapter. Boellstorff does not write much about time in his chapter on terminology and virtual worlds, but I believe time is a key aspect to consider when situating such technology. There is the implication that, because virtual worlds (or electronic technology in general) are newer chronologically they do not hold the same influence on the already-existing actual world – a world with a past. But, as I outlined in the first chapter, Grindr and related apps are not necessarily a novel invention but rather a conglomeration of past cultures and behaviors recreated in a modern, up to date platform.

Joshua Meyrowitz argues that new media, specifically television in the 1960s through 80s, results in a “changing relationship between physical and social place” (308).41 I read his “social place” as a version of Boellstorff’s “virtual world,” as the two both imply a space that is not necessarily physical but still influences/is influenced by social structures of the actual world. Whereas Boellstorff toys with the idea of this unstable binaristic relationship, Meyrowitz

38 Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*.
39 ibid
40 ibid
identifies it as a key source of social change and influence. For Meyrowitz, technology such as television allows for individuals of varying social roles to see the “backstage” (309)\(^{42}\) of those in other, often more private roles.\(^{43}\) There is a vital tension between the physical/actual and the social/virtual space, one that generates change in both worlds.

I believe gay dating applications exist at a confluence of physical/actual and social/virtual, as well as of the past, present, and future. If the future and its technologies are also to be such a conglomeration of the past (which is, in effect, the current moment), then what will it draw from? Similarly, what will the physical world in which these technologies exist look like, and how will the technologies have changed it? There is no sure way to know what aspects of the present will influence the developments of the future, but I do believe there are predictions and analyses we can make. A common narrative in my interview responses to questions about the influence of the past was that gay dating applications “strip personal contact”\(^{44}\) and “taken the place of... person to person talking.”\(^{45}\) This narrative, while underlined with pessimism and dissatisfaction, is crucial for me in that it reveals how users of such technology see their actual selves and world being shaped by their engagement with a virtual self and world.

**Power in the Profile**

My interviews contained the following two questions: (1) How do you present yourself and your identity online, and is that different from how you present yourself offline? (2) How would you compare interactions with potential partners you have on- versus offline? I asked the first question to gain an insight into the construction and (re)presentation of identity in a virtual

\(^{42}\) Meyrowitz.

\(^{43}\) (think shows like *Friends* that give teens a look into adult life, or *Scandal* that provides a perspective on the President’s private life)

\(^{44}\) Interview w/ Brian

\(^{45}\) Interview w/ Michael
manner. The question explores the significance of the virtual profile, looking at how one’s self representation online can influence their offline experience. My second question looks more into the social dynamics of the online and offline experience, as I believe those dynamics are where key moments of influence occur. I draw from Boellstorff’s work examining Second Life – “a free 3D virtual world where users can create, connect, and chat with others”46 – which had mobile avatars as opposed to the static profiles of Grindr and other apps. What happens when a relationship started virtually moves into the actual world – what is lost or gained in that transition, if anything?

The responses to the first question followed a similar pattern: they would insist that they were true to themselves both on and off-line, but then also point out specific differences in interactions and experiences across both settings. For example, Michael urged that he presents “as [he is]... I keep it real,” and Brian even exclaimed that his online presentation is “Exactly who I am!” – but would then begin to argue the opposite. Despite saying that he presents himself exactly as he is, Michael reminded me that a digital profile is “what you make up,” and that it can be customized and tailored to fit a specific persona. Ken wrestled with how “real” an online presentation is, arguing that “sometimes I think it’s a more accurate picture because… your guard is really down when you’re talking to… a screen… and if they don’t like you then you can just block them and that’s the end of it.” He claimed that it’s easier to be open about himself online, but also noted that an online version isn’t necessarily who you are. I took that to mean one of two things (or both): you can lie and deceive others by presenting someone that is different than who you are, or you can present yourself online in a way that you feel you cannot present offline.

One can hide behind the profile in two ways: they can create a “better” version that they display or they can use it to display a self they feel they cannot display offline.  
I believe that the profile in these virtual spaces provides safer opportunities for identity presentation and exploration. Users can present themselves in the way they want to be seen – in ways that it may not necessarily be safe to present themselves offline. For myself, I feel as if I can present in a more forward manner in terms of my desires (sexual and platonic), since the space of Grindr allows me to assume that other users are gay or looking for similar interactions.

When in social situations at bars or parties I cannot always make the same assumptions, and I’ve had negative experiences in the past that range from somewhat uncomfortable to feeling physically threatened. Amy said in her interview that, as a transgender woman, she feels as if she has more control online over both how she presents herself and how she is perceived. She said that offline her presentation and how she is seen change on a case to case basis, depending on where she is, who she is with, and how she feels. Phil highlighted similar aspects of the profiles, saying that they allow a “sort of anonymity” that can provide more self-confidence for users depending on how they present. He explained that, in some ways, it can be safer as the interaction happens virtually through the platform rather than face to face.

The virtual space acts an intermediate where users can test out how they want to interact with others, take chances, and explore the possibilities for offline, physical interaction before actually engaging in it. While the results of these interactions can still be dangerous, in terms of cases like McArthur or the data breaches, there is less threat of immediate physical danger. Such danger cannot be ignored due to the lack of physicality – my intention is to highlight the ways in which Grindr can act as a safe(r) space for gay connection than the offline world we navigate. There are ways we, as users, can act online that would never occur offline unless in one-on-one conversations.

47 Or even both at the same time.
situations or in private. Michael stated during his interview that he feels more uninhibited offline, and that his expressions of sexual desire or preference “wouldn’t happen in a bar.” Some claimed that they act exactly the same online and offline, while others said they were more uninhibited, and therefore more “real,” online.

Nobody could seem to make up their mind on where they were their “real” selves, and I found myself reaching dead ends when I attempted to interrogate the tensions my interviewees were arriving at. I was initially confused, even frustrated at their contradictions as I listened back to the interviews and tried to make sense of the back and forth. As I listened though, I realized that I had a similar relationship with dating apps – I try to be as “real” as I can, posting whatever photo I think makes me look most attractive (but is that real?) and writing a witty bio that best captures me (is that real either?) in hopes of receiving messages of interest. My “real” self becomes what I want others to see of me, but also what I think others will want to see.

Recently, even as I was writing this thesis, I had an experience where somebody that I knew I had previously spoken to started messaging me again on Grindr. We had talked on and off in over my junior and senior years of college, but at one point he stopped responding and disconnected from me on other social media. So it was surprising when he started messaging me again on a Thursday night, quickly insisting that I come to a party he was having on Friday or come and spend time with him Saturday night. I wondered why he suddenly decided to speak to me again, and then I realized that I had recently change my profile picture on Grindr to one where I looked significantly different from my previous one. To him, I was not the person he had become disinterested in months earlier – I was a new face in the virtual landscape, a new, “real” person he was interacting with. Once he realized I was the same person from before, he stopped answering me and it was as if we had never talked at all. But in that experience, I realized that
the virtual profile (especially in a setting like Grindr’s) holds a unique power to create and influence offline understandings and actions. It feels similar to the typical catfish situation, except neither of us were necessarily lying about our identities – it just happened that he saw me as someone new, someone different that had entered the virtual world, someone that he wanted to talk to.

**Virtual Speculations: What Happens IRL?**

Knowing the impact that the virtual profile itself can have, I will now look at the dynamics between users online and offline. Many of my interviewees reasoned that people were more open and uninhibited on the applications, and that their interactions online often felt more forward than those offline. I would attribute this disparity to my earlier point that the virtual world of Grindr acts as a buffer where more risks can be taken with little immediate physical threat. Amy told me that she sees the directness of online communication on the apps as a result of there being more room for error. In my own experience, I have found that if I feel a conversation going awry or if I feel any sort of discomfort, I can easily remove myself from the interaction by blocking the other user – a feature that (unfortunately) is not available offline. Samuel told me that he often lets the other person steer the conversation online, whereas offline he finds himself having more meaningful and sentimental interactions. I asked him to elaborate on why he felt there was less emotion in the online sphere, and he responded that “sincerity is hard to gauge online.” His distinction between the positives of accessibility and directness online, and the positives of sentimentality and emotion offline stuck with me.

Based on my interviews, individuals feel as if they already can be more vulnerable and open about themselves online than offline, mostly due to the removal of physicality. Stripping
the physical interaction allows a buffer zone from potential immediate danger or retaliation – while there are still dangers on the apps themselves, I do believe this is a key component. This buffer also strips the human contact and connection, which could account for the murkiness around emotionality. As Samuel mentioned earlier, there seems to be a lack of emotionality in conversing online, or more an inability to identify or trust emotion. A future iteration of these cultural objects that are dating apps could seek to create a space where one can be vulnerable both in terms of their offline inhibitions and their emotionality.

I wonder if offline emotionality and online comfortability will always remain separate, and what it would take to better translate offline emotionality to a virtual setting. Maybe we just haven’t reached that level of proficiency with the apps yet, maybe we’re still learning how to navigate that aspect of them. Or maybe we need to relearn and revise how we interact offline, and our uninhibited actions online can help us reach that vulnerability offline. As stated in my first chapter, cultures of usage are dependent upon this interaction of nostalgia and novelty – or, within a future-based framework: longing and discovery. We long for certain outcomes from these digital objects, we discover ways to make those happen with what we are given, and occasionally the object will transform to satisfy that longing. At its core, that is what a culture of usage is; it is the ways in which the subject (the user) and the object (the apps) transform and adapt to the desires and needs of one another. If Boellstorff reasons that the virtual, while no less “real,” does exist separately from the actual, then the cultures of usage are what bridge that gap.

The virtual originally developed in response to the actual, to satisfy longings as I mentioned, and now we are reaching a point where we see the actual morphing in response to the digital. A prime example can be seen in the interview responses from my first chapters that describe a “taking over” of offline cultures such as cruising or going to gay bars. The offline
landscape of hookup culture is being rewritten by dating apps, just as I believe it has been rewritten time and time before. While bathhouses and gay bars are obviously vastly different from dating apps, I argue they all exist as spaces that defy the rules and standards of the “actual” world, creating new “virtual” spaces where participants can enact their desires unsupported in the “actual.” We can only speculate on what new desires the current iteration will generate, what shortcomings or absences we will come to notice. It is impossible to know exactly how hookup culture – or any culture – will manifest moving forward, but I read Boellstorff’s understanding of “virtual” as one that emphasizes a potentiality that we should lean into rather than fear.

For me, this potentiality is not all that different from Muñoz’s understanding of queerness and queer futurity. Muñoz argues that future is queerness’s domain, that queerness is potentiality, and I believe that the same can be said for the virtual. The virtual is a realm of potential not available or accessible (yet) in an actual, physical space. Boellstorff argues “virtual worlds do not mediate between places; they are places in their own right” (394), and I agree in that to dismiss such worlds as in-betweens strips them of their potential for power and change. Grindr is not the change, but it is the place where the change can be located, where the change occurs.

These virtual worlds are real places where real things are happening, the lack of physical touch and interaction does not remove the physical responses to interactions had. Boellstorff highlights the potential “physical-world ramifications” of falling in love online as an example of the reality of virtual worlds. Physicality and reality are not synonymous, and it would be silly to insinuate that something very real in our culture like Grindr departs from reality simply because it is not physical. Boellstorff closes his argument stating, “The digital is not linked to the real because it ‘simulates’ the physical… The category of the real is not a point of distinction

49 In this case, on Second Life.
between the digital and the physical” (397).\textsuperscript{50} If the digital does not simulate the physical, I believe it instead expands the real beyond the physical – the digital is potential, it is possibility that reaches beyond physical boundaries and limitations.

\textsuperscript{50} Boellstorff, “For Whom the Ontology Turns.”
Conclusion

When I first said I wanted to write my Division III project about Grindr and gay dating apps, I was afraid people wouldn’t take it seriously – even I wasn’t sure if I could take it seriously. I had never considered Grindr anything besides an app on my phone that helped me meet and sleep with people. But it still felt important, it felt like there was something there worth studying, worth investigating that I could find meaning in. The apps were my object of study, a cultural object I was incredibly familiar with that I would need to tease apart. I worked to make the familiar strange by exploring the apps through an academic lens, and I realized I was finding academic significance in something that I had been convinced had none. Conducting the initial research from the literature and interviews helped me to build the academic base to my writing, but once I began writing the chapters I found it difficult to locate myself within the temporal, cultural framework I had created.

Writing about temporality requires one to attempt to interrupt the flow of time, to locate a moment at which one’s own narrative can enter the wider, ongoing narrative. I encountered this issue of interrupting while writing this paper – what counts as the past, and what counts as the present? Only two weeks before my final deadline, many of my peers sent me breaking news articles detailing the data breaches. Bruce McArthur was just charged with his seventh murder according to an article published only thirty minutes ago as I am writing this very sentence.\textsuperscript{51} Time continues to flow and change, not waiting for us – investigators of these temporalities – to catch up. And for me, that is what is so valuable about my investigations. Each moment we live through is soon to become the past, and has the potential to influence future presents. The effects

will likely not be known until they have happened, and seemingly mundane events may eventually manifest as their causes.

Just as the literature on gay dating apps is still emerging, I believe these cultures of usage are still emerging as well. My research has revealed many different facets of how individuals use and interact with apps like Grindr, and I have come to realize that it may not be possible to identify specifics within cultures of usage. I have taken to saying “cultures,” the plural, as I also have realized there is no singular, shared way in which individuals experience gay dating apps. There may be similarities, and there may be overarching themes across time and space in how these cultures of (homo)sexuality have existed, but there is no monolithic experience. We may not be able to uncover the specificities of these cultures until we are historians in the future looking back on the current moment.

The last section of my third chapter began to explore potential within the context of future possibilities, but I do not believe potential is only linked to the future. Each chapter of this paper focuses loosely on the past, present, and then future, asking questions of these temporalities. Perhaps these questions are unanswerable, but I argue it is worth investigating these questions and exploring the potentials. The scope of my studies should not be confined to the practical limitations of this project, and I hope there is room and opportunity in the years to come for myself – or others – to continue this research.

We think of the past as a static resource we can reference, one that lacks change and exists only as is written in history books. But the past is dynamic: we notice and are called back to the past new things in our present experiences we may have written off or forgotten about entirely. New problems may emerge that we can only solve through accessing the past, through generating new meanings and understandings from bygone moments. Muñoz’s ghosts do not just
appear out of thin air, they gather energy over time as they quietly influence the spaces they inhabit. I see potential in these hauntings in that there is no way to predict what will hold a lasting influence or impact. There is also an endless archive of experience and energy to look back to when trying to make sense of our presents – Muñoz’s writing focuses mostly on the AIDS epidemic, and I didn’t even fully delve into that topic in this paper. There are endless ghosts that I could invoke on this topic, and there are endless histories to be drawn from in general. While the past is not static it is still a resource that can teach us plenty about the conditions and cultures of today. Nostalgia, or nostalgic thinking, can become a tool to help us understand the novelties of today that may initially mystify us.

As for the present, there is so much more I wish I could write on. I worry that my second chapter focused too much on the present-day negatives of Grindr in an attempt to avoid a one-sided utopic understanding. There’s far more to be understood and unpacked when engaging with queer visibility and safety – both positives and negatives. I urge readers to continue to think critically about the novelties they engage with, and to keep striving to understand the cultures that are generated by these objects and from interacting with them. How do we – how do you come to understand the world through interactions and experiences with cultural objects? How do familiar concepts evolve when mediated by these objects? For example, privacy and safety take on entirely new meanings when considered in the context of Grindr. They are shaped by the cultures of dating apps, which then in turn influence how the apps progress or are developed. Understanding your own position and participation in these evolving cultures can be instrumental in getting the most out of using them, and can also assist in understanding your position in the world as a whole.
This project required me to engage with my past and present in ways I was not necessarily prepared for, but also in ways that I knew would be integral to the research, the writing, and my experiences in general. I realized what was haunting me, as well as haunting this project: a desire to understand how and why my usage of dating apps had shaped my understandings of sex and sexuality. My process has not necessarily been therapeutic, as that implies there was something wrong or to be fixed—and that I did fix it—but it has been insightful and revelatory. I have learned about what I get out of the apps beyond the surface level gratifications, and I have had the opportunity to reflect upon my experiences and see how they’ve influenced my cultures of usage. There is so much more exploration and work that could be done—that I want to do on this topic. I want to ask future participants more specific questions, ones aimed at how they feel access to and usage of virtual technology have shaped their experiences. What ghosts haunt them, what futures do they see for themselves, how do they engage with these temporalities? What do they feel they have gained or lost through using the apps, or feel has been gained or lost by queer culture as a whole? Before, I wanted to avoid asking leading questions as I wanted as unbiased answers as possible. Now I want to keep pursuing the specificities and complexities, to ask the harder questions, encourage deeper thinking, and continue exploring.

As you finish reading this paper, I urge you to reflect upon your own cultures of usage with the objects you make use of every day. Strive to make the familiar less familiar, locate yourself and your objects within larger contexts. Ubiquity can be an illusion, one that leads us to just accept things as they are and continue using and interacting with them as we always do. I originally believed Grindr held that same simplistic ubiquity, but in those first readings of Gudelunas and Turner I realized that there was more. I agree with Muñoz in that queerness is a
potentiality we are perpetually moving towards, and maybe never reaching – and I believe that just as queerness is constantly evolving and moving beyond our reach, there will always be more to explore and understand in the cultural objects that we use every day. We may never be able to fully uncover and understand it all, but we can continue to expand what we do, what we create, and what we know.
Interview Guide

• **Introduction**
  
  o Review consent form
  
  o “As we progress through the questions, if there is a question or topic you’d like to speak to more, or focus on more, please let me know. Similarly, let me know if there is a question you’d like to skip as well. We do not necessarily need to cover every question, and if we feel the conversation going in a certain direction I’m open to following that and going with it.”
  
  o “If a question does not make sense or the wording is confusing to you, feel free to stop me and ask for clarification at any point.”

• **Part I: General Questions**

  • “The primary purpose of these questions is to serve as an icebreaker and a lens into the ‘cultures of usage’ behind gay-targeted dating applications. Questions focus on the more concrete, material concepts being explored in this project. These questions build from a general description of self to a wider interrogation into how society/culture interacts with these base ideas.”

  • What gender pronouns do you use?
  
  • What name or pseudonym would you like your responses to be attributed to in the final write up?

1. How would you describe yourself? (This can include whatever you feel it needs to: image, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, etc.)

2. Questions about dating apps
  
  a. What dating applications do you have experience with?
  
  b. Which of those do you feel are specifically targeted towards the gay community?
  
  c. In what ways do you see the app(s) being targeted towards the gay community?

  How would you describe your usage of dating applications?
  
  a. Why do you use them?
b. When/where do you use them?
What are your opinions on the function of dating applications?
What stereotypes do you hear about dating applications? (What do you hear other people say about dating applications)
a. What stereotypes do you hear about gay dating applications?

• **Part II: Term Association**
• The goal here is to create and identify language within the pairing of myself and the interviewee, giving them the chance to define terms before I introduce them in later interview questions. Answers can either be given as a definition, as an association, an experience, a story – however the participant feels they should respond. (A special thank you to Emma Leff and Ashley McGrath for providing these ideas and improvements, and workshopping this concept with me in the fall semester.)
  o Cruising
  o Isolation
  o Recognition
  o Visibility
  o Stigma
  o Virtual, Digital
  o Privacy
  o Personal

• **Part III: Specific Questions**
• These questions aim to go deeper into the subject matter than the first set of questions, utilizing language introduced (by myself) and defined (by the subject) in Part II.
  1. When do you feel most visible, most seen? How does it feel to be visible?
  2. When do you feel most invisible? How does it feel to be invisible?
  3. Question about stigma from outside of AND within community
     a. What instances of stigma do you see coming from those outside the gay community?
b. What instances of stigma do you see coming from within the gay community?

   How do you present yourself and your identity when online?

a. Is that different than how you present yourself offline?

   How do you consider privacy and/or safety when using dating applications?

   How do recognition and visibility function for you in terms of your usage of dating applications?

   How would you compare interactions with potential partners you have on vs off-line?

Are there any other questions you have for me, or any other stories/experiences that you’d be willing to share about the topics we have discussed?

* For the interview with Phil, some questions in Parts I and III were altered as he informed me during the recruiting process that while he does psychotherapeutic work with gay men who use dating apps, he has not ever used any dating apps or websites himself.


