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The Rainbow Flag and the Green Carnation: Grindr in The Gay Village

Abstract

This paper uses autoethnography to examine locative media — specifically, the location-based social network app Grindr — in the context of spatial practices. Because of the way it integrates the physical location of a user in the construction of a digital space, its curious political and logistical challenge to previously defined spatial arrangements such as gay villages, and the negotiation over interpersonal relations its use entails, Grindr poses a unique case to examine questions around space and locative media. I argue that Grindr harkens back to Pre-Stonewall modes of cruising and socializing through the manipulation of cues, codes, and symbols and disturbs the link between spatial arrangements based on co-presence and gay identity politics.

Contents

Introduction

Unlike many other online social networks, Grindr, "the largest all male, location-based mobile network tool for Android, iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad and BlackBerry,"[1] runs exclusively as a downloadable app on mobile devices. Where other information and communication technologies (ICT) claim to obviate space and time, Grindr works through propinquity: users of the service navigate a representation of other nearby users ranked according to distance. Locative media, of which Grindr is an example, combine elements of a number of other technologies including the connectivity of social network sites, the location-aware capabilities of cell phones, and the computing architecture enabled by the advent of smartphones; these are technologies

"embodied in access, spatial in operations, and place-based in content."[2] Promotional materials on the four year-old app's web site claim 4 million users: some 950,000 people access the service daily from nearly every country in the world, collectively transmitting some seven million messages and two million photos daily. Grindr has enrolled millions of users, attracted considerable media attention, and, in so doing, earned its operators significant revenue. While the service is indubitably popular, its announced reason for being remains deliberately vague. The company's site reports that the technology is "uncomplicated" and issues an equivocal invitation for users to put the service to any number of nonexclusive uses: "With Grindr, '0 Feet Away' isn't just a cute slogan we print on our T-shirts. It's a state of mind, a way of life."[3]

Because of the way it integrates the physical location of a user in the construction of an embodied digital space, its curious political and logistical challenge to previously defined spatial arrangements such as gay villages, and the possible interpersonal relations its use bounds, Grindr poses a unique case to think through some questions around space, social media, and mobile devices.[4] Grindr is an example of the kind of privately owned and proprietary technology that forms "the invisible city that grows from telecommunications"[5]. Despite a growing body of empirical research on social media and location-based technologies, the unique combination of technical elements, emergent social practices, and quick adoption by its target demographic make Grindr an ideal case to examine the creation of space through locative media and the ways in which such spaces inherit meaning and influence communication. This paper uses autoethnography and several distinct bodies of literature including queer theory, design, and urban informatics to try to make sense of the Grindr phenomenon in spatial terms. Grindr extends the logic of the gay village into the realm of mobile computing while harkening back to earlier modes of gay symbolic communication; invites a particular performance by its users that

enacts understandings about space and bodies that are particular to the user community; and accommodates as a matter of course what Knopp (2004) refers to as "counterhegemonic norms," that is, a way of valorizing the fluidity of intimate relations between men[6]. At a variety of scales —the city, the neighborhood, and person to person—Grindr affords a horizon of potential spatial relations that are dynamically, strategically, and contentiously enacted by its users on an individual level, independent of any collaborative, identity-based political aim.

In the next section, I describe how representations of the app and its users in popular and scholarly publications have recalled common stereotypes of gay men and their sexuality, especially the idea of promiscuity or pathological sexual behaviors, and how emerging empirical research shows a more complex and strategic use of locative media by gay men. Next, I present three sections that focus on aspects of Grindr use: the formation of bodies in digital space, the relation of Grindr to gay villages in both the abstract and the particular, and, finally, the negotiated nature of relations that take place in this space that is at once physical and digital. I begin each section with a quote from an anonymous Grindr user and present my own impressions based on my use of the app. This paper draws both on the experience of the author not as a participant observer separate from the community under observation, but as a reflective informant. Anderson (2006) describes "analytic" autoethnography as a naturalistic research paradigm wherein the researcher is a member of the community under study (complete member researcher); exhibits analytic reflexivity; makes himself of herself visible in the text produced; dialogues with other informants in the community; and commits to theoretical understanding of the world. Like all forms of ethnography, autoethnography may be seen by many as ungeneralizable, but the attempt made here is not so much to describe fundamental laws that describe all aspects of locative media, but to develop theoretical understanding and qualitative

categories. I will draw on data collected in the summer of 2012 in an attempt to frame the uptake of this technology among my community and to describe this use as a function of cultural, symbolic, and performative action that simultaneously reaffirms and reorganizes spatial and political relations.

Locative Media and Gay Representations

Grindr's popularity has brought attention from the government, media, public health researchers, and scholars interested in gay men and social media. A 2012 data breach attracted the attention of United States Representative Henry Waxman, who sent a public letter to Grindr's founder, owner, and CEO Joel Simkhai asking for specific information about the app's privacy policy, security measures, and candor with its users (Waxman and Butterfield, 2012). The security breach raised significant issues of trust in terms of the security of the system and privacy concerns of users, activating a number of common anxieties about privacy and social media. Representations of Grindr in the popular press generally focus not on privacy, but on gay sex. Rogers (2012) used the term "Grindrscape" to describe the interface of the app, a cascade of thumbnails of user profile images. In *The New York Times* and on *The Huffington Post*, reports on the technology feature sensational reports of crime or lurid stories that portray Grindr as emblematic of gay male promiscuity (Galanes, 2012; Woo, 2013). In *Vanity Fair*, Kapp (2011) described Grindr as "the scariest gay bar on earth that is all over the earth."[7] References to Grindr appeared as punch lines on Saturday Night Live and The Office (Towle, 2012; Plante, 2012).

Researchers in public health and human sexuality are particularly interested in Grindr and its presumptive role as a facilitator of sexual relationships. For example, in a survey of 375 young men in Los Angeles, Landovitz et al. (2013) found that among respondents, the app "is the most commonly reported mechanism for sexual partnering in the previous 3 months—out ranking the use of Internet sex-focused sites and 'through friends'" (p. 11). Weiss and Samenow (2010) called for research into sex addiction specifically mentioning Grindr as a potential place to look for problematic behaviors. Although Grindr is relatively new, the way it has so far registered in print, on television, and in public health literature certainly recalls many characterizations of gay life as laughable, hyper-sexualized, or dangerous.

Grindr and its users are also of interest as a business phenomenon. Mobile dating is a rapidly expanding subset of the online dating market, a multi-billion dollar industry (Moldvay, 2012). Other location-based apps that currently serve gay audiences include Scruff, Mister, Hornet, Growlr, Adam4Adam Radar, and Manhunt Mobile; presumably more apps will appear over time, perhaps even replacing Grindr as market leader. A number of mobile apps exist for other audiences as well, including Blendr (created as a spin-off by Grindr's parent company for use by straight and lesbian audiences), Baddo, Zoosk, Skout, and entries by profile-based dating sites such as eharmony, OKCupid, and Match.com. As far as industry watchers are concerned, these apps have not achieved the same market saturation and acceptance as comparable apps for gay audiences (Kelly, 2012). Freidman (2013) suggested that Grindr's success might owe to the fact that it was crated by and for gay men, a noteworthy dynamic in a male-dominated app design industry. Presumably the inside knowledge of gay designers allowed them to better diagnose a social need in their own community and to assemble suitable technology that solved the identified problem.

While Grindr is only one available option among many and is something of a niche product, it presents many clues about the direction and significance of social media in the gay community. Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) used longitudinal surveys of couples to show the increasing prevalence of Internet-based dating and demonstrated that for same-sex couples of all kinds, meeting online is now the most common way of starting a relationship: "Meeting online has not only become the predominant way that same-sex couples meet in the United States, but meeting online is now dramatically more common among same-sex couples than any way of meeting has ever been for heterosexual or same-sex couples in the past."[8] The authors suggest that due to the relative scarcity of available same-sex partners in the population as a whole, meeting new partners online appeals to those looking to form same-sex couples. Although the authors did not look at locative media in particular, they argued that "the efficiency of Internet search is changing the way Americans find romantic partners."[9]

These resonances of previous depictions of gay men that permeate popular descriptions of Grindr aside, the app as animated by users poses some foundational questions about the spread of computers into every domain of daily life. Researchers have begun to sketch out the contours of the emerging new computing paradigm in terms of who is using the technology and how it is growing in terms of locative media, a term that encompasses a shift in focus in research into social consequences of computing. McCullough (2006) defined research into locative media as a set of shifting frames of reference in the discourses around computers that places them in a new relation to human subjectivity, e.g., from virtual to embodied, from macro to micro, from universal to situated:

> Popular adjectives for the shift include tangible, mobile, ubiquitous, pervasive, invisible, embedded, physical, environmental and ambient. Among these, the current trend in favor of 'locative media' emphasizes the use of positional coordinates. Here the cultural focus turns toward activities that, despite being information intensive, have failed to dematerialize. It is of interest how many of these are urban.[10]

National empirical research confirms the technological aspect of this spread of computerization into daily life in the United States. The Pew Internet and American Life Project found that nearly half of all American adults (46%) own a smartphone and reported that "smartphone owners are now more prevalent within the overall population than owners of more basic mobile phones."[11] Approximately 55% of smartphone users access some kind of service that utilizes the location-aware capabilities of their phone and many access more than one.[12] Similar survey-based research by Pew associates stated that social media usage among Internet users has become ubiquitous: Duggan and Brenner (2013) report that young adults aged 18 – 29 have the highest social media use rates (83%), although "Internet users under 50 are particularly likely to use a social networking site of any kind."[13] This survey also recorded provocative, statistically significant differences in social media use based on race, ethnicity, and gender; the authors stated that "[t] hose living in urban settings are also significantly more likely than rural internet users to use social networking."[14] Lugano (2008) aimed to enrich design of mobile social network software by exploring ideas about the nature of social connectivity and interactivity. He articulated the need for research that focuses on users and on the social network itself using qualitative and quantitative methods. His analysis of key aspects of mobile social software reaffirmed the importance of and prominence of local connections, even as technology enables communication over greater distances.

Empirical research on social media and gay men also complicates depictions of Grindr from the popular press or public health perspective and points to complex and nuanced patterns of use afforded by smartphone computing. Gudelunas (2012) conducted a series of focus groups and intercept interviews in New York and Dallas that sought to explore gay men's motivations for using social network sites through a uses and gratifications approach, a media and

communications analysis framework that emphasizes the active participation of audiences, the

goal-oriented nature of media usage, the multiplicity of needs served through media

consumption, and the ability of individual users to articulate their reasons for using certain media

and not others.[15] While this study focused on social media as a whole and included many other

online social networks along with Grindr, the author found that gay men tend to use multiple

online social networks simultaneously to achieve different levels of anonymity and disclosure.

For example, users might cross-reference profiles of a man of interest on Facebook or LinkedIn

to find more "credible" information beyond that person's strategic self-representation in a Grindr

profile. The author also indicated that users of Grindr vary widely in terms of motivation and

view the app as a means of finding casual sexual partners, dating, meeting a monogamous

partner, making friends, and learning about a new city, all of which happen through negotiation

in chat.[16] The members of the focus groups differed in their exact uses of Grindr and other social

networks, but most participants employed distinctive strategies for managing multiple online

identities and redirecting the presumptive uses of various networks toward self-defined goals.

Grindr, as an example, serves a dual purpose of facilitating both friendships and sexual activities,

sometimes with the same person. Conversely, general social networks like Facebook were

viewed by interviewees as less useful for connecting with other gay men because even when an

individual's social network is full of gay or gay-friendly people, these networking sites are more

public and therefore require more discretion.[17] Jernigan and Mistree (2009) demonstrated how

"[n]etwork data shifts the locus of information control away from individuals" by showing that

gay men's sexual orientation can be accurately predicted through a relatively simple analysis of

their Facebook networks, even in cases where the users themselves have not shared this

information. Because online social networks display a high degree of homophily, identifying gay

men is as easy as identifying male users with lots of gay friends: "Without any information about a Facebook user beyond a list of his friends, one can accurately predict his sexual orientation."[18] Taken together, the work of Gudelunas and Jernigan and Mistree indicate the specific needs of gay users of social networks and the many risks such use entails as a contradictory impulse to selectively disclose identity and to maintain privacy.

In the remainder of the paper, I want to describe the use of Grindr from an autoethnographic perspective. In each of the next three sections, I start with a bit of text taken from an anonymous user's profile to describe a theme I see emerging from use of the app. After a brief observation of the system at work, I attempt to contextualize my observation with a discussion of the literature of a relevant, related field. In the first section, I describe how Grindr relates to ideas of embodiment and inscription in interface design work and media theory. Next, I describe how Grindr functions in relation to existing gay geographies of the city, with particular emphasis on the history of the gay community in Los Angeles and the founding of specifically gay territories. Here I show that Grindr serves many of the same functions as physical gay territories, but does so through the manipulation of symbols and codes, without any complementary outward, public display. Lastly, I describe the kinds of socializing that Grindr use enables and the kinds of negotiations and etiquettes users engage in to communicate. I borrow ideas from queer theory to characterize this kind of negotiation as a defining feature of intimate relations between men that has been captured by the app's design.

Embodiment and Inscription: *"No face = No chat" -- Grindr user, June 29, 2012, Downtown L.A.*

The Grindr interface initially appears as a cascade of thumbnail tiles of user profiles. Contrary to the promotional mock-ups on Grindr's corporate site, many of the profiles do not depict a user's face: pictures of bare chests are equally common, and depending on what time of day and where a user were to access the service, the gallery of profiles might include more bodies than faces. Less commonly, a user might present himself with a still life or landscape, an image that could serve as a conversation starter, a means to maintain anonymity, or a gesture of modesty. Tapping on any of the thumbnail views opens a profile. Examining a single profile takes up the whole screen of the phone or tablet, so only a single individual profile can be examined at one time. The full view of the profile offers a larger version of the profile image. Demographic information and the relative distance of the selected user's location from your present position appear in the upper left; a brief, Tweet-length bio, and four buttons (Chat, Favorite, Block, Report) appear in the lower right. Because Grindr profiles contain so few elements, curation and self-presentation are extremely strategic. Grindr's advertising creates an image of the app as reminiscent of face-to-face contact, a vision of the Grindrscape as a cascade of handsome, friendly faces. In actuality, the scene is considerably more complicated and more contentious. Grindr is as much about bodies as it is about faces.

While it might be assumed that profiles that do not show the user's face (or, in some cases, do not show anything at all) indicate a preference for anonymity, and therefore, anonymous sex, this is not necessarily the case. Many profiles consist of a title and a picture of a torso, but other faceless profiles can include all kinds of other information about what kind of contact is being sought. Some users incorporate an exchange of pictures of their faces as part of the process of chatting and indicate such a requirement in their profile. Such a user might prefer to keep his face picture under greater control for any number of reasons, such as preserving a

professional reputation, avoiding disclosing his availability to a person who might be a neighbor, or avoiding identifying as gay. Clearly, the app does not discourage users from arranging anonymous sexual liaisons with other men, but because of the flexibility and pared-down nature of user profiles, Grindr use often amounts to a game of revealing and hiding.

Men using Grindr are involved in the development of an elaborate and staged etiquette of presentation and representation of the body that unfolds in an immersive environment, a hybrid zone of digital and physical space. The importance of bodies in this hybrid space is not merely a question of motivations or sexual propriety. The bodies present in the Grindrscape correspond to physical bodies nearby, to men in real-time who have made themselves available to chat, and under certain, self-determined conditions, to meet. But participation in this space is not entirely spontaneous or unstructured; it is partly determined through interaction with the material infrastructure of smartphone computing and a series of signs contained in the system.

We can start to understand the hybrid nature of the Grindrscape as both physical and digital by looking at design and media theory. In the field of interaction design, phenomenological explorations of mobile technology design describe the interface as a site of directed performance, of the production of space, and of the transmission of inscribed meaning. Farman (2012) situated the widespread use of locative media in a theoretical framework that combines elements of post-structuralism and phenomenology to investigate how "experiences of virtual space are dissolving into the practices of our everyday lives."[19] Farman's central concern in the book is the mutually constitutive relationship of space and bodies, "a process of inscribing meaning into our contemporary social and spatial interactions."[20] Farman's analysis combined the inscription of meaning in the use of locative media with the various ways that digital worlds interact with the physical realm, the "intimate relationship between the production of space and

the bodies inhabiting those spaces."[21] Farman argued that locative media divide reality into legible spaces and, through a process of embodiment, direct our performances in those spaces. This is not to say use of technology is completely deterministic, but that locative media bound a horizon of potential behaviors and interactions.

In a chapter on social networks, Farman highlighted the importance of reciprocity in making sense of mobile technology. Users require feedback from both non-human and human agents in order to navigate, comprehend, communicate, and ultimately, order reality into spaces and bodies: mobile social networks are not merely experienced, they are enacted through proxemics, movement, and, most importantly for the present exploration of spatial practices related to Grindr, reciprocity.[22] So although they are enacted through mobile interfaces and happen via information and communications technology, Grindr use illustrates the simultaneous, mutual formation of bodies and space.

The idea that Grindr functions as a horizon of inscribed understandings about bodies and space that are then performed by its users might help explain how the Grindrscape orders social relations. We do not invent the terms and rules of our online interactions anew every time we operate an interface. Our interactions with others in those spaces, our means of communicating with and through the machine, are not created anew out of whole cloth at each use. Our posts, clicks, swipes, chats, and emoticons are constructed ahead of time for our use. We don't necessarily act spontaneously from a whole universe of possible actions; rather we make a communicative performance based on the manipulation of a set of acts and symbols. In this way, our actions and the space we are inhabiting becomes intelligible via our relations with others, a set of relations that still allows for improvisation, resistance, cooperation, suggestion, double entendre, and all other manner of strategic communicative acts.

Straight Space and Gay Villages: *"Lost in Weho" -- Grindr user, 25 September, 2012, West Hollywood, California*

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When you use Grindr, you connect immediately to other men around you, bringing together an ad hoc social space. That is to say, Grindr is astonishingly local. A different assortment of profiles presents itself depending on where in town (or in the country) you are located and when you access the service. On campus, my Grindrscape, mirroring the city, turns rather collegiate. Because I live in a gay village (West Hollywood or Weho, an independent, self-governed gay city within Los Angeles County with its own laws, mayor, city council, and police force), the Grindrscape near home is populated with comparatively older, whiter, and more professional men, although there certainly exists considerable variety among users during any given session. When I moved to the neighborhood in 2009, I learned from other men on Grindr when the best time to visit the local library is, where the public pool is, and what bars and restaurants to try, information that I might once have gotten from a published guide or periodical. In response to specific questions about Weho, my fellow Grindr users can be quite informative. In contrast, I often ask men I am chatting with what they think Grindr is for and have yet to solicit the same response twice, reflecting the open-ended nature of the app and the strategic uses to which it is put. I frequently see profiles indicating that a guy is visiting and looking for a fling, site seeing, nightlife, and dining, or any combination of these things. These informational exchanges occur amid the relentlessly flirty greetings and graphic solicitations that Grindr use entails. Grindr gives you a new way to access the places where you already are. Gordon (2008), writing of smartphones and the cultural changes in the production and consumption of information their use

entails, argued, "The tools are themselves just a medium to address much wider cultural changes around what it means to occupy space, to be with others, and to be local in a world where everything from the spectacular to the mundane has global reach."[23]

While much has been written about *place* as a sub-concept of space that consists of locations, materials, and practices "continuously enacted as people go about their everyday lives,"[24] I examine here social customs associated with the establishment of gay villages as a continuation of the mutual implication of mobile technology in the formation of space, here at the neighborhood-level. That is to say, an analysis of the emergence of Grindr and the spaces of gay life in the city generally and in Los Angeles specifically functions transitively in that it requires thinking about the relationship of space to gay identity and about the relationship of technologies like Grindr to space. Growing out of previous debates about how technological changes might alter the cityscape and the very notion of the city itself, the field of urban informatics uses cities and city life to frame questions about the social aspects of computing and computerization. Urban informatics insists on both the specificity of individual cities and the commonality of urban experience to show how "pervasive computing technologies can be put to use and brought to life."[25] To understand Grindr in the context of urban life, we should attempt to understand how the lives of gay men have historically been tied to the city and to experiences of urbanity[26].

Castells (1983) observes that "[u]rban forms and functions are produced and managed by the interaction between space and society, that is by the historical relationship between human consciousness, matter, energy, and information."[27] Making special mention of bars as the focal point of social life for gay people since World War II, Castells ties the establishment of territory by gay people to pragmatic concerns, such as protection in numbers from violence and police

brutality; to political projects, such as gaining representation in state and local government; and thirdly, to affective concerns, the desire "to set up their own organizations and institutions in all spheres of life."[28] The establishment of gay villages then occurs as a struggle for civil rights, but also as an assertion of identity politics, as an alternative social organization set in contrast to the prevailing hegemony of the family and the rejection of sex in the culture at large.[29] Gay villages can be important spaces in the formation of gay identity in that they combine "real and imagined physical attributes with social and personal characteristics" to create a particular vision of what it means to be gay in a given time and place.[30]

Los Angeles, like many large cities, is home to a gay village (the previously mentioned independent city-within-a-city of West Hollywood) and many other neighborhoods with traditionally high concentrations of gay men. Faderman and Timmons (2006) attributed the long history of gay and lesbian communities in West Hollywood, Downtown Los Angeles, Silverlake, and Hollywood to its "Wild West" ethos:

> That ethos helps to explain why it was Los Angeles that gave birth to the country's first gay organizations, churches, synagogues, magazines, community centers. L.A.'s growth to gargantuan magnitude and its vast diversity also help to explain why gay men and women flocked there: in Los Angeles, they knew, they could find both anonymity and community, which have been vital to gays' survival and development.[31]

The history of the gay community in Los Angeles includes persistent, legalized police harassment since at least 1875;[32] the founding of the nation's oldest gay publication (*ONE*)[33] and its largest (*The Advocate*);[34]; the "homosexual riot" staged at Cooper's Doughnuts in protest of police brutality that precedes New York City's epochal Stonewall Riots by nearly a decade;[35] and a barely disguised gay and lesbian subculture in the film industry that dates back to the creation of motion pictures.[36] Los Angeles is, coincidentally, also the birthplace of Grindr.

Grindr sits atop the existing physical infrastructure of the gay village, giving men new ways to find one another and communicate. It joins a number of other novel technological

innovations that gay men have used to find each other in urban settings, including phone sex lines, classified ads, and Internet chat rooms, but it does so with a pronounced emphasis on space provided by the location-aware capability of smartphones. Grindr performs many of the more pragmatic functions of the gay village, such as bringing potential partners closer together and providing a platform for the exchange of local information. Although Grindr brings the logic of the gay village to other parts of the city, in effect giving entry to a gay space wherever it is running, the app does nothing to advance the other aims of the founding of gay villages, namely the political project or the affective aims of alternative community. It also places these exchanges in the relative anonymity and privacy of the Grindrscape, freeing users of any need to visually or physically project any outward sign of gayness or same-sex attraction. To borrow a well-worn chant of gay rights demonstrations and pride parades, Grindr lets its users be here and be queer, but it does not require that anyone get used to it.

Gay villages are in the midst of a number of demographic and economic changes and are becoming older, more affluent, and less exclusively gay as smaller cities and regional hubs become more hospitable (Brown, 2007). Thomas (2011) reports that "[b]etween 2005 and 2011, the number of gay and lesbian bars and clubs in gay-travel-guide publisher Damron's database decreased by 12.5 percent, from 1,605 to 1,405"[37]. In effect, the political goals of the gay village, having succeeded, partially obviate the need for gay enclaves. Halperin (2012) suggests that the increasing mainstreaming of openly gay men into previously forbidden institutions (the workplace, the military, marriage) and the ability of gays to connect using Grindr and other like apps impedes the progress of gay culture and progressive politics.[38]

Grindr's quick uptake by gay men owes in part to the history, location, and practices of gay men, qualities that cannot be separated from the gay spaces where these communities exist.

In this respect, Grindr represents a sort of throwback to the time before gay villages, when men used signs and symbols to make themselves visible to one another, when visual queues, secret lingo, and modes of dress alerted the initiated to one another and to one another only.

Etiquettes of Desire: *"No absolutes, ever. (ha)" -- Grindr user, September 12, 2012. Silverlake, Los Angeles.*

Widespread optimism of the utopian quality of "cyberspace" aside, how might we begin to work through how the hybrid digital/physical space of Grindr orders relations between the people interacting in that space? The call and response of Grindr profiles addresses, among other frequent topics, the ground rules of using Grindr, what the rules of engagement are for this space. Profiles comment on the desired valence of contact, sentiments commonly expressed in blunt admonitions (e.g. "No Hookups," "Looking to date," or "NSA," short for "No Strings Attached"). These opposing sentiments can seem confrontational. Profiles often feature messages directed outwardly, to the entire community of users. Many profiles routinely suggest that Grindr is only for casual sexual encounters; many profiles say the exact opposite. Profiles often state age, racial, or body type prerequisites in crass or dismissive terms. A number of ancillary blogs and hashtags have sprung up documenting these problematic profiles[39]. Users deal with these aggressions by blocking other users. When you block someone, he no longer appears in your Grindrscape and can no longer contact you. You know when another user has blocked you and the notice can sting. In practice, then, three basic modes constitute the possible channels of communication on Grindr: one-to-many communication via profile text, one-to-one direct negotiation with other user via chat, and finally, blocking other users. Users employ all three

means to address the purpose of Grindr, or at least, to address their understanding of that purpose and their reasons for using the app.

What kinds of social relations are called for even allowed in such a space? The flexibility in the design of the app and the habits of its users inform how people chat about the kinds of contact they want and with whom they want it. While it is true that Grindr can easily be used to facilitate casual sexual encounters, as many of its users will no doubt attest, the app seems to recognize the fluidity of relationships, the potential for mixed motivations. A sense of flexibility about what romantic and sexual relations between men can be pervades the profiles of Grindr users. Many users eliminate this ambiguity by stating preferences in advance, but other profiles explicitly embrace this ambiguity, in effect stating that they would prefer some kind of longer-term relationship, but would also consider one-off trysts. "No expectations," functions as a frequent motto, but also as a kind of injunction.

Gay men, whether they live openly in communities of their own creation or clandestinely in places that are hostile to them (or in some in-between, liminal space), have developed a number of means of signaling sexual or romantic desires to one another. In search of the community and anonymity afforded by the city, gay men have used a variety of outward signs to identify each other, including green carnations in the time of Oscar Wilde, red ties in the early 20th century, and the 1970s "hankie code", where "the color of the handkerchief combined with its position in the right or left rear pants pocket communicated a man's sexual tastes with great specificity."[40]

Whatever form they take, gay relationships take place in a heterosexist society and so, by definition, gay men must remake the taken-for-granted categories of socially acceptable human relations to suit their own lived experiences. Peplau (1993) characterizes research on gay men

and lesbians through the 1980s as focused primarily on pathologizing homosexuality; later researchers sought to empirically disprove stereotypes, among them that gay men do not seek and cannot maintain enduring relationships and lead lonely, isolated lives. Later researchers working in queer studies sought not so much to dispute these already disproven stereotypes, but to illuminate and undermine the heteronormative assumptions and taken-for granted categories from which gays and lesbians deviated, to problematize the hegemony of these categories as a source of shame in service of social control (Halperin and Traub, 2003).

In the domain of queer studies, Knopp (2004) argues that the dominant society and its rigid categories of place, socialization, and relationships exclude sexual minorities and produce the need for a politics of identity, a kind of forced mobility, and a personal quest for a social world that reflects the reality of desire:

> For gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders, and other queers, as for other oppressed groups, this means seeking people, places, relationships, and ways of being that provide the physical and emotional security, the wholeness as individuals and as collectivities, and the solidarity that are denied us in a heterosexist world.[41]

Knopp associates the urban experiences of gays in forming kinship communities in geographically bounded regions of the city as part of a political movement born out of this need to subvert, resist, and reorder dominant ontologies. He describes the problematic construction of a unitary gay community within these geographic confines as a project of identity politics fraught with internal paradoxes and unsound binaries including structure/ agency, theory/practice, and essentialist/constructionist; the author argues for a reworked ontological description of the lived world of humans that uses non-binary concepts such as place, placelessness, and movement in opposition to Cartesian and rationalist conceptions of space that reduce the interplay of physical and social worlds into flat, normative categories.[42]

Despite a strong push toward assimilation of gays and lesbians in the broader society, notably in the realm of marriage equality, whether or not there is something inherently different about same-sex intimate relationships remains an open and contested question. Much of the current success of gays in securing civil rights hinges on the idea that gay relationships are fundamentally similar to straight relationships, a position that ignores the presence of heterosexism, and until recently, legal prohibitions against gay sexuality. In any case, part of the developing set of customs emerging from Grindr use seems to incorporate contentious, clamoring, noisome negotiation about what kinds of relationships the men who use app are looking to have and how they relate to the dominant ideas of what relationships should be. In this respect, much of what happens on Grindr seems to be specific to the needs of gay men and, even more specifically, to the community of users of Grindr. In this space, men are fighting over these boundaries and categories, and hopefully, finding someone with whom they can agree.

Conclusion

In this article, I sought to use my own experience as a Grindr user and the method of autoethnography to describe how locative media form an embodied space that is not separate from physical space but fundamentally blended into it; reorder a particular historical, spatial formation, the gay village — providing new avenues for particular functions such as finding partners, making new friends, and sharing local information — in a way that does not require any place-centered, public-facing, communal political project; and create a particular relationship among users, the terms, means, and ends of which are necessarily subject to discussion and negotiation. In this way, Grindr returns gay socializing to a system of secret signs and symbols.

It connects to older patterns of gay socialization and favors the telltale sign recognizable to insiders over the showy displays of identity, the green carnation over the rainbow flag. As locative media proliferate, researchers must find ways to contextualize them with previously used methods and theories not to discount what is new and novel about them, but to understand them as multi-layered, complex, and dynamic. Further research on locative media at the intersection of sexuality, identity, and spatiality will serve to characterize the nature of our simultaneously digital and analog selves and the emergent properties of this moment in digital culture.

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Notes

[1] Statistics regarding the app and its user base are taken from Grindr's website at www.grindr.com, accessed 5 May 2013.
[2] McCullough, 2006, p. 26.
[3] http://grindr.com/learn-more, accessed 5 May 2013.
[4] While Grindr users are not necessarily gay, the community of users is composed overwhelmingly of men who have sex with other men. These users largely identify as gay men, but many others identify as straight, bisexual, queer, trans, or something else all together. For the purposes of this paper, I am interested primarily in the use of Grindr among gay men and its relationship to spatiality.
[5] Varnelis, 2009, p. 128.
[6] Knopp, 2004, p. 123.
[7] Kapp, 2011, n.p.
[8] Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012, p. 532.
[9] ibid., p. 523.
[10] McCullough, 2006, p. 26.
[11] Smith, 2012, p. 10.
[12] Smith, 2011, p. 1.
[13] Duggan and Brenner, 2013, p. 2.
[14] ibid.
[15] Gudelunas, 2012, p. 6.

16 ibid., p. 15.
17 ibid., p. 15.
18 Jernigan and Mistree, 2009, n.p.
19 Farman, 2012, p. 36.
20 ibid., p. 1.
21 ibid., p.4.
22 ibid., p. 67.
23 Gordon, 2008, n.p.
24 Creswell, 2009, n.p.
25 Williams & Dourish, 2006, p. 43.
26 Of course, not all gays live in urban areas; the trend in less urbanized areas in the United
States, particularly in the Mid-West, is toward a higher percentage of same-sex couples (Gates,
2006). Still, moving to the city to form affinity groups is a central feature of the gay imaginary
(Weston, 1995).
27 Castells, 1983, p. xv.
28 ibid., p. 161.
29 ibid., p. 157.
30 Forest, 1995, p. 133.
31 Faderman and Timmons, 2006, p. 361.
32 ibid., p. 15.
33 ibid., p. 116.
34 ibid., p. 133.
35 ibid., p. 1.
36 ibid., p. 62.
37 Thomas, 2011, n.p.
38 Halperin, 2012, p. 440.
39 See for example http://endracismandhomophobia.tumblr.com or the more blunt
http://www.douchebagsofgrindr.com.
40 Summers, 2008, n.p.
41 Knopp, 2004, p. 123.
42 ibid., p. 122.

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