**Digital Cosmos, Mutual Worlds: An Archive of Queer Social Spaces**

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**Abstract**

This project is a historiography of queer and trans* social spaces. The aim of this project was to critically examine an archive that maps the contours of spaces that have enabled queer and trans* sociality over time. Beginning with queer urban enclaves, or "gayborhoods," I track the evolution of queer space from the physical to the digital, discussing early internet space, the microblogging platform Tumblr, the dating app Grindr, and the social media app TikTok. Overall, I trace the companion story of gentrification, as forces outside (and sometimes within) these communities displace queer and trans* people from their social locales. This research is a contribution to the fields of queer and trans* history and queer and trans* media studies, bringing together a variety of sources to examine the past and present of queer and trans* community gathering spaces. Examining issues of justice and access in these spaces, my aim is both to catalogue their history and represent the ways in which queer and trans* social spaces have, in many ways, always been synonymous with both vital resource sharing and continuous displacement.

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# Introduction

This thesis is all about spaces that have enabled queer and trans* people to socialize with one another—some physical, some digital. Methodologically, I did a bunch of research on queer, trans*, and gender nonconforming (QTGNC) people and spaces, and I compiled this project as a written overview of that archive. In the spirit of Jack Halberstam, who advocates for an undercommons of the university that might produce an "unprofessional force of fugitive knowers,"[1] I move in and out of disciplinary correctness and center diverse origins of knowledge. I draw on many different types of sources, some academic and some not: I examine written research and theory, but I'll also discuss things like video games, TikToks, autoethnographic accounts, advocacy organizations, chatroom posts, YouTube videos, Tumblr pages. My goal was to construct an archive that draws both from critical academia (what Halberstam would call "high theory") and popular and/or unusual sources grounded in lived worlds and experiences ("low theory"). I draw on these "eccentric texts and examples…that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory" to foreground "a counterhegemonic form of theorizing, the theorization of alternatives within an undisciplined zone of knowledge production."[2] And much of the research I draw on reflects these same goals by placing counterhegemonic experiences and sources (i.e. marginalized Grindr users) at the center of knowledge production. This type of mixed archive makes sense when considering the

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[1] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure,* 8.
[2] Halberstam, 16, 18, original emphasis.

kinds of spaces I'm discussing, all of which are grounded in the everyday lives of queer

and trans* people.

When talking about these spaces, I am tapping into a distinctly American archive:

most of my sources are from U.S.-based authors, or are discussing phenomena that occurs

within U.S.-based digital culture (although, this is not always the case and I will name

when authors are basing their discussions in other places). Some might find that this

approach contributes to the U.S.-centric portrayal of "the" LGBTQIA+ community that

affects diverse queer communities abroad, and I agree. However, I have a few reasons for

doing this. Firstly, I want to name that I'm an American college student, and so many of

the sources, histories, and authors I encounter are from the U.S. academic sphere or in

U.S. online spaces. Additionally, because I do some deep dives into specific corners of

physical and digital communities, it made sense to relegate many of those particular

spaces to my own country of origin so as not to speak too far from my own knowledge

base. But: the story of American queer communities is not the history of all queer people.

And this history, like many, is constructed retrospectively and is wildly incomplete.

Additionally, I'm sure you've noted my employment of the term "queer," so let's

talk about it. In order to do so, we have to think about the concept of "homosexuality"

and its status as a pathologized identity in Western spaces. Eurocentric notions about

what it means to have sex originally derive from Biblical ideas that uphold the institution

of marriage and label other forms of sex, especially those not resulting in conception, as

deviant.[3] This is a functional rather than social understanding of sex, under which

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[3] Gordon, "The Treatment of Paraphilias: A Historical Perspective."

manifestations of gender seen as threatening to roles constructed for reproductivity, and non-reproductive same-sex acts, could be viewed as sinful actions—like adultery, or theft. However, over many centuries, this conception shifted as expertise in public health was gradually transferred from clergy to (mostly French and German) psychiatrists in the nineteenth century. These psychiatrists began to conceive of various "sinful" performances of gender and sex as *insanity*, a "perversion" of the entire individual.[4]

This understanding mediates Western conceptions of what it means to have sex and to have a gender; it is part of the cultural history of conceiving of sex acts as constituting a fixed sexuality and of gender as biologically determined and expressively limited. The way we conceive of sex and sexuality, as Foucault famously noted and many queer theorists have expounded upon[5], is a result of cultural mechanisms, and produced identity-based markers like "homosexual" or "transsexual" that, eventually, have transformed into the contemporary identity labels we associate with the LGBTQIA+ acronym. This is, of course, not to invalidate these identities—I myself fall under that acronym—but to acknowledge their history and to recognize that Western understandings of sex are not the only ways to construe human sexuality and gender.

Activism and identity politics surrounding sexuality and gender eventually paved the way for the notion of queerness, what David Halperin calls a "positionality vis-à-vis the normative,"[6] a reclaimed slur that gained political traction in the 1990s for

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[4] De Block and Adriaens, "Pathologizing Sexual Deviance: A History."
[5] See Foucault, "Scientia Sexualis" and "The Deployment of Sexuality" from *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, and Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination."
[6] Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, 62.

encompassing radical, nonnormative sexual and gender identities.[7] Because of this, the history of "queer" people is retroactively constructed, as queer people have not conceived of ourselves as such for very long. Despite this, I still believe it is a useful way of thinking about sexuality and gender, as long as we're recognizing the breadth of experience and intersectional oppressions that different types of queer people face. I employ the term because I believe in its political project: that of uniting those of us who experience our sexualities and/or genders non-normatively.

It is important to note that the notion of "queer" has its limitations. I am using it as an umbrella term for the purposes of this thesis, but umbrella-ing isn't for everyone. Not all people who experience sexuality or gender in a non-normative way self-identify as queer, and I want to respect that.[8] Additionally, many trans*[9] people have expressed dissatisfaction with the term's bias towards experiences of sexuality rather than gender. "Queer" when employed in both academic practice and advocacy has the tendency to sideline, rather than forefront, trans* issues, specifically the material embodiments of trans* life.[10] This emerges from a historical, political, and academic climate in which gay

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[7] Love, "Queer," 172.

[8] Check out Kat Blaque's video "Im Trans, but I'm NOT "Queer" (sorry)" at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_vMaDkI7GA for her personal story as to why she does not identify with the term "queer." This is just one story, and shouldn't be taken as generalizable, but Blaque's autoethnographic analyses are both eloquent and nuanced as she discusses her personal relationships to transness and queerness.

[9] Throughout this thesis, I employ the trans asterisk *. Cáel Keegan describes the asterisk as such: "Like science fiction, trans* is about how *what could happen* haunts the present, asking us to consider where elements in reality might lead if permitted to reach…The sticky fingers of the fronded asterisk (*) are the speculative lines of transgender's felt imaginary, sending outward with faith to realize new contacts" (3). This is a way of referring to transness that centers the possibilities of what might come to be, and it is for this reason that I employ the * in trans*. However, there will also be times when I defer to how various authors or sources self-describe; when discussing an article or source, I default to the writer's language.

[10] Love, "Queer," Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens."

and lesbian issues have been privileged over the interests of many other types of queer

people: trans* and intersex folks specifically.[11] For these reasons, I will use the language

queer, trans, and gender nonconforming people (which I'll shorten to QTGNC) or queer

and trans* to refer to *people* who experience sexuality and gender nonnormatively

throughout this thesis, but I will use the word *queer* to denote spaces, places, and

structures that are antinormative in queer's theoretical sense.

Throughout this thesis I may refer to queer and trans* people as constituting a

"community," which is a common way of thinking about queer people who socialize with

one another. But the idea of community as it pertains to queerness is complex and

fraught, and thinking about all queer and trans* people as belonging to *one* community

isn't accurate to our lived experiences. Some scholars have problematized the very idea

of community: in her 2002 book *Against the Romance of Community,* Miranda Joseph

provides compelling arguments for the notion of "community" and its complicity in

perpetuating social hierarchies under capitalism.[12] Additionally, community has

historically been organized around physicality,[13] but this definition has been radically

expanded by emergent digital technologies that enable people to connect in

unprecedented ways. So as changing technological conditions reformulate what

community can even mean, it may be more helpful for the purposes of this project to

think about some ways in which *queer sociality* is constituted by different forces.[14] Thus,

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[11] Rubin, "Thinking Sex," Pow, "A Trans History of Glitches and Errors."

[12] Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community.*

[13] Lauria and Knopp, "Gay Communities in the Urban Renaissance," Miles, "Still Getting It On Online: Thirty Years of Queer Male Spaces Brokered Through Digital Technologies," 8.

[14] This idea of focusing on sociality rather than community comes from Miles, "Still Getting It On Online."

while I'll likely use the word "community" a bajillion times because it is semantically useful and because this is how QTGNC socialization is often linguistically represented, throughout these pages I'll be thinking about some of the different ways that queer-on-queer socialization has been enabled by various on- and off-line structures in the past and present.

Writing about those structures necessitates some historical writing. In "A Trans History of Glitches and Errors," Whit Pow says of historical writing, "to write history is to produce an assemblage of facts and information, and this history is highly mediated, historically situated, and revisionist…. The revision and the addendum are institutional acts of knowledge curation that reinforce historical systems of governance with regard to who may revise these histories, why, when, and for what reason."[15] That is to say that when talking about the past, one always relies on a series of documents and sources that have come into the author's knowledge-sphere in some way, and so are not only mediated by the systemic mechanisms that have distributed knowledge to that individual person, but also by the writer's curatorial desires and occupation of power nodes within the ways that knowledge is shared and spread. I occupy a weird space to be talking about queer and trans* history; I have the privilege of being able to access and, with varying degrees of success, navigate the knowledge distribution mechanisms of my well-resourced university. On the other hand, I am literally barely a human person, I left the womb recently, and I have a very introductory familiarity with the frightening world of

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[15] Pow, "A Trans History of Glitches and Errors," 206-207.

academia and its various search engines. My archive is biased by this; and of biased archival selection, Achille Mbembe writes:

> The archive is primarily the product of a judgement, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded. The archive, therefore, is fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection, which, in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged "unarchivable." The archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status.[16]

And I want to lean into this. My archive will be influenced by the ways in which I search out knowledge, the ways which knowledge arrives to me, and the decisions that I will make about what I want to include in this thesis. I'm going to include things that I like—things that I think are cool. It isn't comprehensive; at its core this is a list of fun queer facts I'm compiling in an academic format. I want to stress this in light of the gravity and importance of the topic; doing research and writing about historical stuff cannot ever be detached from the researcher's positionality, identity, and emotions.

Because of this, it's important that I clarify some of my relevant positionalities and identities. I am a white queer/lesbian-identified woman who was born and raised in the United States. I attend Georgetown University, and I'm writing this thesis for the English Honors program. My whiteness and citizenship status privilege me in academic settings, as well as both queer-coded and heteronormative spaces. In this thesis, I will be

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[16] Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," 20, cited in Pow.

speaking about identities that I do not hold, specifically trans* communities, and queer/trans* communities of color. My aim is to uplift and respect communities of which I am not a part while being mindful of my position throughout. I'm writing this thesis because being queer is fundamental to my being, I want to represent queer and trans* people in an academic setting, and I want to learn more about queerness through my research and writing.

I hope that I will be able to highlight some interesting places and spaces that have enabled queer and trans* sociality, diving into an archive that speaks to how space functions and has functioned in unique ways for various types of queers in recent, somewhat memorable history. I'm going to talk about gayborhoods, newspapers, video games, chatrooms, dating apps, social media. And through it all, I'm going to be thinking about space. How it exists, and where, in what ways, and for whom. How it is sometimes constituted by geography and locality and how it is sometimes constituted by modems and pixels. It was incredibly rewarding to do this research, a task that further imbued me with a desire to enable all the best and most generative modes of queer community while continuing to combat the racism, ableism, classism, and sexual hierarchization that is fundamental to queer history *and* to the way we remember it. An oft-evoked phrase commonly ascribed to activist Marsha P. Johnson sums it up best: no pride for some of us without liberation for all of us.

With that being said, let's embark on this imperfect archival journey together. Strap in, folks, it's about to get gay.

# 1. The Gayborhood: Planetarium

We begin our journey with some earthly geography: gayborhoods.

This first chapter talks about the beginnings of QTGNC social spaces, and my archive begins with knowledge from a variety of documents about twentieth century queer life in the United States. The late 1800s through the 1940s saw distinct, urban-centric queer and trans* cultures that revolved around small physical spaces connected through social networks. Queer and trans* people—who, then, would have mostly referred to themselves as gays, lesbians, crossdressers, drag queens, and/or transexuals—interacted with one another at street corners, personal apartments, bathhouses, cafeterias, saloons, and at popup events such as New York City drag balls, as documented by queer historian George Chauncey in *Gay New York*.[17] Historians Mickey Lauria and Lawrence Knopp contend that cities were considered the ideal development grounds for queer spatiality for two reasons: firstly, they contained "critical masses" of queer people; and secondly, cities, as opposed to rural or suburban areas, harbor a multitude of social institutions that have little to do with families or neighborhoods—i.e. public parks, public transport, bars, shopping areas, bathhouses, or apartment-style housing.[18]

These small gathering spaces eventually merged into "gayborhoods," some of the most renowned being the Bowery, Greenwich Village, and Hell's Kitchen in New York City and the Castro district in San Francisco; others include Dupont Circle in

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[17] Chauncey, "The Bowery as Haven and Spectacle."
[18] Lauria and Knopp, "Gay Communities in the Urban Renaissance," 158.

Washington, D.C. and Boston's South End.[19] World War II oversaw the consolidation of these gayborhoods, as war efforts brought many Americans (including the gay ones) from across the country to urban environments where physical community-building and sociality took place.[20] There is a large body of scholarship devoted to the study of gayborhoods, and Lauria and Knopp consider these territories to be "the bases of gay political and economic power and the loci of gay community services."[21] These urban enclaves are fundamental to the history of queer space.

For their duration, many of these neighborhoods operated around racial and sexual hierarchies, with monogamous white gay men sitting atop the cultural and social pyramid.[22] As such, the idea of the "gayborhood" has been problematized by queer historians, despite being a somewhat useful way of discussing queer geography. Gay male areas were often unfriendly to lesbians and bisexuals, lesbian areas often shunned transgender folks, and most spaces were defined by class and racially exclusive.[23] Drag balls, for example, fractured along racial lines in the 1960s, when Marcel Christian, tired of Black queens having to "whiten up" their appearance to win in racially mixed spaces, hosted the first Black ball.[24] Audre Lorde, describing the New York City lesbian bar scene in the 1950s in her biomythography *Zami*, portrays the experiences of lesbians of

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[19] Chauncey, "The Bowery as Haven and Spectacle," Drushel, "The Evolution Will Not Be Broadcast (or Published)," Cultural Tourism D.C., "Dupont Circle/Sheridan-Kalorma," Boston Planning and Development Agency, "South End."

[20] Chauncey, "The Bowery as Haven and Spectacle," Cavalcante, "Tumbling Into Queer Utopias and Vortexes," Drushel, "The Evolution Will Not Be Broadcast (or Published)."

[21] Lauria and Knopp, "Gay Communities in the Urban Renaissance," 159.

[22] See Rubin, "Thinking Sex," and Riggs, *Tongues Untied.*

[23] Doan, "Why Plan for the LGBTQ Community," 3-4.

[24] Lawrence, "'Listen, and You Will Hear All the Houses That Walked There Before': A History of Drag Balls, Houses, and the Culture of Voguing."

color in white-owned-and-operated gay bars, spaces where Black lesbians were often denied entry.[25]

These spatial and societal changes also took place alongside the advent and popularization of television across the U.S., as well as a greater centralization of communications technology. As media and tech began to alter American lives in fundamental ways, lesbians, gays, and trans* folks "began, with difficulty, to create alternative channels of communication that would foster solidarity and cultivate the emergence of a self-conscious community."[26] Intelligence about places and spaces of queer and trans* socialization were initially proliferated via low-tech, easy-access information channels, specifically newspapers and magazines like Vice Versa, ONE, and *The Ladder.* These channels served as a secondary mode of intelligence-sharing, the primary being physical geographic centralities of queer folks.[27]

These spaces were especially critical in the formation of gay liberation movements, with the Stonewall uprising in 1969 bringing visibility to violence inflicted on lesbian, gay, and trans* people, sparking movements for inclusion and public affirmation of LGBT identities.[28] The growing publicity of these urban queer enclaves encouraged young queer people to, in Kath Weston's words, "get thee to a big city," inviting "the Great Gay Migration" of queer individuals to these gayborhoods, which offered opportunities for community-building, social gathering, and sexual access.[29] By

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[25] Lorde, *Zami*, 224.
[26] Drushel, "The Evolution Will Not Be Broadcast (or Published)," 259.
[27] Gross, "The Gay Global Village in Cyberspace," Drushel, "The Evolution Will Not Be Broadcast (or Published)."
[28] Truscott, "Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square."
[29] Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," 255.

1975, for example, around 5,000 gay men per year were moving San Francisco, creating demands in those areas for safe-space businesses such as bars and clubs, shops, bathhouses, and community centers that catered to various different kinds of queer and trans* people.[30]

These neighborhoods were often considered by residents and frequenters to be places where one could more openly live life as a sexual and/or gender nonconformist, where queer culture flourished, and where many queer people could acquire social and cultural capital without hiding or denying their identities.[31] Yet they also presented unique dangers to residents and nightlife frequenters. Queerly coded spaces, such as gay and lesbian bars, were often the targets of hate crimes and police raids. Gender-nonconforming individuals and queer people of color were often explicitly targeted in these spaces, by racist and cissexist ideologies without and within the community. Thus, gayborhoods offered queer and trans* people certain affordances while also introducing various harms.

One cannot examine the unique vulnerabilities inherent to gayborhoods without also discussing AIDS and the ways in which both the virus itself and the non-queer public's reaction ravaged these spaces with particular ferocity. Infection rates in New York city and San Francisco were ten times higher than in the rest of the U.S. at the epidemic's outset, often attributed to the concentration of gay male spaces in these cities.[32] Originally officially entitled "gay-related immune deficiency" (GRID) and often

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[30] Engel, "First Reports," 12.
[31] Rubin, "Thinking Sex," Cavalcante, "Tumbling Into Queer Utopias and Vortexes," Drushel, "The Evolution Will Not Be Broadcast (or Published)."
[32] Engel, "First Reports."

colloquially referred to as the "gay plague," media attention given to AIDS was almost

exclusively homophobic and moral-panicky.[33] AIDS had a marked effect on these

communities as many residents contracted the deadly virus, unprioritized by the U.S.

government and unmentioned by Reagan until 1985.

Amidst this communal devastation arose practices of collective grief and mutual

aid, often based in gay urban spaces. Jennifer Brier writes of the ways in which AIDS

writer-activists for metropolitan gay press organizations—many of whom were lesbian

women—constructed narratives around AIDS that drew on feminism, women's health,

and gay and lesbian liberation, revealing the ways in which solidarity networks between

gay men and lesbian women were critical to localized community responses.[34] Ann

Cvetkovich similarly documents the mutual-aid-based relationships forged during AIDS

through interviews with lesbians who were involved in the activist group ACT UP.[35]

And, addressing the complete lack of literary representation of Black gay men during

such a devastating period for queer people, activist Joseph Beam (who died due to AIDS-

related complications in 1988) published the anthology *In The Life*, a compilation of

artistic works of Black gay men exploring what it meant to navigate anti-Blackness and

anti-gayness during the AIDS epidemic. When Beam passed away in 1988 while working

on a second anthology, his friend and fellow literary activist Essex Hemphill finished

compiling the works for *Brother to Brother*.[36]

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[33] Engel, 6.
[34] Brier, "Early AIDS Activism," 11-44.
[35] Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*.
[36] Beam, *In the Life,* and Hemphill, *Brother to Brother*.

These practices are only a few examples of the many ways in which various communities engaged in mutual support and solidarity during AIDS, forging networks of reliance and resistance. I included these specific examples because too often, the contributions and struggles of particular groups are forgotten in historical narratives of AIDS activism: lesbians, many of whom constituted critical support systems for people living with AIDS, such as organizing blood drives or serving in volunteer initiatives, despite frequently lacking resources to care for their own feminine and reproductive health; and Black gay men, who then as now contended with the dual public health crises of AIDS and racism, and created models and resources for community-based support that continue empowering queer men of color to this day. And while many historical accounts of AIDS focus on men, transgender women and sex workers were and are still disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS.[37] Transgender women experience high rates of HIV, and stigma, neglect, and institutionalized discrimination prevent trans* people, especially trans* people of color, from accessing care.[38] While historically and contemporarily AIDS narratives tend to center cis gay men, AIDS has and continues to impact all types of queer and trans* people.

AIDS both traumatized and galvanized communities within gayborhoods: the epidemic was deeply injurious especially to queer and trans* people who contended not only with the virus itself but the violent stigma constructed by media, government, and public health institutions. In response, activism around AIDS led to new ways of

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[37] Poteit, Reisner, and Radix, "HIV Epidemics among Transgender Women," The Foundation for AIDS Research, "Trans Populations and HIV: Time to End the Neglect."
[38] The Foundation for AIDS Research, 1.

conceiving of community that revolved around physical spaces. Queer theorist

Annemarie Jagose argues that the growing power of the political term "queer" as a

uniting identifier for those with nonnormative sexual and gender identities had much to

do with AIDS activism.[39] Jagose posits that forces such as educational activists'

emphases on sexual practices over sexual identity, persistent resistance to discourses of

AIDS as a gay-only disease, and coalitional politics of AIDS activism involving lesbians,

gay men, bisexuals, trans* folks, sex workers, people with AIDS, health workers, and

parents and friends of queer and trans* people facilitated the emergent concept of

queerness as a LGBTQIA+ coalitional umbrella.[40] I cite this not to divert attention from

the devastating impacts of AIDS but to acknowledge the resilience of communities in

forming new practices of political organization and coalition-building in response to

profound tragedy.

It is undeniable that AIDS was damaging to queer space—a 2008 study found that

nearly all key informants from the AIDS Impact Conference believed that AIDS

contributed to physical community decline.[41] Yet it is also clear that whatever the AIDS

epidemic may have contributed to the contemporary fragmentation of gay urban villages

pales in comparison to larger systemic interventions. Specifically, city planning efforts by

municipal governments to "cleanse neighborhoods and make them safe for capital

investment" gentrified many urban spaces and displaced many marginalized people, most

often BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) and low-income folks, from their

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[39] Jagose, "Queer," 93-96.
[40] Jagose, 94.
[41] Rosser et. al., "Are Gay Communities Dying or Just in Transition?"

home neighborhoods.[42] This displacement occurred and is occurring across many different kinds of neighborhoods in many different urban spaces, including queer enclaves. And so if you visit San Francisco and New York today, you'll find that, while the queers are definitely still out and about, the geographic organization of queer space is quite different than it was in the 60s, 70s, 80s, or 90s. Historically residential and commercial LGBTQIA+ areas have experienced significant gentrification over the past 30 years, and many queer people have been slowly priced out as neoliberal investors have purchased and repriced gayborhood real estate. Many canonical queer spaces have closed; for example, there are only 15 bars that cater specifically to queer women and femmes left in the U.S.[43]

Queer and trans* people, especially those who lack the economic privilege of migrating to these ever-more-expensive and increasingly-less-queer communities, are simply less likely now to structure their lives around moving to these geographic enclaves. Researchers Andre Cavalcante and Bruce Drushel both note that this decline in queer-specific physical spaces has accompanied a rise in public acceptance of LGBTQIA+ folks and a push towards assimilation of queer and trans* individuals into neoliberal capitalist society. (I'll further discuss Cavalcante's research on Tumblr in Chapter 3.) Drushel argues that this shift accompanies a willing embrace of the "mainstream" by LGBTQ+ people as this "mainstream" embraces them, offering QTGNC people opportunities to participate in civic life and to acquire social capital.

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[42] Doan, "Why Plan for the LGBTQ Community?", 5.
[43] Maurice, "There Are Just 15 Lesbian Bars Left in the Entire U.S."

While I think that Drushel's analysis is lacking an intersectional lens and optimistically overstates the opportunities for queer people to acquire social capital within heteronormativity, it is true that in the U.S., the landscape of acceptance for queer people looks drastically different than it did in 1969 when Stonewall Inn frequenters were violently abused by law enforcement.

Yet, many QTGNC people are not embraced by this amorphous "mainstream." A rise in social acceptance and legal protections helps some queers more than others, and Drushel's homonormative frame for understanding gay village gentrification lacks the recognition that sometimes it is the (white, wealthy) gays that are the gentrifiers, and that spatial displacement and discrimination almost always differentially harms economically marginalized queer people of color and transgender folks. Scholars of queer urban spaces, such as Petra Doan and Kian Goh, have critiqued visualizing urban space as either queer or not queer, as this binary logic invisibilizes the intersecting factors of race, class, and gender identity.[44] Like queerness itself, the nature of space is always dynamic and undefinable.

Kian Goh's research on radical queer urban activism in New York City explores this complexity, revealing some of the inequities faced by those occupying the "queer margins" and the radical forms of resistance employed by queer people of color against gentrification, racism, homophobia, and transphobia. Goh's work highlights how strategies of safety against homophobic and transphobic violence employed in queer

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[44] Koh, "Safe Cities and Queer Spaces: The Urban Politics of Radical LGBT Activism," Doan, "The Demise of Queer Space? Resurgent Gentrification and the Assimilation of LGBT Neighborhoods."

neighborhoods like the West Village (such as street patrols and watch groups) could be weaponized against perceived outsiders such as queer youth of color, and explores the experiences of queer people in the rapidly gentrifying, historically Black and working class neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn.[45]

Through the lens of two organizations, Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment (FIERCE), an organizing group for queer youth of color in the West Village founded in 2000, and the 2007 Safe Neighborhood Campaign in Bedford-Stuyvesant by the The Safe OUTside the System (SOS) Collective (a branch of the Audre Lorde Project), Goh posits a progressive vision of queer activism based in social, racial, and economic justice that fights against gentrifying and homonormative forces. Both organizations stake claims on QTGNC space: FIERCE's Our SPOT campaign, for example, focused on combatting private development activities at Manhattan's Pier 40 and Hudson River Park; SOS's Safe Neighborhood Campaign focused on targeting violence within Bedford-Stuyvesant by asking local businesses and institutions to become visible and accessible safe spaces. These two initiatives demonstrate different strategies and methods of securing safe space for marginalized queer people, as well as the challenges faced by queer youth of color in increasingly gentrified urban spaces. FIERCE's work specifically highlights how urban space coded as "queer" was and is unfriendly to the most marginalized queer folks, especially homeless youth of color, while the SOS's initiative shows the challenges of staking out safe queer spaces in urban space coded as "non-queer."

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[45] Koh, "Safe Cities and Queer Spaces."

Goh's work shows us some of the complexity and nuance to thinking about physical queer spaces in an urban context. There is seemingly endless scholarship on this subject, and no one has come to any kind of conclusion or solution other than that we must continue to work to make queer and trans* spaces more equitable and accessible. Spaces historically coded as "queer" are never racially or economically neutral. And the history of queer space is inextricable from the intricacies of urban existence, which is in turn inextricable from the politics of redevelopment, gentrification, and redlining, which is in turn inextricable from racial and economic hegemony. And while organizations like FIERCE that advocate around gayborhoods do still exist, it's telling that FIERCE has since shifted their advocacy focus towards fighting discrimination and police violence against queer youth of color across the *entirety* of New York City.[46] The landscape of queer space has changed, and this necessitates a reconceptualization of what queer space even can mean, and how institutions like private development companies and grassroots activist organizations can redefine queer life and being.

Thus, places and spaces that enable sociality among queer people have mutated over the years, partially in response to these changing urban landscapes and certainly in response to emergent technologies. Queers need queers, not only for purposes of political organization and activism but also because of the emotional fulfillment that accompanies a shared space for those with marginalized identities to affirm and love one another. And, of course, to facilitate access to sexual partners, something that's especially relevant for queer people. It's a strange and complicated thing for me to think about the decline of

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[46] Koh, "Safe Cities and Queer Spaces," 472.

gayborhoods and all their peculiarities and affordances. Personally, while I'm grateful as a queer person to be able to live outside queer-coded space with the kinds of hard-won protections for queer and trans* folks that exist in liberal cishet spaces today, I do wonder what the kinds of territories I've described in this chapter were like, or *are* like, where their remnants endure; my only method of encounter with gayborhoods is through the kind of reading and research I've done for this project.

But queer space persists, of course. It looks a bit different today and it took a minute to get there. There are places, though. Places where we go to learn, to teach, to talk shit, to build politics, to find love.

We've just gone elsewhere.

# 2. Web 1.0: The First Astronauts

Like I said, it took a minute.

There's a TikTok that came across my For You Page the other day. (If you don't know what TikTok or the For You Page is, I'll explain later.) All you need to know is that it's an old video of David Bowie from about 20 years ago. He's looking fresh in weird little round sunglasses and he's talking to some normy BBC man. He says:

"I don't think we've even seen the tip of the iceberg. I think the potential of what the internet is going to do to society, both good and bad, is unimaginable." He pauses. "I think we're actually on the cusp of something exhilarating and terrifying."

And the normy BBC man looks at him a little weird and is like, "It's just a tool though, isn't it?"

And David Bowie comes back right away— "No it's not. No, it's an alien lifeform."

"What do you think, when you think then—"

"Is there life on Mars? Yes, it's *just* landed here."[47]

Well, David Bowie was clearly onto something. Personally I'm not sure if Mars landed here, or if we landed on Mars—but it's true that us and Mars are no longer separable. I'm one with Mars first thing every morning while I'm placating my caffeine addiction.

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[47] @cleoabram, https://vm.tiktok.com/ZSgWqqc3/

For queers, that alien encounter is everything. And it began a while before David Bowie named it as such. As early as the 1990s, scholars such as Howard Rheingold began to notice and write about the various different types of communities were beginning to gather digitally rather than physically.[48] Social relationships everywhere were already being transformed by the advent and rising accessibility of encounters with Mars.

This extraterrestrial digital space allowed for a kind of sociality amongst queer and trans* people like never before, one that was unbounded by the restraints of physical geography and allowed for new and different forms of communal relations.[49] It's important to note, however, that queer and trans* people didn't just hop out of gayborhoods and into social media networks. It was a shambolic and untidy transition towards digitally reformulating the ways in which queer social relations are constituted.

I wish I could give you a more exact range of dates over which this occurred, because there's quite a bit of overlap between the phenomena I'm discussing in this chapter and the persistence of gayborhoods as a main hub of queer and trans* communal relations. The gentrification of queer neighborhoods occurred over time—urban planning scholar Petra Doan locates this process in the 1990s and early 2000s.[50] The popularization and proliferation of what we refer to as "the internet" also occurred over time—some email and web use began in the early 80s with government-funded programs that allowed several U.S.-based academic communities web access,[51] and the National

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[48] Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, cited in Drushel.
[49] Drushel, "The Evolution Will Not Be Broadcast (or Published)," Allen-Young, "#queer."
[50] Doan, "Why Plan for the LGBTQ Community?", 4.
[51] Liener et. al., "A Brief History of the Internet."

Science Foundation ran the Web until the early 1990s, when the NSF allowed the first

ISPs (internet service providers) to sell commercially.[52] As new technologies emerged,

first dial-up and then broadband internet became available over the course of the 90s, and

ever since, the internet has been morphing and progressing with rapidly expanding

hardware and software innovations. Thus, in typical chicken-egg fashion, the expansion

of computing (and by extension queer and trans* peoples' use of the internet) occurred

during about the same time frame as queer neighborhoods were experiencing

gentrification and fragmentation.

In order to represent this messiness, I'd like to step into a grey area and discuss

two archival queer video games that received relatively widespread proliferation in the

late-twentieth-century queerosphere. These games were playable on desktop computers

and disseminated through queer and trans* news media and early chatrooms. By

discussing these two gamic texts, I hope to excavate and shed light on a small historical

moment that illustrates the beginning of the great migration of queer networks to the

realm of the digital.

I encountered *Caper in the Castro* (1989) and *GayBlade* (1992) in a Game

Studies class while writing this thesis, and their relevance to the notion of queer space

struck me immediately. Most of my information on these games comes from a project

entitled *Rainbow Arcade: Over 30 Years of Queer Video Game History*. This collection

of articles and excavation of media was compiled by game historians and authors

Adrienne Shaw, Sarah Rudolf, and Jan Schnorrenberg for an exhibit at the Schwules

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[52] Spike, "The First ISP."

Museum (in English: Gay Museum) in Berlin.[53]

*Caper in the Castro* and *GayBlade* were also

both created during the AIDS epidemic. A love

for physical queer spaces (in this case, the

Castro) and an acknowledgement of collective
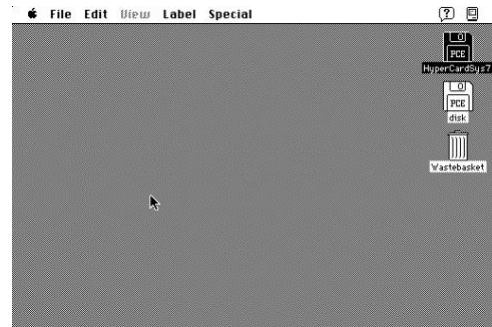
grief and need for healing is inherent in both these games, which are seated at the nexus

of profound community fracture and radical community rebuilding.

The moment of encounter is powerful. In 2020 you are used to unprecedented

technological capacity and speed. You go to the Internet Archive, a non-profit library of

millions of free books, movies, software, music, websites.[54] It is worth noting that this

repository is doing something very unusual and difficult: preserving internet history by

making older games compatible with newer systems. There is not a computer that

processes the software for Hypercard anymore. You click the play button in the middle of

the screen and you are greeted with a message that your emulator is loading. Then a

pixelated retro-looking screen greets you with the message "Welcome to Macintosh."

You have not been greeted by that message before, using the high-power personal

computing laptop that you are using. The screen transforms into a still-pixelated

reproduction of a 1989 Macintosh computer homepage. The top of the screen says "File,

Edit, View, Label, Special." The top of your screen says "Finder, File, Edit, View, Go,

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[53] Shaw et. al., *RAINBOW ARCADE*.
[54] Ralph, *Caper in the Castro*, accessed via archive.org.

Window, Help." You click the fullscreen button on the archive.org site and 1989

overtakes your laptop. You have been transported back in time.

And you encounter. You open up the software for *Caper in the Castro* as though

you are using the hardware of thirty years ago, a time you never lived. The homepage

graphics proclaim:



*it's not just a game....*

*.... it's a Gayme!*

CAPER in the CASTRO

Version 1.0

(Click anywhere to go on)

About Game..

© 1989 C.M. Ralph All Rights Reserved

A Gay and Lesbian Based
Adventure Mystery Game with Sound, Text & Graphics.

Caution: This game includes scenes of violence and other material which may
be inappropriate for persons under the age of 18. Please use discretion.

Disclaimer: This game is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual places,
incidents or people (be they alive or dead) is entirely coincidental.

You click to go on, and a message pops up:

From the author....
I wrote this as a labor of love for the Gay and Lesbian community.
If you enjoy playing this game, I would ask that you make a donation to the AIDS related charity of your
choice, for whatever amount you feel is appropriate. I call this "CharityWare".
Thank you—
C.M. Ralph
click anywhere to get back to the game

You click.

And all of a sudden you have become a witty and cunning lesbian detective

named Tracker McDyke. And your beloved best friend, the drag queen Tessy LaFemme,

has gone missing—kidnapped or perhaps even killed by a shadowy entity in your home neighborhood of the Castro. It's a caper all right. Something nefarious is afoot. You are lost in this encounter. There are queer references everywhere; you are identified as a frequenter of the bar "The Gayme Room." A patron of the Red Herring Café proclaims "Sheesh! What a dyke!" (And she's not wrong). You pursue a mysterious and clearly evil Dullagan Straightman. You feel both naturalized and archival, a rare positionality for a queer person, to whom the past always seems so much less friendly than the present. And as you rescue Tessy LaFemme, you experience a rare kind of cross-temporal solidarity. The moment of encounter is powerful.

*Caper in the Castro* was an adventure mystery game created by C.M. Ralph in the late 1980s. Most believe it to be the first queer-themed computer game ever created. In the game, one plays as a dykey detective searching for her kidnapped/possibly murdered drag queen friend. The narrative, space, visuals, and structure of the game are all intimately tied to queer social life. *Caper in the Castro* centers on a vision of community that is bound to specific and local spatiality, inherent in its very name. Its code was written before the internet reinscribed the nature of QTGNC communal relations. In an interview with Adrienne Shaw for *Rainbow Arcade*, the game's creator Ralph said of this design experience:

> All this [game designing via a then-new software called Hypercard] was
> happening at the same time Kathy [my partner] and I had just moved up here to
> the Bay Area. I was coming from behind the Orange Curtain. The way we were
> treated down there [before we moved] up to San Francisco and the way were

treated in San Francisco—it was like two planets. I was so overcome with

gratitude for the community that just embraced us, so I wanted to give something

to the community. Sometimes creative projects are like that. They converge

around a multitude of different things, and then that's how this happened. The

AIDS epidemic, my impulsive need to create things, and HyperCard's abilities,

everything. It all culminated.[55]

Ralph's love for her physical community is inherent in her words; it's obvious how

fundamental this space is to her experiences of identity, creativity, and politics. And

according to the 1992 manual cover of *GayBlade*, a similar love and fundamentality

structures this game:



[56]

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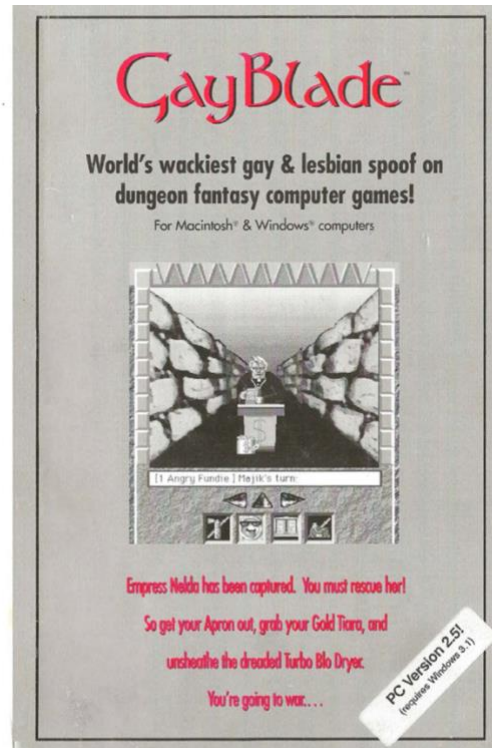
[55] Shaw et. al., *RAINBOW ARCADE,* 30.

[56] Best, *GayBlade*, pictured in *RAINBOW ARCADE.*

This game plays with the rhetoric of space, positing a notion of spatiality that pits queer and trans* spaces against the rest of the world—the world inhabited by "disgusting right-wing creatures." The object of the game is telling: to return to Castle GayKeep, assumedly a spoofy reference to the community safety of gayborhoods. It's also notable that this game was recognized by queer press, which were often operated out of metropole gayborhoods and circulated within them. To read Ryan Best words about creating *GayBlade* is a kind of encounter in itself:

> I grew up being very closeted in downstate Illinois, rural Illinois, but I was the Castro now. I was like, "You know what? I don't care. I don't care if this gets in all the gay newspapers. No one's ever gonna see it." Ultimately, it was really big, and I got on national public radio, *Der Spiegel* magazine, and *USA Today*, and [laughter] Howard Stern interviewed me. It just blew me away, how big it got….I sold thousands of copies, and it really wasn't about the money. It was all about just—back then, it was during the AIDS crisis, and there wasn't too much fun, too much good things happening. This was one of the small ways I hoped to lighten, even if just for a moment or two, the heavy burdens and sorrows of many people.[57]

If ever there was an answer to the question of how video games can be practices of care, it lies in the works of these two queer designers who created these labors of love for their communities. The reason I saw these two works as sitting at the nexus of a very important shift was because of their movement between physical and digital socialization.

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[57] Shaw et. al., *RAINBOW ARCADE,* 35.

These two games received widespread proliferation: *Caper in the Castro* spread through early internet message boards across the U.S. and parts of Europe, receiving thousands of downloads; *GayBlade* sold "thousands of copies." Their nascence was within the space that the Castro offered these creators, but the proliferation of insulated queer language and norms outside the Castro brought that feeling of community outside these spaces which were inaccessible to many. I see these games as an initial digital mode to minimize queer isolation and engage in queer digital play, even if it isn't yet "social" in the way we think of online interaction today.[58]

And, as all this is going on, the internet.

The source food, the cybermother's teat. Everything we do is implicated in this space-that-is-not-really-a-space. This new, old, and everchanging cyberverse. As I write this thesis, I'm living through a time in which the internet is more fundamental to human action than ever. It is Covid-19, and I meet with the rest of the English major thesis-writers at 6:30 p.m. EST every Monday night on Zoom. Zoom runs my life, actually: I and plenty of others spend many hours on it every day, learning meeting talking planning collaborating. It is a space that allows some semblance of sociality to continue in a time when physical interaction is dangerous, impossible, life-threatening.

In many ways, the internet has done this work for queer and trans* people since its early days: it reconfigured space. Margaret Allen-Young, in her master's thesis

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[58] You can check out the archive.org versions of these games at the following links:
*Caper in the Castro:* https://archive.org/details/hypercard_caper-in-the-castro
*GayBlade:* https://archive.org/details/gayblade

*#queer: Community, Communication, and Identity in the Digital Age*, posits the idea that "the argument could also be made that—since the internet is not hemmed in by physical boundaries— it is a sort of 'queer space' itself."[59] Allen-Young doesn't elaborate on this idea, which I think is a shame; the idea that a lack of geographic limitations could make something queer is very interesting to me. What about the absence of physical boundaries might make something queer? Is it the transcendence of the physical? A lack of delineations? I'm not quite sure, but I don't disagree that the internet is a site of queer potentiality. It's a place where marginalized people have been able to connect with other marginalized people, and it has been especially critical for queer and trans* people born in rural or suburban locales where it might be particularly difficult to identify and seek other QTGNC people for social support or as sexual partners.

Learning about the earlier days of the internet has been quite the journey for me, as someone whose social life frequently emerges from or is mediated by online spaces. It's clear that the internet was influential for many queer and trans* people in its early days as well (although, as we'll see, it's critical to think about who/what queer and trans* people were able to get online in the first place). A *Southcoast Today* article from 1996 postulates that "It's the unspoken secret of the online world that gay men and lesbians are among the most avid, loyal and plentiful commercial users of the Internet."[60] This makes a lot of sense, especially if one considers the historical importance of the queer press. Within and without geographical enclaves of queers, queer press were vital couriers of

[59] Allen-Young, *#queer.*
[60] Weise, "Gay and Lesbian Surfers: A Dream Market in the Online World."

information. Some well-known titles include *The Ladder, Vice Versa,* and *ONE*, but this ignores the role of smaller, more localized media outlets and press created by and for gay men and women of color. *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press* was founded by Black feminist lesbian writer-activists Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde, a critical platform created by and for women of color. Of the slogan "freedom of the press belongs to those who own the press," Smith said:

> This is even truer for multiply disenfranchised women of color, who have minimal access to power, including the power of media, except what we wrest from an unwilling system. On the most basic level, Kitchen Table Press began because of our need for autonomy, our need to determine independently both the content and the conditions of our work and to control the words and images that were produced about us. As feminist and lesbian of color writers, we knew that we had no options for getting published except at the mercy or whim of others-in either commercial or alternative publishing, since both are white dominated.[61]

The space afforded to multiply marginalized QTGNC people in the realm of press was (and still is) small. Pre-internet, information circulated via these physical media channels that required teams of people trained in typesetting and access to expensive equipment such as printing presses. Freedom of the press was hard to come by, and when it was acquired such as with *Kitchen Table*, it was hard-won. In light of this, it's especially important to recognize what the early expansion of internet accessibility meant for disenfranchised communities: greater accessibility had the power to change worlds and

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[61] Smith, "A Press of Our Own," 11.

forge new practices of community care stemming from projects like *Kitchen Table*; accessibility barriers had the power to reinscribe hegemonic organization.

And while I will be mostly talking about things that happen/ed on the internet from here on out, it's vitally important to think about how barriers to accessing the internet have shaped its tenets and possibilities. Juana María Rodríguez, whose work I will return to momentarily, reminds us that "the Internet does not create the conditions of unequal access to media and their respective audiences, but it can compound the problem by rhetoric that emphasizes the democratic and multivocal nature of the World Wide Web and other online sources. Theoretically, any individual or group can create and maintain a homepage, but not everyone has equal access to a phone line, a computer, an Internet provider, or the technical resources required to have an online presence."[62] As such, the issue of access is fundamental to conceiving of sociality on the web.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, during the 1990s, the percentage of U.S. households owning computers increased from 15% to 35%, and the amount of money households were spending on hardware to access the internet more than tripled.[63] 66% of households whose reference person was someone who had attended graduate school owned a computer, compared with less than 12% of households whose reference person had not completed high school; and increases in computer ownership for college graduates also experienced a huge increase over these seven years, up to 56% from 24%. The report also states that "It's almost axiomatic that the highest income groups will have

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[62] Rodríguez, "'Welcome to the Global Stage': Confessions of a Latina Cyber-Slut," 122.
[63] Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Computer Ownership up Sharply in the 1990s."

the largest percentage of computer ownership," which is indeed what the data found, with

the highest 20% of earners jumping up from 33% owning computers in 1990 to 65% in

1997. Other income brackets jumped up in ownership as well, but the 20% of households

earning the least jumped only from 7% to 17%—and so we can see that in 1997, a

majority of high earners had computer access while a minority of low earners had access

to a computer. This report also breaks down computer ownership by only three racial

categories: Black, Asian, and white. This problematizes the data, as these categories

evidently do not capture the racial/ethnic breadth of the U.S., and it is unclear whether

those surveyed who did not occupy these racial categories were excluded or lumped into

a racial categorization that they would not identify with.

And while this data is fraught specifically along racial categories, and should be

interpreted with extreme caution, the report is still informative: the distribution of who

was able to own a computer in the 1990s is demarcated along socioeconomic lines.[64]

However, the economic and educational data evidently shows the ways in which people

were able to access the internet differentially according to their income and interactions

with privileged educational institutions. While the Bureau of Labor Statistics flippantly

labeled this as "axiomatic," this disparity has more implications than the notion that, oh,

of course rich people owned computers. The way that wealth operates along lines of race,

ethnicity, citizenship, and ability in the U.S. has huge implications for what kinds of

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[64] It is very difficult to interpret the racial data because the categories are so ambiguous; this categorization clearly reflects insidious racial assumptions of the U.S. colonial project. For a relevant analysis of how Asian Americans are racialized in relation to machines, Blackness, and whiteness, see "In Search of My Robot: Race, Technology, and the Asian American Body" by Margaret Rhee.

people were able to characterize this evolving web space through software design and by populating early internet spaces.

This is underscored by sentiments expressed by interviewees in "An Oral History of the Early Trans Internet," an article by Henry Giardina containing interviews from various trans people who were around during the early days of the web. Jamison Green, an author, educator, and leader in the movement for Trans Health and Rights, says of the early internet:

> Even Lou Sullivan, who started the FTM support group in San Francisco in '86, didn't get a computer until probably '89 or so. He hand-wrote most of the FTMI letters and had carbon copies. He was meticulous about correspondence. He was also one of the founders of the then-called Gay and Lesbian Society of Northern California. So he wasn't connected to the internet and just used his computer as a writing tool, like most of the guys in our group. When I was putting together the FTM newsletter[65] [part of FTMI International] it was really important to me, going all the way through the nineties, even though more and more people were getting connected from '95 forward, that there were so many who were not online that we had to keep the newsletter as a copy. Yes, we could digitize it and put it out on the web at some point, but we had to keep that physical format.[66]

Here we're seeing that interaction between the press, online spaces, and accessibility—even for those like Lou Sullivan, who owned a computer, an internet connection wasn't

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[65] Check this out at https://www.ftmi.org/.
[66] Giardina, "An Oral History of the Early Trans Internet."

readily accessible nor was it readily available to many in his newsletter audience. Cassius Adair, an audio producer, professor, and academic, notes the privilege inherent in being a trans person connected to the internet in the 90s:

> At that time, you had to be an institutional affiliate to be on the earliest wave of the internet. It wasn't a public access entity until 1995. Before that, if you have trans people online, you're looking at—most of the time but not always—a privileged caste.[67]

Yet we can see that however inequitably internet access was and still is, the internet, through expanding computer ownership, began to really implant itself in U.S. households and lifestyles in the 1990s. As access to this technology became more widespread for some, those queer and trans* folks who could access the internet began to position information-spreading mechanisms in this new locus. Within the queer spaces I'm tracking in this chapter, a deeply implicated mode of early web communication is the Bulletin Board System, or BBS. I had absolutely no idea what these were, much to the amusement of my advisor Professor Phillips, who patiently explained them to me. Here I'd like to re-mention my positionality: as a young, white, non-trans woman, I am about to discuss things about which I learned from my archival sources, and don't have any personal experience with.

BBSs were a text-based form of internet communication somewhat akin to a Reddit thread, where users could write back and forth to each other in dynamic conversation, most often with people in their area codes (as they relied on local dial-up

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[67] Giardina.

internet). The BBS software-hardware mechanism was dreamt up by Randy Seuss and

Ward Christensen in Chicago during a blizzard in 1979, when most people were snowed

in and couldn't leave their houses for a few days. The first BBS users were people like

Seuss and Christensen who hacked into their phone lines and connected their computers

to communicate with each other, and the practice quickly spread to anyone who had both

a phone line and a computer (which, as we know, was relatively a select few).[68] This was

pretty much the first time you could reach out and converse with other people on a

computer *without* knowing them beforehand. By connecting to your existing phone line,

you could communicate with a world of people. Since plenty of folks didn't have long-

distance dial-up, many BBSs were specific to local communities, usually enabling

dialogue between people within 10-20 miles of one another.[69]

BBSs were around way before web browsers, in the 80s and 90s during what was

known as the Web 1.0 period, and thus became a critical supplement to queer press in

that they enabled the spread of informal queer dialogue in their specific areas. BBSs were

the mode of communication that allowed so many internet-savvy queers to download and

play *Caper in the Castro.* But they were also an integral mechanism for finding sexual

partners, building social networks, exploring identity, and especially during the AIDS

epidemic, communicating vital information.

In order to explore some of these early chatrooms, I visited the *Queer Digital

History Project*, a site managed by Avery Dame-Griff, a scholar and writer of queer and

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[68] Off The Cuff, "Bulletin Board System (BBS) – The Internet's First Community." Check this YouTube video out at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I18ifd8I6P8 for more info on BBS history.
[69] Off The Cuff, "Bulletin Board System (BBS)."

trans* history. I highly encourage anyone interested in the history of queer online forum communication to check it out.[70] The *QDHP* collects and archives pre-2010 queer internet spaces, and this was the manner in which I was able to access and explore some of the BBSs of the 1980s-90s. These forums were home to a variety of queer and trans* communication localized to particular geographic areas. This technology enabled communication among queer and trans* people in areas that didn't have gayborhoods or physical community meeting places. Of BBSs, Avery Dame-Griff says:

> Bulletin Board Systems [BBS] provided that kind of immediate access. That's
> why that system is revolutionary. Before that, you had to get connected to either
> one of the national LGBT publications—and that was dicey, that could out you—
> or connect to a small, regional group. Those groups maintained libraries of
> information, they had books and photos you could have access to. They did video
> nights, where you'd get a VHS and watch it in someone's basement. So the
> internet really allowed people to get the information they needed without
> exposing or outing themselves.[71]

Many BBSs focused on particular queer or trans* groups. "Transitions BBS," active in the early 90s, operated in the 702 area code of Las Vegas, Nevada, with an intended audience of transgender people. "IXE BBS," originally titled "Kinky BBS," operated in the 317 area code of Indianapolis also in the early 90s, and catered to kinky crossdressers

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[70] Dame-Griff, *Queer Digital History Project*.
[71] Giardina, "An Oral History of the Early Trans Internet."

and trans folks. Others centered lesbian issues, personal dating ads, or concerns of

political activism.

Particularly striking, especially for someone who was not alive during the AIDS

epidemic, were the lists and lists of AIDS information BBSs. On these forums, users

traded information, medical advice, clinic locations, opinions. The mechanisms by which

embattled communities formed networks and practiced care through these BBSs is

nothing short of heroic.

> From: -----
>
> Date: Mar 22 23:17:43 1988 (29 lines)
> Subject: Re: Condom Effectiveness
> Reply to item: 277
> Attn: ----- -----
>
> Ages ago I had a lot of experience using condoms, and also talked
> with others who were also using them.  Of one thing we were all very
> sure:  condoms don't always work.  If they don't always constitute a
> barrier to liquids, why are they considered safe?
> I personally maintain there is no such thing as totally safe sex.
> For one thing, if a man uses a condom he cannot be sure of it.  For
> another thing, there are emotions to consider.  If sex were totally
> safe, would it be interesting?  I think not.
> What we mean nowadays by safe sex is sex that is not physically
> unsafe.  Let's be clear about that.  And I would urge everyone to be
> sure that their sex activities are physically safe.
> But I still maintain that the idea of safety in sex is contradictory.
> Sex is opportunity, is challenge, is enough to overturn us inside.  If
> it is not that, then would people take the chances they took even before
> AIDS came along?  I think not.
> We have daredevils, we always will.  And some kinds of sex activity
> are really daredevil.  So we are not talking about anything like traffic
> laws, where nothing other than safety makes sense.
> We are talking about a widespread human activity that changes one's
> whole view of life, however briefly, and even opens up new horizons.
> This is not as simple as washing your neck or tying your tie.
> Condoms used to be nicknamed "safes" but they were never safe.[72]

This is the kind of dialogue that went down on these forums. Sometimes the

moment of encounter speaks for itself.

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[72] "AIDS Info BBS: BBS Fora," *Queer Digital History Project*.

These message boards were the original form of online communication, the prototype for social media. Supplementary to queer presses, BBSs housed queer information, but differed critically in that usually the proliferators of this information were also the consumers of it—a constant dialogue, rather than a conglomerate of information organized by a few and consumed by a constituency. Many were labors of love for those who operated them, known as sysops (systems operators), who were often recognized as community leaders and enablers of dialogue.[73] (Sysops owned the phone lines whose number you would use to dial in to the BBS.) And, if you've never accessed a BBS (like me), and wish to encounter, check out the game *Digital: A Love Story* by Christine Love at https://scoutshonour.com/digital/.

The BBS was the precursor to various other kinds of early online message boards that were used by queer and non-queer early internet communities. Newsgroups running on Usenet, a BBS-based system hosted on UNIX, allowed for organized forums for finding information digitally for the first time—and might be considered the ancestor of social media.[74] AOL forums also came into being around this time and became quite popular as one of the earliest privatized internet chat, forum, and email services.

These various chat services began to constitute spaces where queer and trans* people might be able to gather. Yet early message boards were not always safe spaces for informed queer dialogue under a benevolent leader, especially for those holding intersecting and marginalized identities. Gwen Smith, activist and founder of the

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[73] Dame-Griff, "Queer Digital History Project FAQs."
[74] Off The Cuff, "The FIRST Social Media – Usenet." This is a follow up video to their short documentary on BBSs; watch at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJr1YNQkrqA.

Transgender Day of Remembrance and of "The Gazebo," an early AOL chat room for

trans women, details the difficulties that surrounded securing a space on this forum for

trans women, describing how AOL would continue to shut down trans forums despite

users' employment of coded language—this only ceased when members of the group

persistently wrote to the head of AOL in '93 and '94. And Juana María Rodríguez, in her

chapter "'Welcome to the Global Stage': Confessions of a Latina Cyber-Slut" from

*Queer Latinidad*, discusses her online sexual adventures in the 1990s as a lesbian Latina

woman. Rodríguez was mostly utilizing Internet Relay Chat, or IRC, a real-time online

chat service that was used on some BBSs. Rodríguez reminds internet scholars that

"cyberspace is not the final frontier; it is not a space of liberation; it is not a decolonized

zone where gender, nation, and the constraints of culture lose meaning. Existing 'in the

machine' does not assuage the social, economic, or political conditions that construct

both ourselves and our new mechanical habitats…Designed as another tool of the

expanding war machine, it was not created with me in mind."[75] Rodríguez reminds us

that the digital and the physical are not so distinct as we might imagine; the embodied

conditions of material lives are inseparable from digital spaces, and constrict what people

and communities have autonomy online.

       Rodríguez experiences various harms and benefits from the listservs she explores.

Her experiences in lesbian-coded spaces are particularly harmful; in one chatroom she is

prohibited from speaking her native Spanish, and she is booted from another chatroom

because the sysops suspects her to be an invading man. Because of this and other

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[75] Rodríguez, "'Welcome to the Global Stage': Confessions of a Latina Cyber-Slut," 117.

experiences with gender policing, she locates rigid enforcement of gender categories along a white Western framework of gender in many of these chatrooms. Finding space in several Spanish-language listservs that she joined and frequented, Rodríguez also discusses how she was able to be in community with those who shared her cultural identity and even forge strong romantic and sexual relationships with other queer members. Many of the chatrooms she frequented also allowed her to explore her sexual desires through text-based sex in ways that transcended various boundaries imposed upon her IRL (in real life). Her chapter explores the dangers and affordances of these early chatroom spaces, grounded in her own lived experience of navigating intersecting identities in the early web days.

The *Queer Digital History Project,* "An Oral History of the Early Trans Internet," and "'Welcome to the Global Stage': Confessions of a Latina Cyber-Slut" are all testaments to the importance of BBSs and early chatrooms for many different queer and trans* internet users. While many (such as the lesbian-coded spaces Rodríguez encountered) enforced normativity and white supremacy, many others also represented a critical site of information, sociality, and sexual exploration for queer and trans* folks online. Compared to previous computer-based communication technologies, BBSs and early chatrooms were relatively accessible (free with a dial-up internet connection and the proper software) and notably discreet. Additionally, many BBSs were localized (especially if you couldn't afford long-distance dial-up) and so were often supplemental to physical socialization without relying on one's ability to "get thee to a big city."[76]

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[76] Weston, "Get Thee to A Big City."

Echoes of this kind of online-to-offline sociality can be found in Grindr, a well-known

dating app that I'll discuss in Chapter 4.

BBSs were also testaments to a fundamental tenet of digital queer and trans*

communities: fragility. Digital spaces occupy a strange quasi-physicality; their existence

relies on a combination of software and hardware that I don't pretend to understand, and

if that software and hardware isn't combined in the right ways, the space ceases to exist.

The arrival of web browsers effectively nixed the necessity for BBSs hosted on

specialized software, leading to the disappearance of many message boards and the

bankruptcy of BBS software providers.[77] (Which, in turn, necessitated the existence of

something like the Queer Digital History Project.) The heyday of BBSs was over by the

mid-90s, and queer and trans* people moved on to populate new and different online

cosmos.

Like I said, it took a minute.

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[77] Edwards, "The Lost Civilization of Dial-Up Bulletin Board Systems."

# 3. Tumblr: Moon Landing

Browsers, bitch.

And a lot of things happened, then. Talking about all those things is really beyond the scope of this thesis, nor do I have the wherewithal to be informed about them: even with the speedy access to Google that I have with the cheap WiFi that my roommates and I use while huddled around a cheap router from Walmart, I don't have the time to research it all, because simply a lot went down. Many queer news media went online, as I mentioned before. Lots of queer and trans* folks went online. Closeted gay teens in homophobic households hunched over family desktops late at night, browsing through the wealth of information on queerness at their fingertips and furiously deleting browser history as they went. Older queer and trans* folks, priced out of gayborhoods, found networks both old and new transplanted into this weird technoplace. Marginalized queers, ostracized from whitewashed and homonormative queer spaces, searched for and formed new and affirmative communities. Keys clicked. Things rearranged.

And from that womb social media was birthed. Merriam Webster's definition is as good as any: social media are "forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)."[78] Thus ushered in the age of what many call the "Web 2.0," a term popularized by media mogul Tim O'Reilly, and theoretically defined by Blank and Reisdorf as "using the

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[78] Merriam-Webster, "Social Media."

internet to provide platforms through which network effects can emerge."[79] Simply put, this means that, in contrast to the Web 1.0 era that I discussed previously, where many webpages (with of course the exception of somewhat dynamic spaces like chatrooms) were static, Web 2.0 is defined by sociality, with an emphasis on users interacting with and making changes to site content. The phenom of social media is integral to Web 2.0: online content is generated and consumed by users, and those users constitute online communities. There's no real date associated with the move from Web 1.0 to 2.0, although I'd argue that public online forums constituted a sort of Web 2.0 prototype in a Web 1.0 space. It happened gradually, sinuously, eventually, technologically, progressively. And now, I wake up every morning and check Instagram.

Web 2.0 has also bled into, constituted, and been defined by app-based media that accompanied the smartphonification of daily life. Within the progression of queer spatiality unfolding on these pages, I'm going to discuss a few Web 2.0-enabled social media spaces that enabled queer congregation and queered the space-gay continuum in meaningful ways. This chapter will discuss blogging sites, social media that were commonly accessed via desktop or laptop computers, with the recognition of Tumblr as fundamentally important to the personal and political consciousness of many millennial-gen queer and trans* people. In the following chapter, we'll move to smartphones and talk about the app-based dating platform Grindr, which has been integral to new modes of queer sociality and sexual access.

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[79] Blank and Reisdorf, "The Participatory Web."

In the last chapter, I reported some information from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics detailing access to computers in the 1990s. As I said before, it's important to think about
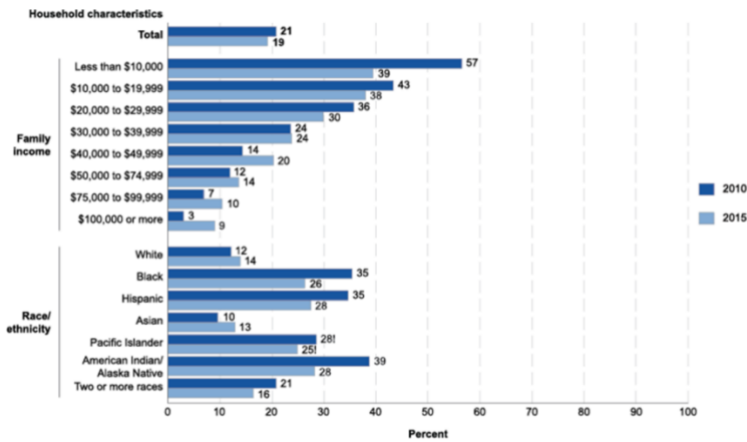


how access to the internet affects how online spaces are constructed, and in a Web 2.0 milieu, internet access is of critical interest as users have more and more power to define internet space. According to data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, internet access declines with each descending income bracket—the graph to the right provides a picture of how internet access in 2010 and 2015 functioned around economic and ethnic demographics.[80] The report details that 38% of those without internet lacked access because it was too expensive. As with all data, this graph should be interpreted with caution, but it's definitely worth noting the demographic groups that may have been and may still be excluded from social media spaces. This is especially relevant for a site like Tumblr, which at its nascence, ran through browsers on desktop or laptop computers with an internet connection.

Without consulting any sources other than the knowledge of my own queer network, I know that Tumblr was a truly lifechanging place for many queer and trans* people. (Fortunately, critical writing and research substantiates this claim, as I'll discuss

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[80] KewalRamani et. al., "Student Access to Digital Learning Resources Outside of the Classroom."

momentarily.) I see Tumblr as a sort of continuation/combination of the platforms LiveJournal and MySpace. LiveJournal was founded in the U.S. in 1998 by a dude named Brad Fitzpatrick as a way to keep in touch with his friends, but expanded as an internationally networked blogging platform.[81] The interface enables something like a journal entry, that other users can comment on in a message-board style. Here, we see the continuation of forms like the BBS that enable generative text-based discussion. LiveJournal was used for all sorts of things, one of those being queer interactions: in a 2008 post in the journal queergirls, one user claims that "livejournal's queer community is pretty much the only place i know to find all you beautiful kids."[82] In addition to providing channels of sociality, LiveJournal also enabled critical networks of information-sharing. Amos Mac, the cofounder of "Original Plumbing" zine, writer, and photographer, said of the transmasculine community on LiveJournal:

> I would lurk on LiveJournal and not post. I found links to people's personal
> websites. I found a lot of trans guys and transmasculine guys that way. They
> would document their transition, like literally every hair that grew on their face.
> Receipts for every syringe ever purchased, every surgery, everything. They
> wanted to give a full sense of how much money all of it cost. At the time, I didn't
> have a community really. I was more interested in reading other people's stuff.[83]

For Mac, this was a space of vital transition information, rather than an interactive social sphere. And LiveJournal's anonymous journal-entry style made the site a space where

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[81] Greenall, "LiveJournal: Russia's Unlikely Internet Giant."
[82] revolut, "hello dears."
[83] Giardina, "An Oral History of the Early Trans Internet."

people could document their experiences and others could read them anonymously and engage, or not—features that carried over to Tumblr, carrying with them both opportunities to benefit and learn without posting, like Mac, but also features that can open up unique dangers for queer and trans* users (more on this as it relates to Tumblr shortly). MySpace, by contrast, was one of the earliest and largest social media platforms, the predecessor of (and capitulator to) Facebook. MySpace was not anonymous like LiveJournal, and was one of the first places where users could construct a personal, identifiable profile. Launched in 2003, MySpace was hugely influential, remaining for several years the largest social networking site in the world.[84] Tumblr, founded in 2007, fused LiveJournal's (queer-enabling) blogging style with pioneered social networking features of MySpace such as personalizable profiles and the ability to share multiple types of media (i.e., not just text).

For Tumblr, it was that perfect storm of platform popularity and site features that allowed for the creation of various queer and trans* online communities and the proliferation of queer political consciousnesses. Allen-Young, a millennial queer woman born in 1992, writes of her experience: "It was on [Tumblr] that I found the terminology for what I could not put names to before—bisexuality, pansexuality, gender fluidity—it was all new to me and likely never would have come my way without the internet….The internet offered me not only the language to describe what I was feeling, but access to a larger community that helped me realize I was not alone."[85] Tumblr users can choose to

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[84] Jackson and Madrigal, "The Rise and Fall of MySpace."
[85] Allen-Young, "#queer."

be anonymous, are able to share various types of media in text/graphic/GIF formats, and can easily search for themed posts using tags, enabling a possibility space for curious people of varying levels of queerness and outness to explore organized social information.

Another facet of Tumblr that initially encouraged diverse and weird networks to emerge was baked into its dominant ideology, the intentions and credos of the top-down creators and hegemonic regulators of the site. Tumblr's founder is a man named David Karp, who acquired the tumblr.com URL after an internship for an animation studio in high school launched him into the world of software consultancy and piqued his interest in starting a microblogging platform.[86] Under Karp, Tumblr was a platform characterized by an "ethos of permissiveness" that allowed and encouraged the sharing of all sorts of content, including the pornographic, about which Karp quipped in 2012: "I'm not into moderating this stuff."[87] This guiding framework of laxity in censorship allowed users to post whatever they wanted, tag that post however they wanted, and interact with whoever else they wanted. As writers Allen-Young, Cavalcante, Avery Dame-Griff, and Haimson et. al. note, this allowed for a variety of outcomes for queer and trans* users, including the creation of networked communities and the introduction of danger to outside forces. Through Tumblr's specific mechanisms, queer and trans* users could create a "counterpublic," a space that's publicly available but acts as an alternative to dominant public spheres that normalize certain bodies and ways of being in the world.[88]

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[86] Benkoil, "Tumblr CEO David Karp's Wild Ride from 14-Year-Old Intern to Multimillionaire."
[87] Cavalcante, "Tumbling into Queer Utopias and Vortexes," 1720.
[88] It's important to note that this isn't the only possible outcome of an unregulated space like Tumblr—4chan is a site that effectively hosts the same policies, but is well-known for being a cesspool of right-wing

As such, various researchers have explored the ins and outs of the queer counterpublics hosted on Tumblr. In "Tumbling Into Queer Utopias and Vortexes: Experiences of LGBTQ Social Media Users on Tumblr," Andre Cavalcante argues that Tumblr's ability to speedily expand "queer youth's social and political imaginary" as an non-single-issue "informational environment and intersectional space" created a queer utopia for users like Allen-Young, who joined the site and began there to conceive of new worlds, engage in new politics, and explore their own identities.[89] In "Making a Name for Yourself: Tagging as Transgender Ontological Practice on Tumblr," Avery Dame-Griff argues that the counterpublic of trans youth on Tumblr helped to formulate and maintain trans identity and being.[90] And in "Tumblr Was a Trans Technology: The Meaning, History, and Future of Trans Technologies," Dame-Griff, Oliver Haimson, Elias Capello, and Zahari Richter argue that Tumblr was a trans technology because it allowed trans users to change over time with each other, remain separate from their IRL networks, explore identity, and engage in intersectional conversation with one another, as well as upholding a model that allowed for dissemination of erotic content. Allen-Young, Cavalcante, Dame-Griff, and Haimson et. al. all view Tumblr as a space where community gathered and formed, where personal-political dialogue takes place, and where various queer and trans* groups could come to different kinds of self-

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extremism, hate, and bigotry. Look into the Tumblr vs. 4chan wars of 2014 for an interesting case study on the two userbases.

[89] Cavalcante, "Tumbling into Queer Utopias and Vortexes," 1723.

[90] Travers, "Parallel Subaltern Feminist Counterpublics in Cyberspace," cited in Dame, "Making a Name for Yourself," 26.

understandings—as well as a space that engenders particular dangers for queer and trans*

users.

For Cavalcante, the utopic potential of Tumblr accompanied the existence of

queer bubbles—spaces where queerness is centered as a norm, a reorientation of

"common sense and taken-for-granted knowledge," filling a need of queer people for an

interactive gathering space. For Dame-Griff, the identity-building potential of Tumblr for

trans users arose out of a tagging system that allows users to linguistically organize

around key "folksonomic" terms. Dame-Griff uses Vander Wal's definition of

*folksonomy* as "the result of personal free tagging of information and objects (anything

with a URL) for one's own retrieval. The tagging is done in a social environment (shared

and open to others). The act of tagging is done by the person consuming the

information," and is valuable in that folksonomies are "derived from people using their

own vocabulary and adding explicit meaning."[91] Additional research focused on "About

Me" blog bio space has shown that for people with non-binary genders and sexualities,

this is a space where QTGNC users can specify pronouns, gender, sexual orientation, and

openness to dialogue, making these pieces of information recognizable to a larger queer

community.[92] Thus, Cavalcante's queer utopia emerges around practices like Dame-

Griff's trans tagging and personal identification in "About Me" spaces, creating sites of

interaction for queer and trans* users to share media organized around inter-community

knowledge like folksonomic vocabulary.

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[91] Vander Wal, "Folksonomy Definition and Wikipedia."
[92] Oakley, "Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary Gender and Sexual Orientation Labeling on Tumblr."

Cavalcante's study includes two striking examples of the power of Tumblr's queer space that I feel exemplify the particularities of Tumblr's spatial nodes. Discussing a focus group in which queer users examined how they would curate their feeds by only liking/sharing/following queer content (thus triggering Tumblr's algorithm to exclusively show them more of this content), Cavalcante writes of one contributor:

> As Jesse explained these extensions to the focus group, one participant asked her if in regulating her Tumblr feed so extensively she became out of touch with "the sucky real world." Without hesitation, Jesse responded, "I don't need reminders of the world sucking! I am fully, completely aware of that. What I need is a queer space I can go to where it's good."[93]

Jesse is seeking the kinds of spaces that queer people often fail to find in the "sucky real world," in a very understandable attempt to escape a heteronormative public. Another participant, Juniper, took the utopic potential of Tumblr a step farther: as a young Black pansexual woman, Juniper saw Tumblr as having "an open platform for constructive criticism in all areas around intersectionality and race and queerness and it is a safe space to have these conversations. It's like you can say I see what you're saying but it's problematic because of X, Y, and Z. And you can have that not met with hostility. No screaming, no violence, no foolishness."[94] Noting a disconnect between the intersectional spaces of Tumblr and her university's LGBTQ student group, Juniper organized and led workshops—first within that group and then in other university spaces—on emerging

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[93] Cavalcante, "Tumbling into Queer Utopias and Vortexes," 1725.
[94] Cavalcante, 1726.

QTGNC identities and intersectionality using the ideas and practices she encountered on Tumblr. Juniper's workshops are a compelling example of the reorientation of queer space that occurs around digital queer and trans* communities, and an activist-minded practice of facilitating community and providing educational spaces on- and off-line.

Yet while Tumblr provided a nurturing and informative arena for users like Jesse and Juniper, all of the authors I've mentioned here discuss ways in which Tumblr's particularities can also be uniquely harmful to QTGNC users and communities. Cavalcante argues that while Tumblr generates a queer utopia, it also enables "queer 'vortextuality'—an experience of being sucked into an online black hole with severe limitations." Adapting a term invented by Garry Whannel to explain certain industrial news practices, Cavalcante asserts that "in the context of media audiences, vortextuality is a process of intense user engagement with media for a delimited amount of time. It is the experience of being sucked in, of falling into a mediated black hole." As QTGNC users seek more queer socialization through Tumblr, the site's algorithm curates more and more queer material, to the exclusion of other types of content—a "mediated black hole" that allowed Jesse to escape from the sucky real world and created the atmosphere that nurtured Juniper's belief that Tumblr contains no screaming, violence, or foolishness.

Because, as Dame-Griff notes, there are some forms of screaming/violence/foolishness that can occur for QTGNC users on Tumblr. In a study on trans tagging, Dame-Griff mined popular folksonomic trans hashtags for themes and information, including #transgender, #ftm, #mtf, #trans, and #trans*. While these hashtags were sites of positive community-formation and information-sharing for trans

users, they were also places where trans users might encounter transphobia and marginalization. #transgender was often tagged alongside other queer tags like #gay, #lesbian, #bisexual, or #pansexual on posts that didn't have anything to do with trans-specific issues, taking away from trans users' ability to maintain autonomy over their subcommunity. The #transgender tag was also associated with a large amount of fetish porn, enabled by Karp's ideology of permissiveness, but harmful to trans users, "remind[ing] them of how their body is commodified and consumed for others' pleasure without their consent."[95]

And both Dame-Griff and Cavalcante note the potential for exposure to harmful content on Tumblr. Trans tagging opens a user up to the possibility of identification and targeting by transphobic blog trolls, as those tags are public. Also enabled by Karp's anti-regulation beliefs, Cavalcante found that some users could be seduced by subcommunities with injurious ideologies, such as one participant who was sucked into an informational vacuum around self-harm. Dame-Griff reported a good amount of "tag policing," wherein users engage in regulating the use of established folksonomic lingo, sometimes to the exclusion of those who would advocate for more inclusive definitions (i.e., arguing that one cannot identify as transgender without the experience of body dysmorphia). Some negative facets of Tumblr's queer social experience are not unique to its online elements—a gay bar may also be a space that marginalizes and/or fetishizes trans* and gender nonconforming folks, or a space that is a site for homophobic and transphobic violence. But the ease of access to online communities through tag searching,

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[95] Dame, "Making a Name for Yourself," 29.

the ability to maintain anonymity, Karp's original anti-censure positionality, and the vortextuality enabled by the site's algorithm can produce both constructive and caring identity-based communities as well as unique experiences of marginalization and danger.

Haimson et. al.'s research furthers Dame-Griff's, reiterating the two potentialities of queer/trans* network creation and exposure to vulnerability. These researchers argue that Tumblr was a "trans technology," enabling trans experience via particular features. Trans users could undergo meaningful change online alongside other trans people, and these networks forged among trans users were separate from those they inhabited IRL. Tumblr was also a space where trans people could present their real gender identity when this was not always possible in their daily lives, which was affirming and vital for many trans users. And, echoing Juniper's observations from Cavalcante's study, Tumblr afforded an intersectional dialogue space for multiply marginalized trans people, particularly trans bloggers of color, to discuss and document their experiences in spaces where race and class, as well as gender, could be central to the conversation.

And the documentation of trans life on Tumblr is critical to the creation of this intersectional space: Haimson et. al. also argue that in order for a technology to be called trans, it must also "uphold policies and an economic model that embrace adult or erotic content—an integral part of transition and intersectional community building for many trans bloggers—without characterizing it as pornographic and removing it."[96] Many trans people on Tumblr documented and posted their transitions photographically, content that

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[96] Haimson et. al., "Tumblr Was a Trans Technology: The Meaning, History, and Future of Trans Technologies," 2.

may be considered erotic but should not be confused with pornographic. For many years, Tumblr's site features and culture enabled trans experience as such; however, the fact that the site was not designed with the needs of marginalized users in mind resulted in economic policy changes that ceased to enable many of the queer and trans* experiences these authors discuss.

You may have noticed that in many places in this section, as in the title of Haimson et. al.'s study—"Tumblr *Was* a Trans Technology"—I used the past tense to describe some of the queer happenings on Tumblr. Like communities on BBSs and nonmainstream spaces like LiveJournal, Tumblr's queer and trans* communities are an exemplar of the tenuousness of online spaces supporting lasting communities, and a reminder of queer and trans* vulnerability in what Cavalcante calls "corporatized digital spaces."[97] David Karp owned Tumblr from 2007 to 2013, a period characterized by Karp's unregulatory ideology. In 2013, however, Karp sold the platform to Yahoo for 1.1 billion dollars.[98] This sale was associated with increased paid advertising on the site and a campaign to remove pornographic content to comply with Apple's App Store regulations. In doing so, the company started censoring tags such as #lesbian, #gay, #transgender, #bisexual, #pansexual, or #queer because of their association with "adult content," instead forcing users to congregate to the homogenizing company-moderated tag #lgbtq.[99]

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[97] Cavalcante, "Tumbling into Queer Utopias and Vortexes," 1732.
[98] Fox, "Yahoo to Buy Tumblr for $1.1 Billion: Report."
[99] Tumblr Staff, "We've heard from a bunch of you who are…"

Thus began a continued fracture of queer and trans* communities on Tumblr; this same issue would occur again in 2017, when Yahoo was purchased by Verizon Communications and combined with AOL to create Oath.[100] The site then introduced a required "safe mode" that censored pornographic content, requiring all under-18 users to use this mode and making it the default for new accounts. Safe mode also censored queer and trans* hashtags, making unmoderated queer content unavailable for nonadults and new users.[101] Many QTGNC folks who hadn't already boycotted the site in 2013 did so after this second round of queerphobic censorship. David Karp left Tumblr in 2017,[102] and in December 2018, Tumblr introduced what's known colloquially as the "Great Porn Ban," prohibiting all "adult content" which they define as "photos, videos, or GIFs that show real-life human genitals or female-presenting nipples, and any content—including photos, videos, GIFs and illustrations—that depicts sex acts."[103] The Great Porn Ban was the effective end of many queer and trans* communities on Tumblr, for whom erotic content was a crucial part of engagement with the platform.[104] In 2019, Tumblr was purchased by Auttomatic, the company that owns WordPress blogs, and the same anti-porn censorship policies instated in 2018 remain today.[105]

Here we see an issue with queer communal space formation, much broader and farther-reaching than the scope of this thesis, but worth discussion nonetheless: infringing outside capital interests. Real estate investors looking to gentrify neighborhoods, raising

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[100] Goel, "Verizon Completes $4.48 Billion Purchase of Yahoo."

[101] Cavalcante, "Tumbling into Queer Utopias and Vortexes," 1732.

[102] Lunden, "David Karp is Leaving Tumblr by the End of the Year."

[103] Kirkland, "Tumblr Cancelled Porn, So Users Cancelled Tumblr."

[104] Haimson et. al., "Tumblr Was a Trans Technology."

[105] Alexander, "Verizon is Selling Tumblr to WordPress' Owner."

rents and pricing out queer bar and saloon owners; tech giant CEOs looking to increase company revenues by conglomerating and purchasing popular media sites. In both situations, corporate interests prevail over queer and trans* interests; profitability over community. In the case of Tumblr, LGBTQIA+ people joined a space that was not formed for them and queered it. Yet that space was never invested in maintaining and nurturing that queered environment. Tumblr's economic policies reminded queer and trans* users that *they* were the outsiders; *they* were the ones who had reterritorialized the space in the first place, and that its true territory lies not in the land of the queers but the land of Making Money.

As we've seen, battle lines over who controls space inevitably play out along lines of hegemonic power. Earlier I alluded to the fact that the era of Tumblr oversaw something crazy happen in the evolution of the ways that people can experience space: smartphones. As we'll see in the next chapter, smartphones engender queer space in revolutionary ways through location-based apps. If, as Allen-Young suggested, the internet itself is a kind of queer space, then smartphones are about as fruity as they come. They're like little gay spaceships. But the ways in which smartphones enable new spatial arrangements for queers is ultimately very embroiled in American distributions of social and economic power. We might be able to fly around a galaxy or two; but, depending on who you are, you may or may not end up on the planet of self-determination.

# 4. Grindr: Mars4Mars

So, yeah, smartphones.

If you're a person in the world today, then you're probably acutely personally aware of how smartphones have changed the way people interact with one another, reinscribing social relations in almost every walk of life.

But smartphones have done more than just change the way we relate with one another—they've also radically altered the way we think about space. When cellphones were flip phones, accessing the internet was something done on a laptop or a home computer. This bound the World Wide Web to certain spatial configurations—your device would have to be connected to internet somewhere, maybe at home, or at work, or a coffee shop or something. My family never had a desktop computer, but I remember when my mom had this clunky-ass Windows laptop that took about 6 months to turn on and to load any type of Internet Explorer page—accessing the internet through that dinosaur was a certain kind of spatial experience. There was a whole process involved; open Clunky, hold down the power button, wait 5-10 minutes for the screen to light up and the Windows hum that meant things were loading and turning on. Listen to the background orchestra of whirs and fans and clicks. Plug in that ethernet cable, get a snack. Wait a little more, open Internet Explorer, eat a few bites of snack, type in a URL, more snack. It was a whole process. You'd be sitting down. There were cords involved that would keep you physically bound to a wall. And so how I conceived of the internet back then is drastically different to how I think about it now.

If that clunky old computer was a vessel to Mars, it worked. It was stocked with that powdery food astronauts eat; and it would semi-reliably get you to outer space and you'd be able to do what you needed to do there, as long as you were patient about the journey. Smartphones, on the other hand, allow us to traverse at the speed of light from any location near a cell tower. That relationship with the extraterrestrial is now fundamentally different: the internet, as space, is now more of an overlay than a concrete destination. For those of us who have that kind of access, it's everywhere—life from Mars has landed and it's in motion. Space works differently now.

This change in the spatial configuration of internet access has altered many things for countless queer and trans* people, more than can be discussed here or even fully known. In this chapter, I take up the question of sexual access through the specific case of the mobile dating app Grindr. Sexual access for queer and trans* people is a nuanced topic that is intimately bound to the spaces I've been tracing in this project. So far I've focused less on access to partners and more on resource-sharing or community-building. And while that's a crucial component to queer social relationships, lots of queer and trans* people are trying to have sex and build romantic relationships with one another, and gaining access to those sexual partners has long been a fraught experience. Pre-internet, physical spaces that offered access to potential partners were places of both opportunity and extreme danger, and methods for finding partners via the internet brings with it new risks and potentialities. In this chapter, I'll explore some of the nuance around Grindr as a dating app whose userbase consists mostly of queer men. Grindr provides a new spatial dimension for queer sex, overlaying a realm of queer sexual possibility on top

of cishet public space. But experiences of marginalized users on the app complicates

Grindr's radical queer potential and show how normativity, racism, transphobia, ableism,

and toxic masculinity structure this space.

Grindr is a social mobile app primarily for men who have sex with men that is

quite popular and well-known within and without the queer male community. One of a

few MSM-specific dating sites, Grindr has many features that set it apart and enable new

and different kinds of relations between queer people. Grindr was launched in 2009 by

Joel Simkhai for the iOS App Store, the first location-based dating app for queer men to

debut on iOS.[106] Its interface allows users to browse the profiles of nearby queer men,

displaying how far away other users are without revealing their exact locations.

Originally, the app required no personal information whatsoever to join, allowing for

personalized levels of discretion. (Nowadays, to sign up, Grindr requires an email address

and phone number, which does accompany privacy concerns.) As Simkhai put it in 2010,

this "little private network" was intended for "users who can't be quite public about

it."[107] Simkhai himself is a gay man, and his simple wish in founding Grindr was to

"make it easier for gay men to meet one another."[108] Today, Grindr has over three million

users,[109] having greatly expanded beyond Simkhai's original intentions, and performing a

marketable function that Simkhai views as "solving a problem."[110] However, Grindr does

more than just solving the problem of how queer men can meet each other. Queer men

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[106] Dating Site Reviews, "Grindr Information, Statistics, Facts and History."
[107] Palmeri, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Just Grindr."
[108] Smiley, "Grindr CEO Joel Simkhai Explains How He Turned His Idea for The App Into a Reality."
[109] LinkedIn, www.linkedin.com/company/grindr/about/.
[110] Smiley, "Grindr CEO Joel Simkhai Explains How He Turned His Idea for The App Into a Reality."

had been meeting each other long before they were doing it on Grindr, and thus it might be more helpful to view Grindr's functionality as enabling a new way of encountering situated among various other (older) traditions of queer sexual meetups.

"Cruising" is one such tradition. A centuries-old practice of locating casual sex, usually in public spaces, cruising has enabled men looking for sex with other men to find each other long before locative technologies existed. Different cruising spaces might cater to different "types" of men, and could be outdoors (i.e. a public park) or indoors (i.e. sex clubs and bathhouses). Cruising was an important tenet of queer urban communities, and locations where one could cruise were an important part of subcultural knowledge for urban queer spaces—and, in the case where a queer man was unable to access knowledge about where to cruise, various guides to public sex spaces for queer men were published annually.[111]

In "Still Getting It On Online: Thirty Years of Queer Male Spaces Brokered Through Digital Technologies," queer historian Sam Miles defines cruising as an explicitly anti-normative sexual practice that has been increasingly reterritorialized in the last 30 years by digital technologies.[112] Miles argues that not only are new technologies shaping queer male spaces, they now *are* queer spaces, constituting and mediating how they are enacted and who has access to them.[113] Platforms like the BBS and Tumblr enable(d) primarily virtual rather than physical interaction; Grindr, however, explicitly

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[111] Tewksbury, "Cruising for Sex In Public Places: The Structure And Language of Men's Hidden, Erotic Worlds."
[112] Miles, "Still Getting It On Online: Thirty Years of Queer Male Spaces Brokered Through Digital Technologies."
[113] Miles, 2.

seeks to connect people IRL, opening up the possibility for scholarship (like Miles') on

hybridized digital space. And so the very idea of space—something I've been tracking

throughout this thesis—is changing: a neighborhood, a chatroom, a blogging site, a…gay

GPS?[114] And, rather than queering normatively-coded internet space—as queer and

trans* communities on Tumblr did—locative apps like Grindr use the internet to queer

heterosexually coded *physical* space, reterritorializing space in queer favor as the "app

overlays queer space on ostensibly normative terrain."[115]

       While this may seem like a virtualized extension of cruising practices, which also

reterritorialized heterosexually coded public space as queer, both Miles and Grindr

researchers Courtney Blackwell, Jeremy Birnholtz, and Charles Abbott note that the

practice is also very much changed. Many popular articles I encountered in my research

frame Grindr in light of the tradition of cruising—Vanity Fair dubbed Grindr "the

world's biggest, scariest gay bar" where one can "cruise anywhere"[116]—but Blackwell et.

al.'s research explores the effects of "co-situating" very different types of individuals

across traditional spatial and community boundaries. Knowledge about cruising spaces

pre-internet would have primarily proliferated within these traditional physical

communities and neighborhoods, but as Blackwell et. al. note, Grindr's features place

people in proximity in a way that "transcends and conflates socially defined places and

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[114] Miles also mentions conceptualizations of space like "cyborgs" and "avatars" that I haven't touched on much: check out Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" and Dan Healey's "Gay Switchboards" from *Encyclopedia of Gay Histories and Cultures.*
[115] Miles, "Still Getting It On Online," 6.
[116] Kapp, "Grindr: Welcome to the World's Biggest, Scariest Gay Bar."

neighborhoods."[117] This co-situation is the very thing that constitutes the

reterritorialization of normative space into queer space—but it *also* reterritorializes queer

space itself, as Blackwell et. al.'s research shows. The participants in this study

mentioned positive affects towards the accessibility of new queer relationships that

Grindr affords: one participant mentioned liking how Grindr "makes every space a

potentially gay space… Gay men have plenty of spaces much more than other people but

there's a lot of places that are still heterosexual. And Grindr gives me the chance to pull

out my phone and have a gay bar in my pocket."[118]

Yet study participants also experienced a range of emotions about who was using

the app for what: unlike cruising spaces, whose purpose was clearly marked as a place of

casual sexual encounter, Grindr's "looking for" feature introduces ambiguity as users

have to decode what others are *actually* "looking for"—which, at times, is different than

what their profile suggests. Many enter the space for casual hookups, but not all, and not

everyone looking for a casual hookup might be willing to state that outright.[119]

Both Miles and Blackwell et. al. also discuss the fraught landscape of profile

creation for Grindr users. Unlike the previous digital technologies I've discussed, the

profile is central to the Grindr experience. A friend allowed me to peruse their profile for

information-gathering purposes, and screenshots with blank information are provided for

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[117] Blackwell et. al., "Seeing and Being Seen: Co-Situation and Impression Formation Using Grindr, a Location-Aware Gay Dating App."
[118] Blackwell et. al., 1126.
[119] Blackwell et. al., 1128.

reference. There's a space to upload pictures, a name slot, a
bio area, and then there's options where users can identify
various things about themselves: their age, height, weight,
body type, sexual position, ethnicity, relationship status, and
"tribe," a feature that allows for users to identify with up to
three groups: bear, clean-cut, daddy, discreet, geek, jock,
leather, otter, poz (indicating an HIV-positive status), rugged,
trans, twink, and sober. (I'll discuss "tribes" further later on.)
You can also specify what you're looking for, where you'd
want to meet, if you're open to accepting NSFW pics, your
gender and pronouns, your HIV status and last test date, and
provide links to social media if desired. All of these elements
are optional, and are displayed to other nearby users.
Additionally, you can choose to employ filters on profiles
displayed: with the free version of Grindr, you can filter age,
"looking for," and tribes. "Advanced" filters require paying
for Grindr Xtra or Grindr Unlimited, and allows users to filter
based on who's online, who has photos and who doesn't, who
hasn't chatted today, and specified weight, height, body type,
position, relationship status, "meet at," and NSFW pic
settings. It's noteworthy that until very recently, Grindr also allowed paid users to filter
for ethnicity.
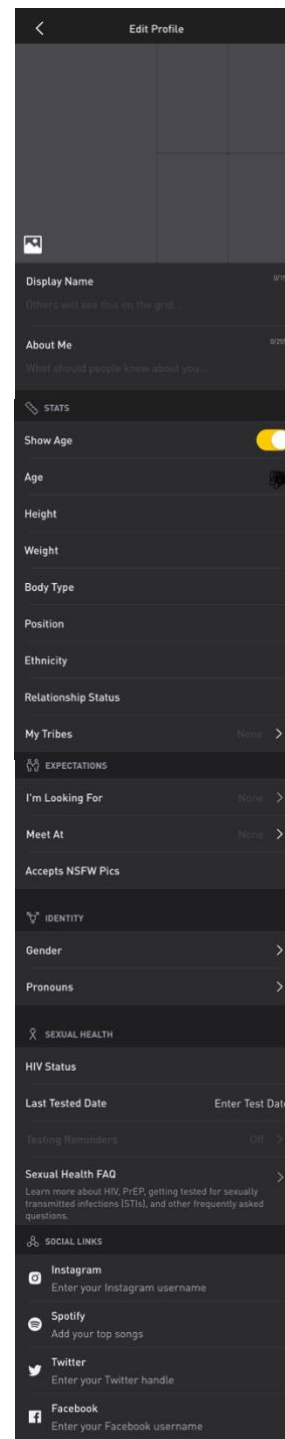
Because of these particular profile features of Grindr, Miles identifies a tension in labeling locative apps like Grindr as inherently subversive and anti-normative: Grindr's radical potential lies in its ability to layer queer space over normative space, but it also exists within a neoliberal capital context that invites users to "log partner preferences as if products."[120] And within this context exists privileging of certain bodies, especially along lines of race, gender, ethnicity, age, and body type. It's crucial to locate how Grindr and other dating apps operate around hegemony, in what Shaka McGlotten in *Queer Intimacies* refers to as a "racist economy of desire."[121] I also want to re-foreground my own positionality in this discussion; as a white queer woman, I do not have any idea what it's like to use Grindr, nor have I experienced racism on dating apps, and must rely solely on the words and findings of others for this information. The scholars whose work I'll present in the following section have all engaged in research and writing that investigates experiences on Grindr and similar sites through the lens of various marginalized identities, showing how this economy operates around presentations of race, masculinity/gender, age, fitness levels, and folksonomic sexual identifiers like top and bottom. This is a non-comprehensive compilation of some of the recent scholarly research and conversations occurring around Grindr (and similar locative apps) that highlights how various types of people are "othered" through Grindr's economy of desire. This identity research adds a critical lens to Grindr's spatial dynamics: Grindr may

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[120] Miles, "Still Getting It On Online," 5.
[121] McGlotten, "Feeling Black and Blue," 69.

be akin to a pocket gay bar, but as such, it's crucial to understand who is welcomed and affirmed at the door.

I'll begin with some quantitative research: in an analysis of 500 profiles across four different gay dating apps, researchers Rodriguez, Huemmer, and Blumell found that masculinity on these sites was gatekept and policed, privileging a masculine elite "that is predominantly white, young, fit, and healthy."[122] And in a study focused specifically on racial attitudes on the gay male dating site Adam4Adam (a desktop precursor to Grindr), Russell Robinson created profiles using the same photograph of an "attractive, Latino gay man." Controlling for age, height, weight, waist size, body type, hair, body hair, "looking for" (what they were using the site for), smoking status, and penis size, the variables studied were sexual position (top/bottom) and race (white, Black, Latino, and Asian). Robinson notes that the results indicate a racial hierarchy among MSM on this site, with Black and Asian men receiving a significantly lower number of responses than white and Latino men, with Black bottoms at a particular disadvantage.

Authors Shaka McGlotten and Senthorun Raj explore some of the consequences of this racial hierarchization from an autoethnographic lens. In "Grindring Bodies: Racial and Affective Economies of Online Queer Desire," Raj also identifies the tension between Grindr's potential to enable antinormative relations and its reliance on normative categories that turn partners into products. Raj explores how, in this economy of desire, whiteness becomes desired social and sexual capital, "enabling bodies to 'pass' as

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[122] Rodriguez, Huemmer, and Blumell, "Mobile Masculinities: An Investigation of Networked Masculinities in Gay Dating Apps."

'White', while excluding other bodies. Racial 'Others' become produced in this economy of desire as fetishes or repugnant objects."[123] Raj says of his own experiences using Grindr in Australia, "my 'Indianess' becomes a point that bodies turn away from…In the act of naming myself as 'Other' (no category exists for Subcontinental ethnicities), I am refused some social and sexual mobility in this dominating space of whiteness, a space often conflated in relation to nationhood."[124] This distance from "Otherness" is maintained through performative profile statements that "organise and dominate bodies on Grindr": "'not into Asians sexually' or 'ONLY ATTRACTED TO CAUCASIANS'."[125] Alternatively, Raj speaks of being fetishized as a queer Asian body occupying a space of submission. This account of his experiences on Grindr speaks to how white supremacy organizes the "economy" of Grindr into a space where bodies perceived as more distant from a white masculine ideal are "worth" less.

Shaka McGlotten, in "Feeling Black and Blue" from *Virtual Intimacies,* highlights some of the affects experienced by Black gay men on gay dating sites, focusing on the feelings of anxiety, paranoia, and optimism felt by himself and other Black gay male acquaintances. McGlotten explores his experience with profile creation reflects "a complex set of negotiations in which I ambivalently grappled with the racialization of desire and my own positioning in a hypercompetitive erotic marketplace in which whiteness enjoys preeminence."[126] McGlotten argues that feelings of anxiety and paranoia "organize many of the processes and relations in these online queer spaces

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[123] Raj, "Grindring Bodies: Racial and Affective Economies of Online Queer Desire," 2.
[124] Raj, 8.
[125] Raj, 8.
[126] McGlotten, "Feeling Black and Blue," 61.

in ways that resemble prior and contemporaneous forms of racial injury, as well as emergent or ongoing forms of violence," but that optimism is also a critical affect towards this space: "the promissory 'not-yet-here' of online spaces continues to make available transformative contacts and encounters, as well as precipitating a more expansive theoretical and political imagination."[127] Both McGlotten and Raj's autoethnographic work around Grindr show how Grindr's profile-creation particularities shape the social experiences of queer men of color in ways that can be particularly harmful—but both authors refuse to categorize the use of these apps as *only* engendering negative experience, rather advocating that harmful experiences must become legible and representable. As McGlotten contends, "feeling black and gay online hasn't therefore yet settled into cold facticity, but continues to shimmer with the right to refuse the certainty of no future, as an interesting interest in the present, or as 'astonished contemplation' of the 'not yet conscious.'" McGlotten and Raj also both view Grindr in relation to economic logics: this complicates Grindr's spatial analogue as a pocket gay bar by suggesting that it's also akin to a "marketplace," where queer bodies are products that are assigned more or less worth.

Additionally, many of the aforementioned scholars name the fact that Grindr is often utilized primarily to locate casual sex, although as Blackwell et. al. discuss, this is not always the case. Andrew Shield's research on Grindr culture explores how immigrants to Copenhagen use and experience Grindr; Shield has written extensively on

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[127] McGlotten, 63, 77.

the topic[128] but the study I'll be primarily drawing from here is entitled "Grindr Culture: Intersectional and Socio-sexual." Shield's work shows how many queer and trans* Grindr users in Copenhagen feel limited in their use of the app due to discrimination based on their race, migration background, sex, gender, ability, size, and HIV status. As Shield suggests, this is especially salient for users who are immigrating from other countries who may use the app not just for sex, but also to seek out friendships, local information, housing, even employment.[129] This speaks to Grindr's co-situating spatial dynamics, and further complicates Grindr's spatial status. Not only is Grindr a pocket gay bar and/or a sexual marketplace, it can also be used like a community center, a space to tap into local resources for those who are new in town. Yet the resources and potential of Grindr as a community center are curtailed by these experiences of discrimination: echoing findings of many of the other researchers cited above, through interviews with twelve recent immigrants to Copenhagen, Shield found that users experienced rejection from many native white Danish users based on their perceived racial or citizenship status. One participant from Turkey lamented Grindr's "ethnicity" menu, believing it contributes to racist discourses and racial targeting.[130] Other users also experienced problematic racial fetishization, a pattern similar to the one noted by Raj in his personal experiences.

Additionally, as one interviewee in Shield's study contends, "it's not just racism flourishing on Grindr…there is also audism and ableism."[131] Especially considering that

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[128] Shield, *Immigrants in the Sexual Revolution: Perceptions and Participation in Northwest Europe*; Shield, "New in Town: Gay Immigrants and Geosocial Dating Apps"; Shield, "'Looking for north Europeans only': Identifying Five Racist Patterns in an Online Subculture."

[129] Shield, "Grindr Culture: Intersectional and Socio-sexual," 150.

[130] Shield, 154.

[131] Shield, 156.

Grindr implicitly encourages thinking about height, weight, and "body type" through profile features, it's unfortunately not surprising that Shield encountered plenty of profiles that asked for "no fats," or implied this by requesting men who are "fit/in shape," and found that promotional material for the app centered on men with low body fat. This underscores aforementioned findings from Rodriguez, Huemmer, and Blumell on the harmful body ideals that circulate on Grindr, further limiting nonnormative bodies from safely engaging in this space.[132]

Shield's study also explores how gender operates on Grindr. The work of Rodriguez et. al., Robinson, Raj, and McGlotten all mention the privileging of certain kinds of masculinity and the proliferation of femmephobia on Grindr, yet many trans women use the app, a fact that Shield states Grindr as a company is "oblivious" and "ambivalent" to.[133] Grindr has only recently stopped advertising itself as a social network for men only; its site claims that it is "the world's largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people," but its 2017 promotional material designated it as "all-male."[134] One trans woman who was originally from Asia who Shield spoke with discussed that she was commonly assumed to be a sex worker, suggesting that "Grindr users hold a constellation of stereotypes about transgender women, Asian immigrants, and sexual-economic opportunism."[135] Trans men also experienced marginalization on

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[132] For further reading, check out Matthew Conte's graduate thesis "More Fats, More Femmes, and No Whites: A Critical Examination of Fatphobia, Femmephobia and Racism on Grindr." In this thesis, Conte deconstructs the "popularized" profile expression(s) "no fats, no femmes, no Asians or Blacks" to explore the intersections between fatphobia, femmephobia, and racism on the app.

[133] Shield, "Grindr Culture: Intersectional and Socio-sexual," 155.

[134] Grindr.com, cited in Shield, "Grindr Culture: Intersectional and Socio-sexual."

[135] Shield, 155.

Grindr; Shield quotes Danish trans male activist Niels Janson who believes that "nobody

will write to you [if you're a trans man]…in my experience, you can't be too

different."[136]

Scholarship has shown that trans* people do experience high levels of physical,

psychological, sexual, and coercive violence on cyberdating apps like Grindr,[137] even as

these sites can produce meaningful connections with other trans* folks and identify cis

users that uplift trans* identity and being and, in the words of one participant in a study

on queer online dating by Tinonee Pym and colleagues, are "nice."[138] The work of Kath

Albury and colleagues further discuss some of the experiences of trans women on dating

apps. Most participants described times they felt unsafe on dating apps, or times when

they encountered transphobia in others' profiles (i.e. "cis4cis).[139] Yet despite this, most of

the participants reported overall positive experiences with dating apps, leading the

authors to conclude that "dating apps are spaces that hold potential for trans dating app

users to feel more and/or less safe depending both on the app's technical infrastructure

and the attitudes of fellow app-users."[140] In "Authenticity, Validation and Sexualisation

on Grindr: an Analysis of Trans Women's Accounts," Christopher Lloyd and Mark Finn

reported many of their participants felt that Grindr users questioned the presence of trans

women on the app, often invalidating their identities as women and/or fetishizing and

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[136] "Grindr and Sex Culture" panel, quoted in Shield, 155.

[137] Dank et. al., "Dating Violence Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth."

[138] Pym et. al., "'I still want to know they're not terrible people': Negotiating 'Queer Community' on Dating Apps."

[139] Albury et. al., "Not Your Unicorn: Trans Dating App Users' Negotiations of Personal Safety and Sexual Health," 80.

[140] Albury et. al., 80.

sexualizing them because of their gender. Participants varied in their affects towards

Grindr, with some participants denouncing the ways they were sexualized on the app and

others enjoying some sex-positive aspects of Grindr. And as Niels Janson notes,

transmasculine people and trans men use Grindr as well; the paper "Gay, Bisexual, and

Queer Trans Men Navigating Sexual Fields" explores the sexual experiences and

subjectivities of transmasculine people, some of whom used Grindr. For trans male

participants who identified themselves in "gay" sexual fields such as Grindr, they

generally felt unwelcome and unexpected in these spaces; yet those participants who

identified with "queer" sexual fields often felt expected or highly erotically valued, which

is an interesting distinction when thinking about queer space.[141] And while this next

source is decidedly not academic scholarship, I learned quite a lot from the Tumblr page

"Trans Men on Grindr" about the ways that cis men speak to trans men on dating apps—

while there are a few positive and affirmative conversations, in the vein of Pym et. al.'s

"nice," many of the messages contain invalidating and harmful sentiments like "you are a

female right?" and "so youre female that is really cool," or fetishy requests for genital

pictures/sex acts.[142] It is also clear from my research into this topic that trans* people are

not prioritized in scholarship on Grindr and other dating apps, and I hope that more

studies can emerge that explore these experiences. I also want to name that none of these

studies took an intersectional approach to trans* experience, electing to focus on gender

and/or sexuality, and thus should be considered limited in their scope and appraisal of

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[141] Scheim et. al., "Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Trans Men Navigating Sexual Fields."
[142] "Trans Men on Grindr," https://transmenongrindr.tumblr.com/.

trans* experiences on Grindr. However, these studies all speak to some of the limitations in engaging with Grindr's spatial dimensions for trans* folks.

Additionally, as I noted when discussing profile features, trans* people on Grindr are collapsed into one "tribe": the gender identity of trans* folks, whether they identify as transmasculine, transfeminine, or nonbinary, is collapsed under a label that appears alongside social/aesthetic groupers like "bear" "nerd" or "otter." Identity here is implicitly compared to these more arbitrary identifiers, "giv[ing] the impression that trans identities are fleeting, or that trans people are fetishes,"[143] and implicitly centering and defaulting cis users. And, because filtering for "tribes" is free, this means that any user can automatically filter out trans* people from appearing on their homepage. However, as Shield notes, this identifier allows designated space for trans* people to come out and recognizes the diversity of gender on the app. A study by Fernandez and Birnholtz on trans people's navigation of identity disclosure on dating apps found that, despite introducing vulnerability to harassment and transphobia, proactive disclosure of trans identity was preferred by many of their interviewees for ensuring their safety and maximizing positive reactions from others (although not all preferenced this option, as others elected to disclose trans identity in the chat).[144] Many participants considered profile disclosure to be a harm-reductive form of proactive disclosure, and the trans tribe identifier is one such method of preemptively signaling one's identity. So while the way

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[143] Shield, "Grindr Culture: Intersectional and Socio-sexual," 156.
[144] Fernandez and Birnholz, "'I Don't Want Them to Not Know': Investigating Decisions to Disclose Transgender Identity on Dating Platforms."

in which Grindr situates the "trans" identifier is "awkward"[145] and ostensibly cisnormative, it also provides protections for some trans* users in this space.

This "tribe" feature of Grindr also structures the app's complex spatiality and adds new dimensions of spatial possibility. The language of "tribe" here is problematic, appropriating an indigenous community designation to represent digital groupings of queer people. Tribe's association with indigeneity also suggests an indigenous relationship to the physical land that one inhabits. Thus, the use of this term roots these designations not just in social relationships but also in physical, geographic, spatial ones—foregrounding, in a colonizing way, Grindr's relationship to geography and physical space. Ultimately, the app's purpose is to connect those who occupy the same physical location. Sorting partner preferences by "tribe" actually reproduces structures of physical gay spaces—aside from the "trans" and "poz" designations, many of the other "tribe" listings are also common types of gay bars—like a bear bar or a leather club. By employing the app's filters so that one sees only other bears, for example, one articulates a relationship to bear space and to the app's built-in co-situation of diverse queer people. Doing so ushers the user into a bear bar/marketplace/community center that is spatially everywhere, a mobile overlay of queer bear space. This function is a way of organizing people in Grindr's digital space that can reestablish some of the community boundaries that Blackwell et. al. found Grindr to transgress.

The tribe function isn't the only way that Grindr's relationship to physical queer spaces emerges. Whilst I was Google Scholar-ing/Academic Search Premier-ing the topic

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[145] Shield, "Grindr Culture: Intersectional and Socio-sexual," 156.

of Grindr, it became apparent that much of the research specifically around gay male

dating apps centered on STI/HIV prevention. This is not what I've focused on in this

chapter, and so for an overview of articles on sexual health and dating apps, please check

out the report "Safety, Risk, and Wellbeing on Dating Apps: Final Report" at

https://apo.org.au/node/268156, which is a metanalysis of 99 articles published between

2015 and 2018.[146] In "Not Your Unicorn," Albury et. al. note this research's tendency to

sideline gender nonconforming folks, as well as lesbian and queer women (cis or trans*).

They also note although throughout this scholarship there emerges a theme of "sexual

risk behaviors," there's scant evidence that using dating apps contributes either to sexual

riskiness or to the spread of sexually transmitted infections.[147] The overwhelming amount

of literature around Grindr and STI/HIV prevention is directly the legacy of the concerns

around AIDS and gayborhoods that I discussed in Chapter 1, the reinscription of

spatialized anxieties into Grindr. Physical bodies are still a primary concern in the

literature of this digital space, and the reflections of concerns around material space in the

Grindr literature reveals how Grindr has come to function as a queer space in the public

imaginary.

Here haunts the ghost of the gayborhood; or, more accurately, here exists the

gayborhood in an updated format. Grindr's explicit functions and the ways in which its

users interact with the app are quite similar to how queer people in the 1900s interacted

with gayborhoods, with the obvious exceptions of one's living arrangement and the

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[146] Albury et. al., "Safety, Risk, and Wellbeing on Dating Apps: Final Report."
[147] Albury et. al., "Not Your Unicorn," 76.

gayborhood's geographic boundaries. And as we've seen through research and writing on

identity and the norms that structure this space, the app also reproduces the social

hierarchies of gayborhoods that I discussed in Chapter 1. In this chapter I've suggested

that Grindr can function on multiple dimensions of space. Because the app is primarily

used to locate sexual partners, it functions as a portable gay bar. But not everyone uses

the app in that way—for some it's a means of securing friendships, meeting new queer

people, and/or accessing resources, like a community center. Yet its tendency to value

certain queer bodies over others and the app's functions that commodify potential

partners embody a relationship to capital that Shaka McGlotten and Senthorun Raj

articulate as an "economy" or "marketplace."

Throughout this project I've been looking at some of the ways monetary interests

infringe on queer space in harmful ways, and the economics embedded in Grindr echo

these logics of gentrification that I've been tracking. However, Grindr's gentrifying

mechanisms are located within queer space, which in this case is simultaneously also

*every* space. In gayborhoods, Web 1.0, and Tumblr, many of the displacing capital

interests emerged from ostensibly cisnormative and heteronormative sources—real estate

gentrifiers, web developers, and Tumblr staff cater towards the cishet public and operate

in that mainstream realm of cishet space. Grindr, as an explicitly gay technology, enables

queer relations but has a complicated relationship to the descriptor "queer" in its

theoretical sense. Grindr's radical queer potentiality lies in subverting cishet public space

with a gay overlay, showing that queer space can be everywhere. Yet within this

unbounded queer realm circulates normative logics that constrain and displace the

movements of those who are othered by those norms, those who do not benefit from Grindr's economy of desire. Thus, the space that is Grindr simultaneously perpetuates the displacement and ostracization of many types of queer people through these norms, while also performing the radically transformative act of remaking public space for queer people. Because of this, there's an argument to be made that Grindr is both very queer and also not queer at all—normative and antinormative at the same time.

Whatever you believe about Grindr's queerness, however, it's clear that the app upholds multiple capitalist frameworks that harm its marginalized users. The company itself looks to profit off queer connection, allocating power in partner preferences to those who can afford to pay for in-app subscriptions and features. And its design encourages its users to think of their sexual partners as commodities, creating an economy culture that privileges white, cis, masculine, and able bodies. These systemic features have a much further reach than Grindr, and are a symptom of colonial white supremacy. But they can also be addressed by the company and the app's constituents. Because, rather unlike gayborhoods, early internet chatrooms, and (for the most part) Tumblr, Grindr continues to be a relevant and pleasurable destination for many queer and trans* astronauts. Grindr shows us that queer-controlled digital space can be haunted by interests that don't reflect those of all QTGNC people; and that it's one thing to have a gay spacecraft—and another to feel safe, accepted, and affirmed in space.

# 5.  TikTok: Space Jam

This last year has been a strange, queer year.

Over the time that I've been writing this thesis, literally the world is in shambles. There's a disease running amok that's killed millions of people worldwide. Everything's shut down where I live. So many people have lost jobs or are financially screwed. My last year and a half of college has been online, and I'm so lucky—I have a place of shelter and food and education. A couple weeks ago as I'm writing this chapter, I got an emergency-approved mRNA vaccine stuck in my arm, which would have been an unthinkable luxury when I began drafting this thesis. Life is weird and hard right now.

And through it all, I've been watching TikToks.

TikToks are short, 15-to-60-second videos. They appeal to my limited attention span. And the ones that I interact with on my app are very, very queer. It's a strange and poignant thing to discuss queer sociality during the time of Covid, especially when we're talking about online space. Socializing with other QTGNC people has been (and I'm sure will continue to be) a hugely fundamental piece of my own development; and the way that I do it right now is mostly online. And much of it is through TikTok. Many queer and trans* people had already been using the app because of its reputation for offering a space for queer encounters, and quarantine could do nothing but enhance that. Especially during the initial March 2020 period of Covid lockdown, everyone who was queer was just sitting around being queer and bored; many queers downloaded the app to assuage their boredom; and, after encountering the social space(s) of TikTok became perhaps a little less bored and a little more queer.

My own interactions with TikTok as a queer person, especially as the app became solidified in my personal social media gamut, were what prompted me to write this thesis in the first place—I saw a platform that was enabling queer sociality in strange and new and unique ways, and, through this research, began looking backwards at spaces and places that have also connected people queerly over time and across mediums. I see TikTok as a new node in this genealogy, something that's enabled a younger generation of queer and trans* folks to socialize with and learn from one another.

And so in this chapter, I'm going to gesture to TikTok as an emergent site of contemporary queer sociality, juxtaposed against a backdrop of an ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. As a platform that's new yet already relatively established in U.S. gen-z online consumer culture, I think there's a lot to be said about TikTok, and I will not be the one to say it all: this chapter concludes my thesis by saying, here's a nascent space of queer sociality that gained a lot of popularity during a time of social deprivation, and I hope that queer and trans* scholars begin to study it as such. Through my own usage of the app, I note some of its particularities, and perhaps can contribute some future directions for research.

As part of my research for this thesis, I spent a lot of time watching and analyzing queer and trans*-related TikToks that crossed my digital path. However, because I want to protect the identities of the creators of these videos, I won't be citing any specific TikToks. Most creators are making content without the assumption that it will end up in a piece of academic writing or proliferate beyond the FYP. It's possible that some of these creators aren't open about their sexuality or gender aside from their TikTok content. And

because the constituency of TikTok creators is quite young, and users don't always reveal their age, some creators may not be over 18. For the purposes of this thesis, I'll refrain from discussing too many specific videos and gesture to the app's affordances and constraints for queer and trans* creators and consumers.

As someone who prides myself on social media literacy, it did take me a while to download the app, immersed in other platforms as I was. It emerged into the neoliberal marketplace during a time where our little gay spaceships are insistently thrusting content upon us, feeding off the human desire for connectivity, vying constantly for our social-emotional attention. New applications are under perpetual construction, as it becomes clearer that enabling sociality pays. Construct the best interface, develop an addictive algorithm, engender human connection, and collect and sell as much of users' personal data as possible—you'll be a billionaire.

The platform now known as TikTok was originally called Musical.ly, which dropped in 2014 and was very irrelevant to me at that time. Musical.ly was a place where users could record videos of themselves lip-syncing to songs, often using speed up/slow down functions and various aesthetic filters. The reputation of the app was that it was used by a bored subset of younger teens. ByteDance, the company that currently owns the app, purchased it in 2017 and changed its name to TikTok. As far as I was aware, users continued to interact with the app in this same style, lip-syncing to audio clips. It held no allure for me, and its reputation for being niche and unnecessary for internet literacy persisted. As the app evolved, whisperings of happenings other than lip-syncing began to circulate in the other internet spaces I was inhabiting. A TikTok or two would pop up

every once in a while in video-post form on my Instagram Explore page. Sometimes

friends would tentatively assert "I heard it's kind of like Vine, but not." More and more

people were joining the app, undeniably, and it was growing in popularity. Cody Ko, a

popular YouTuber whose content revolves mostly around making fun of other people on

the internet, made a few reaction videos asserting the "cringiness" of the kind of lip-

syncing videos that were TikTok's general content at the time. Yet, likely as a result of

evolving in-app features, a growing number of young people were hitting download. The

whisperings of non-lip-sync activity grew louder.

So naturally, I was curious. When a close friend downloaded it for the first time,

the first member of my social community to do so, he texted me, "Holy shit. I thought I

was going to hate this bs but I stg the algorithm is insane. I don't know how to explain

just download it." So I did. By the time that I acquired TikTok in late 2019, it was the

number one most downloaded app on the Apple App store and the third most downloaded

app on the Google Play store.[148]

"The algorithm" is the key. I downloaded it, and within days many of the TikToks

appearing on my homepage were queer (they knew). The main features of the app include

the ability to post short videos and to view and interact with others' TikToks. This

interaction takes place on the app's "For You Page" (FYP), a homepage feature in which

users scroll through content algorithmically selected for them. TikTok's algorithm picks

up very small user interactions and factors them into this selection of for-you videos:

pressing the "like" button or commenting incorporates a video into one's algorithm, but

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[148] SensorTower, "Top Apps Worldwide for Q1 2019 by Downloads."

so does sending a video to another user, creating and posting a certain kind of video, or even lingering too long on a video before scrolling away. TikTok users quickly noticed the strength and accuracy of the algorithm, and its ability to group videos together by theme and then display many clips of one or multiple themes to users on their FYPs. This goes for *not* observing content too; any one user can be completely disconnected from sectors of the app. For example, one creator notes to their audience that if other users aren't interested in engaging with their content, they can "hold down your little finger and hit 'not interested'…you can keep your shit to yourself" and "it's almost like your interactions with videos determine your algorithm." As such, I've seen many TikToks and spoken with numerous peers about the TikTok algorithm's seemingly far-too-accurate ability to accurately predict one's interests, identities, and affiliations.

Algorithms are tricky fiends. There's a huge body of scholarship out there about the fickleness of algorithms; perhaps one of the most ambitious and influential works is Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism.* Noble explores how algorithms reinscribe hegemony around race and gender, detailing the rise of "technological redlining," the reinforcement of oppressive structures and profiling by algorithms based in the privatized technology sector and driven by neoliberal ideology. Focusing primarily on Google, Noble highlights many myths about the objectivity of Google's algorithm, exposing anti-Black and anti-femme prejudices baked into Google's algorithmic structure—showing how "algorithmic oppression is not just a glitch in the system but, rather, is fundamental to the operating system of the web."[149] Noble's work

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[149] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 10.

offers insightful research and presents a critical practice of approaching algorithms: understanding that humans create technology, and thus the designs of that technology can never be neutral and will inevitably contain and reproduce the prejudices of designers. This work also describes how the logics of geographic gentrification are baked into digital spaces, a phenomenon I've been exploring throughout this thesis.

Because TikTok's algorithm is so central to its functionality, yet is also such a black box, understanding that there are inevitably prejudices baked into its code is key to discussing ways it can engender queer sociality. In Chapter 3 I examined Andre Cavalcante's notions of queer utopia and vortextuality as they apply to Tumblr, and I assert that these concepts are just as relevant to TikTok because of the centrality of TikTok's algorithmic curation. While the algorithm's inner workings remain a mystery, its effects can be observed by most casual users: videos on TikTok appear on the FYP because they are in some way related to videos a user previously engaged with. This concept is known as *homophily*: like attracts like. Homophily is a principle that undergirds many algorithms on social media sites, and its ideological presence in TikTok's algorithm is readily observable. It also arguably facilitates one's engagement with QTGNC content, by showing people who engage with QTGNC content similar, "like" videos. This is a particular way of arranging space, one that facilitates how, or *where*, any given user can be within TikTok's realm of digital spatial possibility. However, exploring where that concept originates from underscores Noble's work on algorithmic oppression and exemplifies how the logics of gentrification become encoded in the infrastructure of technologies.

Laura Kurgan and colleagues' article "Homophily: The Urban History of an Algorithm" investigates the history of this "like attracts like" principle and its implications for social media algorithms. This piece tracks the history of the term homophily as it emerged from an unpublished 1947 study on the Addison Terrace Housing Project, a mixed-race housing project in Pittsburgh, to its current fundamentality to network science. Homophily was a term coined by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in research that emerged after the United States Housing Act of 1937 decreed that local governments could decide whether or not to build mixed-race housing, and housing advocates began to question the norms of segregated housing by wondering whether strong neighborhoods could develop with heterogeneity. This generated the study by Merton and Lazardsfeld on Addison Terrace, whose residents were about 50% white and 50% Black. The researchers administered an extensive survey but focused their results on residents' responses to whether or not racially mixed housing projects should exist, and whether or not Black and white residents on Addison Terrace got along well.

The researchers grouped respondents into three categories: those who believed that housing projects should be integrated and that people in Addison Terrace "got along pretty well"; those who did not believe that housing projects should be integrated, but thought that people got along well in Addison Terrace; and those who supported segregation and thought people didn't get along in Addison Terrace. Their aim was to understand if people with different racial attitudes socialized most with those who held their same attitudes (homophily), or those who held different beliefs (heterophily). In their responses, white residents were fairly evenly distributed across the three belief

categories, but an overwhelming majority of Black residents (88%) believed that

residents in Addison Terrace lived peacefully together and supported desegregation of

housing projects. Deciding that this majority in the data wouldn't "allow comparative

analysis," Merton and Lazardsfield threw out the responses of Black residents and based

their report solely on white participants. The researchers also omitted the "significant

percentage of black and white residents who declared that they have friends and/or

acquaintances of the other race," and only asked white residents about their closest three

friends, a pretty rigid definition of community. Within the skewed and fraught data the

researchers collected, they found a general pattern that white participants tended to

befriend those who shared their same racial attitudes, leading Merton and Lazardsfield to

conclude that "value homophily prevails." This is where the algorithmically organizing

principle of "like attracts like" comes from; as Kurgan et. al. note, "the concept of

homophily is therefore haunted, from the beginning, by racial segregation."[150]

Homophily as a guiding principle of algorithms directly emerges from prejudice in the

context of urban housing—the discriminatory parent of Noble's "technological

redlining."

      Homophily as a fundamental tenet of network science has taken on a life of its

own, disconnected from this original (unpublished) report on housing segregation

attitudes. The ghost of homophily appears in many common structures of social media

apps, such as "like" tallies that "can guide the opinions expressed by others—the self-

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[150] Kurgan et. al., "Homophily: The Urban History of an Algorithm."

fulfilling prophecies of algorithmic decision-making today."[151] As I've mentioned, homophily is observably a key tenet of the TikTok algorithm that groups videos into content buckets and shows people "like" content. As algorithms increasingly become more fundamental to queer and trans* social spaces, it's worth interrogating whether algorithms (like TikTok's) that encourage homophily "produce a social world in which previously held identities and positions are reinforced and concentrated rather than challenged or hybridized."[152] It's also important to hold homophily's history in mind when thinking about algorithmic organization of digital space: embedded within that spatial organization are the logics of segregation and displacement.

This is especially true in the case of TikTok, whose algorithmic workings have come under fire for suppressing ("shadowbanning") marginalized users on the app. "Shadowbanning" is a term devised by TikTok users to describe a state in which one posts a video or several videos and the algorithm does not disseminate them to other viewers. Creators have long been critical of the app's tendency to censor the content of marginalized people, a practice TikTok has actually admitted to. As late as September 2019, TikTok was instructing its content moderators to identify creators who are "susceptible to harassment or cyberbullying based on their physical or mental condition." The content of those creators would then be censored from the FYP under the guise of protecting marginalized users from cyberbullying. As part of this practice, TikTok maintained a special list of user accounts they considered "particularly vulnerable," many

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[151] Kurgan et. al.
[152] Kurgan et. al.

of whom produced content with the hashtags #fatwoman or #disabled, or had rainbow flags and other LGBTQIA+ markers in their bios. These "particularly vulnerable" accounts were under further restrictions from reaching users via the FYP. Under these discriminatory policies, TikTok moderators had about 30 seconds to identify users with "autism, down syndrome, or more generally 'disabled people or people with some facial problems such as birthmark, slight squint and etc,'" and censor the reach of that content.[153] While TikTok has claimed these policies are no longer in effect, disabled, fat, and QTGNC people continue to have a much more limited audience reach than other users on the app. This suppression is digital segregation and gentrification in action— displacement under the guise of "protection."

Yet despite this limited reach, marginalized TikTok users continue to have nuanced conversations in often-sequestered regions of the app. As someone who has witnessed and participated in many of these conversations, I can autoethnographically attest that they do exist—even if their reach is limited by TikTok's blunt censorship policies. Many vulnerable users continue to appear on FYPs, despite the company's absolute power to broaden or lessen the reach of videos in their algorithmic distribution structures, because there are people out there who want to see that content. Continuing to use the app has thus become a defiant act of staking out space for marginalized users, defiance done in the name of connecting with other community members and often to

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[153] Kim, "TikTok Admits It Suppressed Reach of Queer, Fat, and Disabled Creators," and Botella, "TikTok Admits It Suppressed Videos by Disabled, Queer, and Fat Creators."

provide the public representation of disabled, fat, queer, and/or trans* people that they themselves seek.

For me and many others, TikTok has been a space that has enabled queer sociality in ways both old and new: along patterns echoed in the other places and spaces mentioned in this thesis and along different patterns enabled by new and distinct algorithmic and videographic technology. As one of Cavalcante's Tumblr study participants noted, there's something to be said for a "queer space I can go to where it's good."[154] Like a gayborhood nestled in heterosexual urban space, a queer BBS in a sea of straight-coded chatrooms, a trans* Tumblr community occupying its bloggic corner, or a Grindr-facilitated meetup at a straight bar, queer and trans* creators on TikTok have queered its normative cosmos. Through producing content that naturalizes queer and trans* life and being and posting that content to the app, QTGNC creators construct algorithmically-mediated experiences for themselves and other users that allow many of us conversations that we wouldn't be able to have elsewhere.

Thus, one affordance for queer and trans* users is the FYP's ability to create a space for dialogue that centers nonnormativity as an expected and natural state of being. Tiktoks proclaiming sentiments such as "I may be [insert negative state here], but at least I'm not straight" or "imagine being,,, cisgender" abound. This is something that's been fundamental to all of the spaces I've discussed in this thesis so far, but strikes a particular resonance with the QTGNC communities of Tumblr—in fact, one user even made a video identifying parallels between TikTok and Tumblr, the comment section of which

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[154] Cavalcante, "Tumbling into Queer Utopias and Vortexes," 1725.

was filled with other users noting similarities between emergent cultures on the two platforms. From what I've witnessed, it seems like many of the conversations happening around identity, intersectionality, and queerness/transness happening on TikTok are quite similar to those that occurred on Tumblr.

While the two sites might harbor similar dialogues, however, TikTok's interface is markedly different—all discourses on TikTok are mediated by form. Content on the app must be posted as a video or a conversation in the comment section of a video; users share their experiences *cinematically*. Ethan Bresnick's study of TikTok compares its cinematic features to a "virtual playground" as it "democratizes cutting-edge cinema technology."[155] These playful cinematic features offer unique possibilities to socializing in this space. On TikTok, queer and trans* users might share their experiences and opinions by speaking directly into the camera, a mode of communication the Washington Post dubbed "surprisingly confessional."[156] Users might also might stage a conversation to illustrate a point or represent something that happened to them, in which they use TikTok's videographic technology to stitch several shots of themselves together. As Cáel Keegan contends in *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*, "we occupy a cinematic reality, cinematic bodies."[157] TikTok's cinematic elements make for a variety of imaginative storytelling tools that creators can leverage to engage in discourse and represent experiences.

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[155] Bresnick, "Intensified Play: Cinematic study of TikTok Mobile App," 10.
[156] Ohlheiser, "TikTok has Become the Soul of the LGBTQ Internet."
[157] Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*, 3.

Because of this, TikTok is a space that harbors intersectional dialogues in many forms, as the cinematographic options available to content creators offer various mechanisms by which to make their experiences with gender, sexuality, race, ability, nationality, language, and class legible to their audience. And while TikTok's algorithm may suppress many of these videos from reaching the kind of mass audience that wealthy white creators receive on the app, there are many users who seek to enable, witness, and participate in those kinds of conversations, including myself. However, as noted vis-à-vis Tumblr by Haimson et. al. and Cavalcante, TikTok is both a space that encourages intersectional dialogue and promulgates hateful content. Researchers Gabriel Weimann and Natalie Masri found the app to host, unchecked, a variety of extremist content that promotes and celebrates fascism, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-immigration, chauvinism, nativism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia.[158] The proliferation of hate speech on the app is particularly concerning due to TikTok's young user population. The controversy surrounding TikTok's censoring of disabled, fat, and QTGNC creators, while simultaneously failing to censor hate speech, suggests that the company (at the very *least*) clearly needs to invest in better moderators. Further research should focus on the mechanisms and communities that promote intersectional dialogue on the app, as well as the particular dangers hate speech on TikTok poses to queer and trans* youth.

One investigation of queer and trans* identity in relation to TikTok's algorithm has already taken place, research that constitutes the first of its kind and that will hopefully inspire more such scholarship. In "For You, or For "You"?: Everyday

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[158] Weimann and Masri, "Research Note: Spreading Hate on TikTok."

LGBTQ+ Encounters with TikTok," researchers Ellen Simpson and Bryan Semaan investigate how LGBTQ+ users experience the algorithm in their everyday lives. I'll explore this study quite extensively as it adds vital information to my analysis of TikTok's spatial configurations. As I have, these researchers identify TikTok as part of a larger history of spaces that have enabled queer and trans* connectivity, and note the particular relevancy of its black-boxed algorithm as an insidious structural piece of QTGNC people's interactions with the app.

        These researchers found that their participants experienced TikTok's algorithm as both affirming and supportive of identity work, but also at times transgressive or violating to their multiple identities. Many participants described how the For You Page interacted positively with their queer/trans* identities, especially because it provides visual representation of queer and trans* folks. One person described how seeing visual representations of themselves on TikTok helped them understand and reconcile their experiences as a nonbinary mother. Another participant mentioned how TikTok has made active participation in queer communities and queer discourse more accessible. Others also mentioned the impact of positive representations of coming out narratives and familial acceptance of queer and trans* identities. Overall, TikTok could provide this positive space for narrating queer life and subjectivity—describing their FYP, one mixed-race nonbinary bisexual person spoke of how validation and exposure to representation increased their pride in their own identities:

> "[P]eople who fit into my algorithm have – they're very – they're prideful for
> their identities. Of LGBTQ+ identity. Definitely of trans identities, I know that

fits into that, but I just want to point that out. Of Black identities. People are prideful of who they are – and I enjoy those kinds of videos."[159]

Drawing on Bresnick's research of TikTok as playful and cinematic, the researchers also point out how TikTok users playfully enact memes and challenges through the app's various technical affordances, "participating in video challenges (e.g. outfit changes for various situations or characters) or by using trending sounds specifically related to LGBTQ+ identity (e.g. femme lesbians using a sound featuring a techno beat and the repeated phrase: "No One Knows I'm a Lesbian" to promote femme visibility)."[160] Interviewees also displayed an in-depth understanding of TikTok's algorithm, including how it works and how to potentially manipulate it to personalize their FYPs or increase the visibility of their content. I find myself gaining this kind of experiential knowledge as well—you might see it manifested in my earlier description of the For You Page, which is based solely on my own observations. It's almost like exploring a new space and creating mental maps of its contours and the laws of its physics. This familiarity with TikTok's algorithm through repeated use and scrutiny effectively queers the FYP by turning it into a tool leveraged towards creating more space, representation, and dialogue for queer and trans* users.

However, while this experience of the FYP could be validating and supportive for queer and trans* identities, the algorithm also made many users feel as though parts of their identities were marginal and invisible. One participant, a Black cisgender bisexual

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[159] Simpson and Semaan, "For You, or For "You"?: Everyday LGBTQ+ Encounters with TikTok," 252:18.
[160] Simpson and Semaan, 252:18.

woman, felt that TikTok was not prioritizing creators of color or LGBTQIA+ users:

"Sadly, there's a lot of creators of color or LGBTQ creators that are not really featured

even though there's so many – the majority of [my] feed is white people. . . which there

is nothing wrong with that obviously. . . Like yeah there's so many others using the app;

you guys need some Black people up here."[161] Other participants spoke of mass

stereotyping, feeling that much of the representation they were seeing relied on

perpetuating stereotypes of queer and trans* life rather than representing nuanced

experiences. Another interviewee discussed how her FYP began to show her content

from TikTok's pagan/witch communities, many of whom were appropriating indigenous

practices. As a Native American, this participant was saddened by this content and made

a short video response: "And [I] made couple quick little videos like hey, don't smudge;

like hey, this is Palo Santo or white sage, they're endangered. It's a closed practice. And

the backlash is, at times a little scary." Other TikTok users "called her by racial slurs and

confronted her with white supremacist attitudes, all because she tried to resist the

unwanted content on her FYP by explaining why the content was problematic."[162] These

are just a few examples of how TikTok's algorithm as a spatial organizing tool, and the

practices of other users in that space, can be transgressive for queer and trans* users and

the various identities they may hold.

  In response to these transgressions and violations, users in this study also

mentioned practices of resilience and resistance—one example includes the

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[161] Simpson and Semaan, 252:21.
[162] Simpson and Semaan, 252:23.

aforementioned response videos to appropriated smudging practices. From my own use,

I've seen that educational videos are commonplace on TikTok, although it's also not

unusual for those videos to receive hateful backlash. These response videos are intended

to reach an audience where they would counter some of the ignorance and hate that was

identified by both Simpson and Semaan's participants and Weimann and Masri's

analysis. All of Simpson and Semaan's participants also mentioned over-liking queer

content to counter the appearance of content that appears on their FYP that they didn't

wish to see; I myself do this all the time—some video of, as one participant eloquently

put it, a straight boy with his shirt off humping stuff will appear on my feed and I'll

immediately go like ten different videos from my favorite queer and trans* creators so the

algorithm corrects itself. This overcorrection is an example of using TikTok's

homophily-based algorithm to navigate digital space and to relocate to a different

location within the FYP's quasi-geographic arrangement.

Users have also developed responses to transgressions from TikTok's moderator

team: creators often find that TikTok will delete content without stating a relevant

"Community Guidelines" justification for its removal, and to counter this, creators will

simply repost deleted content. Queer and trans* TikTok users have thus developed

methods of contesting both hateful users on the app and contravention from the algorithm

itself. While this speaks to the determination and resilience of TikTok's queer and trans*

userbase, it shows, as Simpson and Semaan note, how "the burden of representation falls

the marginalized to educate the uneducated, correct the stereotype, or to repost the

content if it was taken down though community moderation or deplatforming efforts by bad actors."[163]

I hope that more research of this kind will proliferate in the near future, and as someone who is privy to some of the multiplicitous queer worlds that populate the app, I imagine that these worlds will continue to be taken up by academia. I hope that researchers and writers will continue to explore how TikTok's algorithm impacts queer and trans* experience, discourse, connection and subjectivity, especially for the young generation that constitutes the app's population. Further research should also focus specifically on trans* people's experiences with TikTok and how the app and its cinematic affordances interact with trans* embodiments—for example, I've seen a lot of trans* and gender nonconforming people documenting their experiences with physical transition on the app. Additionally, while the Covid-19 pandemic was mentioned by Simspon and Semaan—Covid lockdowns began halfway through their research—I hope to see more emphasis in future research on Covid's impact on TikTok's queer and trans* communities.

Covid's impact will certainly be felt in all realms of life for—well—who knows how long, possibly forever. Throughout this thesis I've been tracking a movement of queer social spaces from the physical to the digital, but that doesn't mean that, prior to Covid, physical spaces haven't remained a fundamental piece of queer and trans* social life. Gay bars, informal social spaces, LGBTQ+ centers, queer gyms, queer- and trans-centered healthcare services like FOLX Health, I've even heard of a summer camp for

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[163] Simpson and Semaan, 252:28.

lesbians in the Ozarks called "Lez Camp"—these places are still fundamental to the experiences of many queer and trans* people. With Covid, many of us have lost access to those spaces. The isolation of the past year has had as-yet-untold impacts on many queer and trans* people's relationship to physical communities, as well as our relationships to the various digital worlds we may inhabit. None of us can know what that may mean for queer and trans* communities of the future, but it's worth recognizing that our relationships to queer social spaces on- and off-line have changed, are changing, and indeed may forever remain in flux.

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This project has been about mapping spaces that have enabled queer and trans* people to socialize and be in community with one another. I began by discussing physical space, and together we explored gayborhoods, then early digital encounters like queer video games and BBSs, the now-deserted but once populous blogging site Tumblr, the locative dating app Grindr, and the emergent social media platform TikTok.[164] I've looked at these physical and digital structures through theories and metaphors of space, often describing incipient digital worlds as Mars-like, galactic, astronomical. However, it occurs to me that we're inhabiting a time when, to many, the digital feels more terrestrial than unearthly. Many people feel at home in space, in the corners of the internet that will radically accept and validate us. That is, after all, what I think queer space is all about—

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[164] In terms of queer digital space, Twitter and YouTube are glaring omissions from this thesis. For further reading on queer space and YouTube, check out "YouTube as a Site of Counternarratives to Transnormativity" by Jordan F. Miller, and "Stories like Mine: Coming Out Videos and Queer Identities on YouTube" by Brian Wuest.
Some further reading on Twitter: "#GirlsLikeUs: Trans Advocacy and Community Building Online," by Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles.

finding a corner, queering it, making it safe and generative for yourself and for others who need that place of safety and community.

But as I've highlighted throughout this text, physical and digital queer and trans* spaces can also be fraught and dangerous. Many QTGNC people aren't safe from harm originating from the outside or the inside; as we've seen through our exploration of these spaces, harassment, gentrification, and displacement in both physical and digital queer spaces are hugely detrimental to many communities. My goal in writing this thesis was to shed light on the nuance of the affordances and constraints of these spaces, as well as excavating these lesser-known queer histories; but from what I've learned along the way, it's clear that there's much work to be done to ensure equity and autonomy within queer space. Highlighting all of that work is beyond the scope of this project, but I'll offer two final works in this archive that offer theoretical frameworks for tackling the issues of power and injustice in queer digital spaces.

In "QueerOS: A User's Manual," queer/trans scholars and artists Fiona Barnett, Zach Blas, micha cárdenas, Jacob Gaboury, Jessica Marie Johnson, and Margaret Rhee outline a vision for Kara Keeling's theoretical concept of a "queer operating system," addressing the "lack of queer, trans, and racial analysis in the digital humanities, as well as the challenges of imbricating queer/trans/racialized lives and building digital/technical architectures that do not replicate existing systems of oppression."[165] These authors put forth a vision for a hypothetical QueerOS that centers consent to be in "a relational network of queer kinship with and between people and systems, bodies and objects, one

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[165] Barnett et. al., "QueerOS: A User's Manual."

and another;" has an interface that allows both user and machine to mutually transform; rejects content "rooted in slavery, settler-colonialism, prison and military industrial complexes;" embraces uncertainty, and welcomes crashes; runs apps that are unrestricted, collectively worked on, always failing, and existing in a space of "free exchange, sharing, and open development;" remembers and attends to history; and uplifts and centers trans users and queer and trans people of color.[166] This vision of a QueerOS directly responds to the lived conditions of queer digital spaces that restrict the autonomy of queer and trans* people over space, proposing a speculative technology that offers an alternative (queer) framework for understanding digital systems and interactions.

And in "Introduction: #TravelingWhileTrans, Design Justice, and Escape from the Matrix of Domination," Sasha Costanza-Chock describes a network of designers, developers, technologists, journalists, community organizers, activists, researchers, and others who have developed principles for working towards using design—of architecture, urban space, artificial intelligence, algorithmic decision support systems, websites, and truly anything that can be *designed*—for liberation. These values also offer a practical scaffold for building autonomous queer social spaces in either digital or physical form. The Design Justice Network principles are as follows; note that this is a living document, and I'm inscribing its status as of April 2021.

> Design mediates so much of our realities and has tremendous impact on our lives,
> yet very few of us participate in design processes. In particular, the people who
> are most adversely affected by design decisions—about visual culture, new

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[166] Barnett et. al.

technologies, the planning of our communities, or the structure of our political and economic systems—tend to have the least influence on those decisions and how they are made.

Design justice rethinks design processes, centers people who are normally marginalized by design, and uses collaborative, creative practices to address the deepest challenges our communities face.

1. We use design to **sustain, heal, and empower** our communities, as well as to seek liberation from exploitative and oppressive systems.

2. We **center the voices of those who are directly impacted** by the outcomes of the design process.

3. We **prioritize design's impact on the community** over the intentions of the designer.

4. We view **change as emergent from an accountable, accessible, and collaborative process**, rather than as a point at the end of a process.

5. We see the role of the **designer as a facilitator rather than an expert.**

6. We believe that **everyone is an expert based on their own lived experience**, and that we all have unique and brilliant contributions to bring to a design process.

7. We **share design knowledge and tools** with our communities.

8. We work towards **sustainable, community-led and controlled** outcomes.

9. We work towards **non-exploitative solutions** that reconnect us to the earth and to each other.

10. Before seeking new design solutions, **we look for what is already working** at the

community level. We honor and uplift traditional, indigenous, and local

knowledge and practices.[167]

In sharing these design justice principles and Barnett and colleagues' QueerOS, my aim

is to highlight two theoretical and methodological approaches towards building

autonomous and collaborative queer social spaces that resist and dismantle the systems of

oppression that curtail many of those existing spaces. These spaces may be virtual,

physical, or some hybrid form; they may already exist or be in the works. These

theoretical approaches are just two visions of how we can approach the construction of

queer social space, with attention to the unequal distributions of power among

communities in an increasingly digital society.

While the future of queer social space is uncertain, and the needs of queer and

trans* people are constantly evolving, the kind of affirmation, care, community, sexual

access, and resources that queer sociality can provide for queer people isn't going away

anytime soon. Personally I'll be spending far too much time on TikTok until the Covid-

19 pandemic is under control so that I can go dance for hours at A League of Her Own (a

queer bar in DC). I suspect many others are doing the same: queer space persists. For

now, we'll be here—queering digital cosmos and building mutual worlds.

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[167] Costanza-Chock, "Introduction: #TravelingWhileTrans, Design Justice, and Escape from the Matrix of Domination."

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