ABSTRACT

HOOKING-UP EMBODIED TECHNOLOGIES WITH THE RHETORIC OF SEXUAL LITERACY

by Robert Caleb Pendygraft

In my thesis I explore the intersections between embodiment, technology, and sexual literacy within the scope of rhetoric, specifically looking at mobile hook-up and dating applications such as Grindr. In chapter 1, I position my research in the field of Composition and Rhetoric, arguing Grindr complicates rhetorical principles concerning identity. In chapter 2, I explain the risk I take with my research methods, drawing connections between queer theory, my embodiment and subjectivity, along with a discussion of queer ruralism. In chapter 3, I rhetorically critique Grindr’s interface. Chapter 4 assesses Grindr’s multivalent impact in queer discourse, specifically the representation of Grindr in the TV show Looking. I also argue that Grindr and similar embodied technologies have affective and ethical implications, concluding with future research prospects and impacts of apps like Grindr.
HOOKING-UP EMBODIED TECHNOLOGIES
WITH THE RHETORIC OF SEXUAL LITERACY

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CHAPTER ONE

TO GRIND, OR NOT TO GRIND: THEORY AND PRACTICE OF SEXUAL LITERACY

Sometime between 2006 and 2007—He won’t stop texting me. And I have to pay for these per text, 10 cents! This shit adds up, and working part-time at the pizza joint down the road doesn’t pay well. I have to lie about this weekend, one of his text messages reads. I am sure he will show up regardless if he must lie to get out of the house. Plus, I have already asked my of-age lesbian friend to get the vodka. We have planned this out. This is what we always do: sneak off to the back hills, on my friend’s parents’ land and drink vodka, skinny-dip, ride 4-wheelers, and make out, while the adults—who are just as ripped drunk as we are—pretend that they don’t know a half-gallon is being passed around a group of teenagers. Just like they pretend they don’t know there are girls kissing girls, and secret high school boyfriends making out somewhere in the woods.

Grindr is a mobile phone application or “app” that was released in 2009 and soon afterwards “exploded into the largest and most popular all-male location-based social network out there” (Grindr.com) as Grindr itself boasts. It was designed to be a “location-based social network” exclusively for gay and bisexual males (Grindr.com). No longer being restricted to the personal computer, mobile apps such as Grindr changed the dating game. The software is downloadable for free on either Android or Apple devices¹, but has some limitations, such as being able to view only the 100 nearest users or having a limited amount of space to build a profile. You can purchase access to more features in Grindr Xtra, which I discuss in chapter 3. Grindr uses the mobile phone’s locative technology to place gay, bisexual, and/or queer male users in proximity to other queer males in their area on a virtual grid in order for individuals to “hook-up” in person, whether it be for sex or otherwise. I discuss Grindr in my thesis—both

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¹ I use the word devices because you can download Grindr on iPads and tablets that use the Android operating systems. For the scope of my project, which is in part limited by my own experience, my focus is on the mobile phone.
academically and personally—to explore various ways in which we rhetorically talk about sex and how technology can and does play an integral role in enabling such communication.

Grindr.com prides itself on its locative technology. On Grindr.com, their mission statement is spelled out plainly:

0 feet away: Our mission for you.
Grindr’s different because it’s uncomplicated and meant to help you meet guys while you’re on the go. It’s not your average dating site -- you know, the ones that make you sit in front of a faraway computer filling out complex, detailed profiles and answering invasive psychological questions. We'd rather you were zero feet away.

Also, notice how the description here does not elicit any sexual overtones:

With Grindr, "0 Feet Away" isn't just a cute slogan we print on our T-shirts. It's a state of mind, a way of life -- a new kind of dating experience. Turning Grindr off and being there in-person with that guy you were chatting with is the final goal of using the app. Being 0 feet away is our mission for you.

Grindr is meant to create a “state of mind” as the site puts it, with the ultimate goal of creating an “in-person” scenario; Grindr’s website makes no mention of sex. Perhaps what appears to read as an innocent description is meant to be ironic. However, I want to point out that without a queer sensibility to such campy description (see Sontag), if indeed this is the case, the description still is quite innocuous compared to the types of lewd interactions the app often enables in real life. But, Grindr is sex. At least in part. Both in my experience and in popular culture representations of Grindr, the app is full of virtual homoerotic sex, gay-sex innuendos and jargon, and encounters from users, who meet in real life (IRL, for short). At any given point signing on, an array of headless torsos, abstract or stock images, and faces populate your gridded interface of gay men, straight men, discreet men, tops, bottoms—I could continue.
Also, the app’s icon (see Figure 1), a rudimentary silhouette of a mask, seems to suggest that anonymity, or at the very least the possibility of being anonymous is at the heart of the Grindr experience. Perhaps the most blatant example of how much sex is implied by the app is the name’s root word: grind. The term doesn’t leave much room for guessing. Grindr is a repertoire of cataloged homoeroticism bound in an intricate nexus of queer identity markers, social mores, and rhetorical practices that may not openly elicit “complex, detailed profiles” or require “answering invasive psychological questions,” but inadvertently demands such.

This thesis offers rhetorical analysis of how mobile technologies such as Grindr influence the ways we read, compose, and become literate about our gender, sexuality, and lived sexual experiences through our interactions with technologies. Or put another way, this project aims to expand “sexual literacy” (Alexander) by rhetorically analyzing the roles mobile technologies can play when they intersect with the arena of sexuality, particularly sexuality in queer discourse, within the field of rhetoric and composition. As a result I want to pose the following questions as ways of thinking through this task: How can we recognize sexual literacy in online spaces? How does embodiment factor into types of sexual literacy and to what extent do digital space challenge notions of embodiment? How can we rethink composition as an act in sexual literacy, both as composing the body and composing digitally? How do emerging technologies limit and/or expand access to queer communities and queer space?

**Sex, Sexuality, and Technologies in Rhetoric and Composition**

*In rural Kentucky I had to learn a new lexicon to carve out space in my own homophobic world. Looking back, my first “boyfriend”—for the lack of a better term, “fling” may be more*
suitable—and I did not communicate much in person. It was mostly through texting that I found that relationship. There wasn’t anything very significant about the relationship in retrospect, if you could even call it a relationship at all. I bring it up because I found that it was in the discreet interaction of text messaging that we were able to connect in the slightest. Mostly this was the case because when we were able to conceal our affair by the text message we didn’t run the risk of exposing our teenage tryst. His parents were deeply religious and he had to ensure that they not overhear us talking on the phone. I had yet to come out to my own parent, and at the time it wasn’t a conversation I was willing to risk having. My point: the text message felt private. What we exposed of our romance was nil; this wouldn’t have been possible unless we had the discreet function of communicating via our cellphones.

Jonathan Alexander’s cornerstone text, *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy*, can be credited with allowing this project to coalesce for me. Alexander places front and center the importance of studying sexuality in rhetoric and composition: “Learning how to talk fluently and critically about sex and sexuality composes a significant part of becoming literate in our society. Being able to address sexuality issues intelligently, critically, and even comfortably is vital if we are to participate in some of the most important discussions of our time” (*Literacy* 2). Grindr, I argue in this thesis, is a platform where users learn how to talk about sex, even become literate through the use of the app about certain types of sexual practice and discourses. Alexander highlights and defines *sexual literacy* as “the knowledge complex that recognizes the significance of sexuality to self- and communal definition and that critically engages the stories we tell about sex and sexuality to probe them for controlling values and for ways to resist, when necessary, constraining norms” (*Literacy* 5). Grindr facilitates a certain type of sexual literacy to emerge, particularly in queer male communities, but it can also allow for a more complex understanding and problematizing of how digital spaces can rhetorically construct the identities of users.

Scholars in rhetoric and composition (among other fields) have pointed to the importance of looking at sex and sexuality critically, as well as, the important relationship between technology and sexuality. In Jonathan Alexander’s and William P. Banks’ article, “Sexualities, technologies, and the teaching of writing: A critical overview,” the authors express their concerns about the “discussions of sexuality, technology, and the teaching of writing,” by pointing to four main areas: 1) the introduction of LGBT and queer texts in the classroom; 2) how to make safe, or safer, space in the classroom as well as digitally; 3) using identity as a
means and topic for discussion and argumentation; 4) using sexual literacy to frame pedagogy and research (276). The authors continue, positing, “It may be that we need energetic scholars working in these areas to help us understand the complexities of queerness and identity in provocative new ways” (284). Grindr is a provocative (in many ways, to say the least) platform that can offer an alternative type of digital space that complicates queer interactions. It is my aim in my thesis to take up the Alexander and Banks’ call to the field, and propose that we can use Grindr as means of understanding such complexities.

Along with Alexander and Banks, other rhetoric scholars have looked at technology outside the scope of sexuality, considering how the boundaries between bodies and technology intersect, and at times, overlap and blur (Dolmage; Link; Pedersen; Post; Wysocki). Bryon Hawk and David M. Rieder make an astute observation about the changes mobile technologies have caused when they write, “Technologies, especially in the case of small tech [e.g. the cellphone], are never distinct objects: they are only experience in relation to other entities arranged in complex constellations to form particular environments” (xvii). Grindr not only represents a type of technology that acts as a conduit for sexual literacy to emerge, it also exemplifies the type of embodiment that technology can influence in such a constellation of complex social relations.

Embodied technologies don’t merely complicate social relationships, but personal interactions with these embodied technologies can be brought into analysis. Ben McCorkle has suggested, “the thin chrome line, the literal contact zone between the human body and the personal computer” is a site where scholars must “focus our critical attentions because soon that line will become blurred and indistinguishable, or will even disappear altogether” (174). Not only do I take up Grindr, then, to critique the sexual discourse that is consequential from the app’s use, but also because the app demands us to reconsider the thin chrome line between the user’s body and technology being exclusive to the personal computer. The mobile device deserves to be analyzed for its effects on our bodies. Recognizing the significance of mobile devices for composition, numerous scholars have studied the implications of mobile devices for writing pedagogy (Bjork & Schwartz; Brown; Fishman & Yancey; Johnson-Eilola & Selber; Kimme Hea; Moeller; Turnley). I acknowledge that my work here may not speak directly to composition pedagogy; however, my research with mobile technology lends itself to a conversation on how the composing process can transcend the classroom. When Bjork and Schwartz argue, for example, “that students can better perceive—and learn to challenge—their
social, cultural, and historical locations when they research, write, and even publish on location” [authors’ emphasis] (225), the same can be said of writing one’s identity on Grindr.

Composition and Rhetoric scholars have also studied the rhetoric of online dating, though they have largely focused on heteronormative uses of computer-based dating sites rather than on queer uses of mobile apps. For example, Elizabeth C. Tomlinson analyzes the impact of digital space on identity construction in her essay “The Role of Invention in Digital Dating Site Profile Composition.” In her work, Tomlinson makes the claim that, “[R]hetoric and writing studies, broadly construed, could benefit from examining the rhetorical acts performed within dating site discourse,” highlighting the significance of the dating site’s users as a rhetorical agent in the composing process (115,116). Tomlinson analyzes online dating sites such as Match.com and eHarmony.com, and the rhetorical agency the user has in the invention of profile construction. A large portion of her analysis hinges on the rhetorical canon of invention, as a result. She writes, “A key issue in invention’s long history has been whether invention happens as a process of discovering new ideas versus a process of generating/creating new ideas” (117). It is in the digital setting where she complicates this history, making the claim that “the audience has taken on an even more significant role within invention” insofar as online dating is concerned (117). I agree with Tomlinson, and would like to extend her conversation into identity construction via mobile technology with my work here on Grindr.

Tomlinson also brings up another essential point in thinking of the online dater as a rhetorical agent in constructing identity, when she claims, “…individuals make decisions about their identity construction, and these decisions consist of goal-directed behaviors intended to control or persuade an audience to adopt a particular interpretation of the individual” (118). Online dating has a specific rhetorical purpose. The user in online dating has a certain exigency, if you will: to find a compatible date. Tomlinson, points out that it is in the construction of the user’s profile that there exists the problem of “presenting an ‘ideal self’” (118). What exactly is this ideal self, though? For Tomlinson, her findings result from a pool of 13 participants who do not bring up sexuality or much discussion about sex at all. Furthermore, because there is no mention by Tomlinson as to how these participants sexually identify, I am tempted to assume the research conducted in the essay may have been limited to a pool of cisgendered, heterosexual users simply due to the responses of the subjects and the focus on Match.com and eHarmony.com—sites which are marketed predominantly to the heterosexual dating pool.
Although Tomlinson acknowledges the limitations of her research focusing on a small number of individuals. I believe Tomlinson’s analysis of the role of invention in digital identity construction can be extended by engaging with queer mobile technologies such as Grindr. After all, Grindr does not have the same ideal self in mind as eHarmony, and thus the exigency of the digital profile construction shifts as well. That is to say, through the analysis of alternative types of online dating, such as hook-up applications as Grindr, the scope of sexual literacy can broaden.

Jen Almjeld has brought the topic of online dating and profile construction into conversation with rhetorical practice as well. In her essay, “A Rhetorician’s Guide to Love: Online Dating Profiles as Remaded Commonplace Books,” she highlights how gender roles are produced by the digital space of online dating. She writes:

> this seemingly neutral technological tool [i.e. the online website] for finding love actually wields great power in forwarding specific scripts for possible identities and gender roles. These models for normative gender performances, embedded within the templates and design options provided in the virtual space, clearly posit right and wrong ways to perform dater based on larger cultural narratives of Western masculinity and femininity. (72)

Almjed claims websites such as Match.com ultimately want users to establish “…an offline, face-to-face relationship, but in order to achieve this, profile creators must first utilize design templates, pull-down menus, and linguistics and visual commonplaces to demonstrate their acceptance and adherence to scripts for normative heterosexual gender roles and therefore fitness as daters” (74). The move Almjed makes in highlighting the importance of gender roles and template design in online dating transfers onto my argument about Grindr. Through the analysis of Grindr the argument can be made to discuss how template design and the constraints of the application’s interface can perhaps reinscribe certain types of gendered discourses that exist in queer discourse communities—a point I discuss in chapter 3.

Not only does Almjeld’s critical discussion of gender performance in digital space contribute to the framing of Grindr in my thesis, but her claim that online dating sites are spaces for learning and practicing rhetorical composing reinforces my goal to include mobile technology beneath the umbrella of sexual literacy. She writes: “The construction of online dating profiles, then, fits in our rhetorical…[tradition] of writing identity, teaches much about
ways we live and write in a new media age, and is an ideal space to critically engage the ideologies and limitations of technologies that so often seem invisible or at least neutral to us” (73). It is my aim to contribute to this conversation on how we must consider and even reconsider our assumptions about how we write ourselves into these digital spaces. While Almjeld does not make it explicit that her project deals with sexual literacy, her argument does fall into sexual literacy in the way I am framing it. She does so, for example, when she writes, “Reading spaces like Match.com to reveal ways the design and conventions of the online dating community cast users into normative gendered roles is a good step to raising critical awareness in multiple virtual spaces. Match.com, then, is added to the growing list of online spaces—video games, social networking sites, virtual worlds—being productively theorized by scholars to reveal the bias and limitations of virtual tools and spaces” (81). I have chosen Grindr as the central analytical site for my thesis because I believe that it belongs on, to borrow Almjeld’s phrase, this growing list of online spaces.

Queer Theory, LGBT Communities, and Technology

My first cell phone wasn’t a smart phone. Actually, it wasn’t even a flip phone. I remember it was a bulky Nokia. The model number eludes me, or if the specific phone itself had a name I cannot recall. However, when we did get the phones it wasn’t because it was a trend at school, nor was it an attempt to keep up with the Joneses. No. My mom had purchased the phones—prepaid mind you—in the hopes that we would be able to stay in touch. I recall having this cumbersome phone and not having a house to live in that was my own. Well it isn’t so much the case that we were homeless and forced to live on the streets, but more so that since my single mother couldn’t afford rent, the only place she found to stay at was a friend’s who lived outside my school district. I found myself living in the basement of a classmate’s home. It wasn’t about having a cell phone; it was about making sure that I could be in contact with my own family.

While composition and rhetoric scholarship on online dating has focused largely on heteronormative sites (Almjeld; Tomlinson), this thesis also seeks to contribute to a broader interdisciplinary conversation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer discourses in online spaces. First, though a discussion of the word queer seems necessary, including a brief history of the term and a discussion of how I use it in my thesis (Alexander; Banks; Rhodes;
The term queer is a re-appropriated concept from previous decades. Its meaning had intrinsic derogatory connections for non-normative genders and/or sexualities historically. Steven Hogan and Lee Hudson cite the word as a pejorative up through the late 1980’s, borrowing the term from its original in the sixteenth century meaning “abnormal” (463). As it would seem to follow by its *strange* etymological roots, queer, as far as the term being used in an academic or scholarly context, had no precise inception; queer theory emerged rather queerly.

There is prolix scholarship surrounding queer’s employment and the foundation of what has been label Queer Theory in the academy. For example, Warner and Berlant observe, “The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies” (198). Another astute observation of Queer Theory in the academy is made by Halberstam: “Many works in queer studies end with a bang by imagining and describing the new social forms that supposedly emerge from gay male orgies or cruising escapades or gender-queer erotics or sodomitic sadism or at any rate queer jouissance of some form or another” (149). The term *queer* is used here as an umbrella term that deconstructs binaries—unfixing, rupturing, and destabilizing discourses surrounding sex, sexuality, and gender. My usage of the word closely aligns with Jagose’s explanation, “Queer theory’s debunking of stable sexes, genders and sexualities develops out of a specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralism figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions” (1). In regards to my work here, I want to place *queer* next to the notion of embodied technology and situate the word with sexual literacy. I use the term “queer” as way to engage the discursive construction of sexuality as well as the transgressive possibilities that may emerge from sex, and perhaps more importantly, how we talk about sex.

Specifically, my queer theoretical lens is informed by interdisciplinary scholarship on sexuality in online spaces. Numerous scholars have pointed to the complex sexual identities that

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2 See: Judith Butler; Michel Foucault; J. Jack Halberstam; José Muñoz; Adrienne Rich; Gayle Rubin; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick; Michael Warner

3 However, do not be mistaken, the term’s use is not a conflation of sex, sexuality, and gender. Neither do I use it as a replacement for one’s identity as far as gender and sex are concerned (though, it may be).
form through digital platforms. For example, Christopher Pullen writes in his Preface to *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*, that “online new media appears to offer increasing democratic scope for LGBT communities…[t]his equates to a need to understand issues such as the subjectivity of ‘queer’ identity, the potential of social construction, and the contemporary setting of reflexivity” (10). Perhaps most important in framing my project here, he claims “the advent of new communications technology has enabled the construction of new vivid electronic arenas of networking, community and identity,” as well as pointing out that, “engagement within new virtual forms reveals a certain migration from a need for LGBT presence in real physical social space” (10). Grindr is doing this work of networking, establishing (and even reestablishing) identities among queer discourse communities. It does so, as I have already pointed out, through creating types of sexual literacy. I would like to also complicate Pullen’s statement insofar as Grindr is concerned, by claiming that Grindr users are not always seeking to claim a gay or queer identity (nor does the site require them to do so). There are anonymous profiles on Grindr: individuals that have no picture, don’t divulge information, or even claim to be straight or discreet, not identifying as gay, bisexual, or queer at all. I believe that because of the unidentified, anonymous users that interact with Grindr, the claim that Grindr is a *queer* space needs to be explored.

While rhetoric and composition scholars have not yet analyzed the digital space of Grindr, composition scholars have explored LGBT identities in other online spaces (Alexander & Rhodes; Arola; Banks; Peters & Swanson). For example, Jonathan Alexander and Elizabeth Losh have pointed to technology’s role in LGBTQ community building in their article, “‘A YouTube of One’s Own?’: ‘Coming Out’ Videos as Rhetorical Action.” In their discussion, they highlight how vlogging—short for video blogging—can establish queer online communities through coming out stories. They write, “In addition to acknowledging its benefits for community building through such knowledge sharing and pooling of experience [in online places such as YouTube], some scholars also see in cyberspace the potential to create fluid and challenging representations of queerness—representations that, like cyberspace itself, figured sexuality as complex, changing, dynamic” (46). The authors continue and claim, “In between the constructions of identity and the deconstructions of freeplay lies the potential for understanding the representations of queerness on the Internet as a complex endeavor with many different ramifications for identity, community, and political action” (46). I believe that my research is
situated in seeing sexuality “as complex, changing, dynamic,” but add to the authors’ statement need not be limited to the internet via the personal computer—but also the impact of the internet that is accessible anywhere through our mobile devices. Through my inquiry with Grindr, I can contribute to a larger project of LGBTQ scholarship that offers new ways to think about embodiment and mobile technology. Alexander and Losh also highlight in their article that “certainly, much queer activity online is about ‘hooking up,’” whereas, their focus in their essay, is to assess representations of identity and community (39). I want to briefly mention that ‘hooking-up’ online — via the PC or mobile phone — must not be excluded from the discussion of sexual literacy. In fact, as I hope my work on Grindr will illustrate, both identity and community can intersect with “hooking-up.” To put it another way: we cannot exclude the act of sex from the definition of sexual literacy and technology (I discuss at length this in chapter 2).  

Along the same trajectory of arguing for technologies role in LGBT community building, Brad Peters and Diana Swanson have analyzed the benefits of learning from those communities in the composition classroom. In their article, “Queering the conflicts: What LGBT student can teach us in the classroom and online,” they make the case that because LGBT “students need to develop successful rhetorical strategies for dealing with the conflicts that education, community, and society impose upon them,” we in the field can learn from these strategies (295). It isn’t my suggestion to introduce Grindr directly into the composition classroom, but instead that rhetorical analysis of apps like Grindr used in the queer community can help us rethink subjectivity and the composing process in ways that may influence pedagogy.

In addition to drawing on rhetoric and composition scholarship about sexuality in online spaces, I also seek to contribute to interdisciplinary conversations about online queer hook up sites and mobile applications (Farr; Gray; Pullen). In his recent book Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality (2014), Shaka McGlotten has engaged with similar intersections of queer discourse and technology that I am in exploring in my work. As his title suggests, the connection between the intimate and the virtual underpin his argument. In his book, McGlotten aims to accomplish two goals: to “track some of the ways technologically mediated intimacies are framed in popular, mass-mediated discourses as failed, establishing an equivalence between

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4 Bringing up this point is not to suggest that Alexander and Losh look down on or reject my claim, but simply to emphasize the scope of sexual literacy that I aim to establish in my thesis.
virtuality, failure, and queerness;” and to turn “this framing of virtual intimacies as failed on its head, asking, What’s real about intimacy to begin with?” (9). McGlotten looks to online gaming, TV shows, media scandals, the Internet, and porn to explore these connections. He also engages with Grindr, using his own subjectivity and experience to explore how the app complicates intimacy and ethical issues. He writes that his book “describes a range of contacts and encounters, from the ephemeral to the enduring, made possible by digital and networked means: chat rooms, instant messaging, porn, status, updates, tweets, online personals, dating sites,” including, “hookup aps” (7). I engage with McGlotten throughout my entire thesis. I build on his method of integrating personal experience as well as how Grindr can reinforce racial hierarchies. However, our critiques of embodied technologies differ insofar as my reading of the interface of Grindr comes from a rhetorical perspective. Also, by engaging with popular representations of Grindr, as I do in chapter 4, I challenge how the app is influencing the spectrum of gay relationships.

Other scholars have written about the act of soliciting queer sex online. Take for example, Daniel Farr’s analysis of personal sex ads on Craigslist, in his article, “A Very Personal World: Advertisement and Identity of Trans-persons on Craigslist.” While his discussion of personal ads via the website Craigslist centers on the discrimination of transgender individuals in computer-based hook up sites, his essay does the work of highlighting many factors that I believe can apply to mobile hook-up apps such as Grindr. He writes, “The examination of personal ads offers a breadth of information about the socio-cultural construction of beauty, intimacy, identity, and advertising ideologies,” and that online personal ads, “expose individual desires and expectations, but they [also] reveal underlying cultural ideologies informing language and content” (88). While acknowledging that a Grindr profile may have similarities to a personal ad on Craigslist—you are advertising yourself in both, and possibly with having sex as your goal—Grindr does function a bit differently: it enables users to edit and reedit their profiles, interact in live time, audiences are dynamic (reliant on your location), and so on. What I find important in Farr’s work is his claim that placing a representation of oneself online to solicit sex can challenge us to think through not only such factors of “beauty, intimacy, identity,” but that these digital spaces can allow for a discussion of, “cultural ideologies informing language and content.” I would argue that what Farr highlights here points to the broad scope of sexual literacy that technologies can enable.
Up until this point situating my argument centers on sexual literacy, looking to previous scholarship that critically places my project at the junction of technology and digital theory with discourses of sex and sexuality, particularly LGBT discourse, and using Grindr as the main source for my analysis. In arguing for Grindr being a site that can offer critical insight into these intersections of embodied technologies and sexual literacy, I want to point out that scholars have written on the topic of Grindr. It is the case, however, a large amount of the scholarship that looks at Grindr is published outside the Humanities, and that Grindr has not been analyzed in the field of rhetoric and composition.

The academic disciplines that have published on the hook-up app fall mainly in Health Sciences (Burrell, et al.; Holloway, et al.; Landovitz et al.; Martinez, et al.; Rendina, et al.), Psychology (Hartman; Kibry & Thornber-Dunwell), and Lesbian and Gay Studies (Altman; Carman; Fox). The main emphasis that these articles in the sciences point to is the concern on health and disease control, where these apps can at worse encourage, but at least contribute to the spread of sexually transmitted disease. This work is productive for the sake of looking at the risks of unprotected sex that result from using apps like Grindr. While commending the work these articles do for the prevention of STDS, I would like to point out such a framing of Grindr could limit the rhetorical possibilities the app offers. For example in one study, the authors state: “Most of the research on social media has been focused on ‘risk behaviors’ and developing new HIV prevention and health promotion ‘media interventions’”(Martinez, et al.). Framing Grindr solely as public health “problem” ignores other positive potentials of the app in the queer community. For example, Martinez et al does not mention of how the app actual makes a space for HIV positive individuals; Grindr allows you list your self as “Poz5,” short for HIV-positive. Admittedly this can be both productive insofar as enabling a discussion of HIV/AIDS and creating a space for those individuals in digital venues, but also problematic because having this label can allow for discrimination.

In other words, looking at Grindr and similar technology as rhetorically constructive of identity can complicate the way we interact with these technologies. By adding to the conversation that has surrounded sexuality and technology—in a vast range of disciplines, as I have shown here—it is my aim to assess the rhetorical value of sexual literacy through looking at

5 See my analysis on Grindr Tribes in chapter 3.
Grindr. Take for instance, Max Fox’s critique of Grindr in his article, “Grindr’s Lonely Crowd.” He makes the claim that Grindr “automates the work that once made a subversive and politically potent world” (19). He continues with his criticism, making larger claims about how digital media is retroactive in enabling queer interactions: “Though it provides a platform for the sex which constitutes the gay identity, Grindr is not a simple replacement for the older life-world of cruising. Much as Facebook transforms everyday sociality into a product and a mode of production, Grindr and other apps like it subsume sexuality as a social productive process” (21). I, in large part, find Fox’s take on Grindr one-dimensional and lacking a well-rounded critique of what embodied technologies can do in broadening our social lives, but mostly how we talk about sex. Grindr allowed him the fodder to publish, as well; that is surely a plus for him and the broad spectrum of types of sexual literacies that can emerge. Ultimately, when we write ourselves into these spaces for sex or out of boredom, due to emerging new technologies⁶ that enable us to do so, we must be diligent to challenge the scope of rhetoric and writing as scholars, while also paying close attention to the treatment of the subjects and bodies that use such technologies. The modes of composing oneself through writing are no longer limited to a computer screen, or pen and page; we compose ourselves through all technology.

Overview

It has been my aim to position this project at the intersections of the work among many fields of academia, arguing for the use of Grindr as my primary text in my thesis, but also placing my research in the discipline of Composition and Rhetoric. In the next chapter, “Risking Method, Risking Queer Ruralism,” I seek to explain how identity and sexual literacy is shaped by embodied technology such as the mobile phone, placing my own experience at the core of my research.

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⁶ A recent example of this could be the Apple Watch© set to release April 25th, 2015. The watch is meant to be directly interactive with the user’s iPhone via Bluetooth. The watch adds a new dimension to how we could reconsider embodiment, because not only is the watch is literally worn on the body it changes how we communicate. Its design allows for the user to draw on its surface to send texts and converting the sketches to texts. Beyond just mere communication between users, the watch monitors and helps record the users fitness and health habits (https://www.apple.com/watch).
project. I examine the risks associated with my methodology as well. Moving into chapter 3, “Rhetorics of Embodied Technology: A Rhetorical Critique of Grindr,” I broaden my argument, analyzing how Grindr shapes identity and sexual literacy through its interface. In chapter 4, “Looking at Hooking-up,” I analyze the recent, popular HBO television series and its representation of Grindr in order to assess the impact the app has in queer discourse. I also engage with Shaka McGlotten’s reading of Grindr as an ethical space, making the case that embodied technologies are affectively impactful. I conclude with further suggestions for research and what possibilities lay in analyzing other types of embodied technologies.
CHAPTER 2
RISKING METHOD, RISKING QUEER RURALISM

Fall 2008—I haven’t stayed at this dorm room more a week; we keep driving back to hills to camp out and smoke. The sun is sticking around and I am not truly ready to let go of home. After working all summer and finally turning 18, I was able to buy my first iPhone a few weeks ago. With everyone moving away to college, I know that I am going to have to find my own place here in Lexington. I remember the other day I logged onto Grindr, killing time before class and instead of having messages waiting for me, there was a cock picture. Watching porn and browsing the internet wasn’t anything new, but that was the first personal dick pic I had received.

To begin to answer my initial questions about how technology, embodiment, and sexual literacy overlap, coalesce, and intersect on Grindr, I believe it is important to first ask and address: Why am I writing this? How have I come to this work? If sexual literacy is the central concern of my work here, I must investigate how sexual literacy can act as a mode of research, informing my methodology. In other words, if I am to take up Alexander’s definition of sexual literacy, it is necessary to address my own development of sexual literacy as well.

When I try to remember the time I downloaded my first mobile application, I could not tell you. What I can tell you is that I remember the exact moment when I was able to own a cell phone. Growing up in Kentucky, an only child to a single mother, having a smartphone was not a matter of concern. Instead of purchasing the latest technology, making sure that we had a place to live and a basic phone to communicate seemed to take precedence back then. It wasn’t until later when I left the Appalachian knobs and headed to the city that I was able to invest in my first iPhone. It is important to highlight it was an iPhone—not merely a cellphone. Since it was a phone that enabled access to the Internet, I was able to download and use mobile apps. Looking back I realize that it was that smart phone, with its ability to connect beyond the phone call or the text message, that spurred my inquiry to understand and question how technologies can come to affect the bodies that use them. Years afterwards, I am still fascinated by mobile technology’s capacity to shape and change how we interact with our world on many levels: socially and personally—the technology that we carry on us seemingly 24/7 (I would venture to guess that
even my reader probably has theirs within a few feet of their person) even affects how we theorize public and private spaces.

When I use “hooking-up” in my title, I do so as a double entendre. Much in the same way the colloquialism of “hooking-up” pertains to sexual connection, I also employ the phrase to illustrate my attempt to draw connections, to “hook-up” technology as an embodied practice with the ways we talk about, perform, and envision sexuality—that is, sexual literacy. When I make the claim that we are no longer bound to making phone calls or sending texts as the predominant means of cellular communication, the mobile device has then created and continues to create extensions of our embodied lives, playing an essential role in how we engage with our environment. When I follow this logic through, I find that my project presented here is dealing with both theoretical and material realms, specifically pertaining to the body and technology. I want to complicate these assertions even further: since my argument relies on the body, and more specifically since my argument uses my queer body as an example, I insist we include a conversation about embodied practices of sex and sexuality. If sexual literacy acknowledges “the knowledge complex that recognizes the significance of sexuality to self- and communal definition” (Literacy 2008), then my story must play a role in the work I present here.

How do I write this as a responsible individual, respecting not only the integrity of my identity, but also acknowledging the delicate and always shifting politics of identity more generally? In other words, in my thesis when I consider my first cell phone a large contributor to the ways I survived as a homeless youth in the country, I do so knowing that I am risking the rural part of my identity to my readers. Also, if I write about how receiving my first “dick pic” via the gay hook-up app Grindr on my iPhone during freshman year of college, I know that my method is controversial. I don’t tell these stories as an attempt to speak for all queers. Nor do I do this to speak for all queers with smart phones, or moreover for all types of mobile communication. I am also not asking my audience to consider risking the same type of exposure of their own identity. Instead I want to emphasize the benefits of considering such types of “embodied writing” (Banks) as methodological grounds for knowledge. If what I am doing here is embodied writing that relies on an alternative queer archive, I must return to my adolescent body and my first cellphone and the means in which it enabled me to hook-up on many levels as an example.
Ta(l)king Risk

It is also the case that my first basic phone did not represent any immediate connection to sex. I was still in the closet, so to speak. It was shortly thereafter having the phone in my possession that I slowly opened my closet door to claim the interstitial space of being “bi” in order to prevent the violent whiplash of coming out full-blown gay in rural Kentucky; it was a survival tactic in the world I found myself for being raised around homophobia in Kentucky. If I could hold on to a small sliver of straightness promised by my guise of bisexuality, I could make sure that I wasn’t risking so much. Much like having a phone was an act of survival itself so was making sure I tiptoed out of the closet. I bring these stratagems up not to digress but to highlight that the phone itself became a large way that I not only survived, but also recognized as having a queer identity.

Making myself an example, positioning my subjectivity as central to my thesis puts me at risk, I believe. Yet, my personal experiences with sexuality, technology, and rhetoric are essential sources of knowledge to make my argument about sexual literacy. This is not out of the ordinary for risk has followed me throughout my queer life: from having sex with a man for the first time outside in a Kentucky trailer park to logging onto my Grindr profile in Cincinnati to having an onslaught of dick pics waiting in my inbox.

Throughout this thesis I risk exposure: unveiling my private life and claiming it as epistemic grounds for an academic setting. My private life—that is the knowledge complex that I recognize as significant to my sexual definition—is on display for an audience of intellectuals. The exposure of my seemingly lewd or distasteful queer experience provokes the scrutinizing gaze of the academy that privileges sterile, impersonal representations of knowledge. Or in other words, approved academic discourse may be read as: white, straight, and male— not emotive, not sexualized, not queer, and certainly not layperson. William Banks has pointed to the precariousness of my method when he writes how the field rhetoric and composition has increasingly made a shift away from the personal writing my thesis seeks to use as epistemic grounds. Banks writes that “[t]he assumption,” about personal writing “is that the ‘personal’ isn’t critical, isn’t socially responsible because it encourages a solipsistic narcissism of knowledge

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7 I recognize that this is not the case with all those who identify as bisexual. Instead, I mention it here to highlight how identity played an important role for myself, growing up in Kentucky.
production” (22). Furthermore, it is in response to the critique of personal writing that Banks calls for a type of writing he poses as embodied writing, making the claim that:

regardless of how distant we can get ourselves from the embodied experiences of our lives, if we do not find ways back to those bodies, those experiences, we run the risk of impoverishing our theories and pedagogies. More specifically, when we ignore the embodied in discourse, we miss the ways in which liberation is always both social and individual, a truly symbiotic relationship (22).

When Banks writes of embodiment here, I would like to think that my project with sexual literacy is attempting to bridge the embodied experience of my life with my own body, and with my past sexual and technological experiences as well as the experience of this type of writing I am doing here. I agree with Banks, what is at risk here is the contention that my personal experience with embodied technology can procure knowledge. However, because I am openly queer in my personal and academic life, my very existence is tethered to that identity and the politics of that queerness. I believe this to be a starting point for understanding my risky method.

Queer theory has become an integral part of my methodology, then. But I must wonder, what kind of queer work am I doing here? I am reminded of Judith Halberstam’s radical analysis of alternative archives of knowledge in the Queer Art of Failure. Halberstam suggests that a canonical archive of queerness exists. It has at its core figureheads such as Tennessee Williams, Virginia Woolf, Bette Midler, Andy Warhol, Henry James and purports tenants that are predominantly from a gay male perspective, riddled with “indifference, ironic distancing, indirectness, arch dismissal, insincerity, and camp” (110). However, on the other hand there is an alternative archive that “is far more in keeping with the undisciplined kinds of responses,” and in which “the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire are unloosed” (110). I am drawn to the notion of self-shattering and a loss of mastery here, and perhaps more readily available with my methodology to assume the unloosing of desire as a springboard for the analysis of sexual literacy I seek to explore. That is to say, in the analysis that takes place in the pages here, my voice will unloosen the stories of my past and loss of self I have experienced, risking my academic identity here in the present.

In a matter of speaking, I am hooking-up on multiple levels: my voice vacillates from the intimate and personal, hooking-up with the academic and professional; in a temporal sense, I rely on drawing connections from my past as critical sites of inquiry into my present research; more
theoretically, I am bridging multiple archives of queer knowledge, hooking-up seemingly
different ways of knowing; I am also, as I will get to shortly, hooking-up the urban and rural
parts of my identity; and perhaps most obviously, I am actually discussing my hook-ups. So
when I recall, say for instance, a 3am tryst behind a dumpster in the alleyways of Cincinnati to
expose the type of lived experience resulting from mobile interactions, I am claiming here that I
realize this is risky behavior. The event I cite may be considered risky, yes, but more so I want to
highlight the risk in claiming it as intellectual evidence.

Halberstam’s reading and critique of Lee Edelman’s queer negativity, highlights, much
like I am proposing here with my articulation of methodological risk, that “the queer subject...
has been bound epistemologically to negativity, to nonsense, to antiproduction, and to
unintelligibility, and instead of fighting this characterization by dragging queerness into
recognition,” the queer subject must (I am including myself in this proposition) “embrace the
negativity that we anyway structurally represent” (Halberstam 106). In other words, being
labeled as queer—publicly or personally, academically or socially—puts my identity central to
my critical inquiry. Halberstam claims this negativity can constitute an antipolitics, but should
not be considered apolitical (108). So when I agree with Halberstam’s view of queer negativity, I
am not viewing this type of negativity as pejorative or morally wrong, or without political power.
Instead, I employ Halberstam’s use of queer negativity to confront conventions of methodology
overall. As Halberstam argues,

If we want to make the antisocial turn in queer theory we must be willing to turn
away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly
politically negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck
shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak
up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate. (110)

Perhaps this is a wrong method to suggest in the conventions of thesis-writing and knowledge
production underneath the pillars of the academy or within the walls of English departments.
And I must admit, my tactics here are not as brash and unyielding as Halberstam’s are in the
passage. I don’t want to fuck shit up, nor do I want to breed resentment from my readers; I do
want to disrupt the notion that the private, the sexual, and personal are places to avoid for
epistemic production. Instead, I suggest that personal sexual stories can offer an alternative,
purportedly negative archive from which I hope to make an antipolitical turn, with the hopes to offer an alternative means of thinking of technologies and sexualities.

My situating this study in terms of my own embodied experience has also been informed by Donna Haraway’s feminist epistemology

where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people’s lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus a view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. (589)

Embodied writing should make its way into the reconsideration of academic work, because otherwise we speak “from above, from nowhere, from simplicity.” More specifically, it is in that very consideration of academic work that is dangerous. Embodied writing does in fact establish epistemologies of “location, position, and situation,” (Haraway 589). The risk, as pointed to with Halberstam, is that I do lose a part of myself in telling you my story—my private self is no longer mine, no longer private. To recall Banks, however, we mustn’t forget the bodies that bring us there. If we can’t risk ourselves in the work that we do, why do the work at all?

Urban and Rural Possibilities: Queering My Method

The Nokia-phone’s hard plastic faceplate was removable and came with the option to place inside customizable inserts. Just as I clung to the access the phone offered to stay in touch with practically the only family I had, the phone offered me a canvas to illustrate my “bi”-ness at the same time. I recall drawing on my insertible template the two overlapping, inverted triangles, one pink—alluding to the realm of homosexual desire, an identifier used during the concentration camps during the holocaust, and blue—which I thought represented the sphere of heterosexuality.

My experience of claiming identity through cellphone decoration supports Meredith Zoeteway’s assertion that the customizability of cellphones and laptops, “is not ancillary, inconsequential decadence; it is key to presentation of self, it can call forth the past, and it can help spur change” (Zoetewey 139). The decoration of my phone was the first instance I had with how a mobile device could function as an identity marker. My phone was, in short, a signifier of

8 http://www.algbtical.org/2A%20SYMBOLS.htm
my queerness. I recount the story above not because I want to evoke sympathy of my reader about the precarity of my childhood, but instead to highlight that the act of owning such types of technology affected my own embodiment before I recognized it as doing so. Granted it wasn’t until later—till moving to Lexington, Kentucky, and from Lexington to Cincinnati, Ohio—that I was able to expand the sphere of embodied influence of my cell phone into the practice of random meetings with gay men in my area by upgrading to a phone with Internet capabilities. My embodiment then, in Kentucky’s countryside, was fettered to survival insofar as my desire to persevere with my developing identity politics, but also economically, socially, and in terms of physically finding security in a place to live. I was a queer in the country and my phone was my way out in a number of ways.

My claiming of rural queerness can be situated besides Scott Herring’s discussion of urbanism and ruralism. In his book, Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism, Herring argues that the positioning of the urban city “as the epicenter of contemporary queer life ‘around the world’ smarts as much as the implicit assumption that the metropolis is the final destination point for queer kids of any gender, class, race, or region” wherein representations of the city construct “the metropolitan as the terminus of queer world making as many have come to know it” (4). However, he points out that the boundaries between the urban and rural are not simply demarcated by concrete sidewalks and grassy fields, or skyscrapers and farm life. Herring writes that according to the 2000 census the “geographic pratfalls of numerically defining what counts as a ‘rural’ or an ‘urban’ space…become less transparent” (8). He continues in his discussion of the 2000 census:

[The census’] categorical data illuminates just how precarious any proper definition of “rural” or “urban”—along with their counterparts “metropolitan” and “non-metropolitan”—can often be. The more examples that the bureau gives, the more it obscures denotative guidelines that might demarcate “pertaining to country” or “pertaining to town.” Designating any area, population, locale, or, by proxy, person as ruralized while defining any area, population, locale, or person as urbanized starts to seem less like a descriptive act and much more like a prescriptive project. When their semantic surfaces are scratched, the terms “rural” and “urban” become a definitional roundabout… You don’t always know the rural when you see it, and it often takes a shared recognition to identify a
particular space or place as “non-metropolitan.” This suggests that something in excess of empirical geographic specificities or the faulty logic of population density governs the urban/rural divide that informs U.S.-based queer studies. Since definitions of “rural” and “urban” must participate in a rigged language game, any “urban/rural” distinction is as much context-specific, phantasmatic, performative, subjective, and…standardizing as it is geographically verifiable.

I quote Herring here at length for a number of reasons. Initially, in his criticism of the census bureau, which he discusses in depth in his text, Herring highlights particular parallels between the rural and the urban with the metropolitan and the non-metropolitan. In doing so he points out that the semantics surrounding these binaries can become standardizing, establishing normative types of urbanism, those that he calls “meteronormative.” Moreover, in looking at how these terms are applied to space, persons, and groups of people to the extent of my project here with Grindr, and more precisely to my own subjectivity that I blur the lines between rural and urban.

When Herring points out that the urban/rural, non-metropolitan/metropolitan binaries are operating in a “rigged language game” that is contextual, recognizable, and subjective, the divide between the terminology can be placed next to—even overlap with—the function of sexual literacy as a rhetorical act. For example, risking exposure of my rural identity for an academic reader and claiming that the act of story telling makes me recognizably rural and queer becomes a rhetorical process as well. In Herring’s work, he questions, “What happens when countrified queers challenge the representational systems that underlie the perpetual citification of modern LGBTQ life” (6)? I would like to think that my work here not only critiques the boundaries of the urban and rural, but also the academic and non-academic. Both in the analysis of Grindr along with positioning myself within my methodology, I would like to illustrate with my own queer ruralism, an alternative way to consider technology’s impact on how we talk about sex, but also how we write about it. Put another way, this thesis may be an instance when a countrified queer challenges the academic representational system.

When Herring asserts that “non-urbanized queer stylistics can and have been used to disarm the standardizing functions of metronormative habitus,” I believe that he would agree with me that hook-up apps can function as a means of countering the expectation that gays have more opportunity to find other queer men in their area if they move to the city. I have logged
onto Grindr in my home town of Danville, Kentucky and I have seen the profiles; you may have to drive farther to find local gay men than if you were in a city, but for us who grew up in the country you have to drive most of the time to get anywhere. You do not have to be in a city to hook-up via your phone, and men certainly are not limited to hooking-up with other men through Grindr, either.

Michael Warner, in his canonical queer text, *The Trouble with Normal*, upholds this assumption of the urban as the primary locus of queer life. In discussing cultures of urban sex, Warner seems to insist on a migration to the city for liberation insofar as hooking-up. He uses the example of the “kids growing up in North Carolina or Idaho,” or in other rural, non-urban areas, “who know that somewhere things are different,” to argue that the “urban space is always a host space” and the city shouldn’t exclude others access to that host space [author’s own emphasis] (Warner, 190). As Herring has pointed to, in making this claim, Warner himself excludes rural queers, by hierarchicalizing the urban over the rural. Warner writes, “Since the Stonewall Riots of 1969, queers have come to take for granted the availability of explicit sexual materials, theaters, and clubs. That is how we have learned to find one another, to construct a sense of a shared world, to carve out spaces of our own in a homophobic world, and, since 1983 to cultivate a collective ethos of safer sex” (169). I wonder when Warner wrote this in 1999 if he had in mind the generation of young queers during that time, in which I am including myself. I was 9 years old during 1999, only a few years prior to my decorated Nokia. It is safe to say that there were no “explicit sexual materials, theaters [or] clubs” for my teenage self to take advantage of. In fact, I had to navigate my sexual identity through other means.

In addition to dismissing the experiences of rural queers, Warner’s *Trouble with Normal* also largely ignores online spaces for sexual interaction; however, Warner in his work with Lauren Berlant, does acknowledge this relationship between queerness and the spatiality of technology:

Now gay men who want sexual materials, or want to meet men for sex, will have two choices: they can cathect the privatized virtual public of phone sex and the Internet; or they can travel to small, inaccessible, little-trafficked, badly lit areas, remote from public transportation and from any residence… In either case, the result will be a sense of isolation and diminished expectations for queer life, as well as an attenuated capacity community. (191-92)
Excerpted from “Sex in Public,” that was written in 1998—one must question since 2009, the year Grindr was released for mobile download, if Warner has logged on to challenge his own understanding of the queer experience? While to some extent I can see how “a sense of isolation and diminished expectations of queer life” could be read onto hook-up apps, I don’t believe this wholly to be the case. Yes, the phone does isolate oneself: you must be looking at your phone, perhaps distracting you from those around you; thinking of what to do or say on these apps requires you to expend a certain amount of energy; you could say the phone does demand an individual, isolated experience. But it is from that isolation that I was enabled to make a queer lifestyle. I was isolated as a queer in the countryside of the Bluegrass; my queer life was diminished by that isolation because I didn’t have access to queer communities. My phone, however, was the impetus that removed me from that isolation. Still to this day, my phone has enabled me to build friendships and relationships—sexual, or what have you—in ways that may have not been possible without it.

Samuel R. Delany is another scholar who, like Warner, has valorized the urban setting and physical (not virtual) spaces for their capacity to make hooking-up easier. In Delany’s, Times Square Red Times Square Blue, he reflects and meditates on his experience of having public sex in the adult theatres throughout New York. It should be pointed out that both Warner and Delany are writing about New York and its sex publics in 1999 during which New York was facing changes in legislative zoning laws that threatened (and did) close sex retailers and adult theatres, limiting access to queer public space. Delany explains that his “argument’s polemic thrust is toward conceiving, organizing, and setting into place new establishments—and even entirely new types of institutions—that would offer the services and fulfill the social functions provided by the porn house that encouraged sex among the audience” (xvii). Access to public sex, to hooking-up, and to sex in general is key to Delany’s text overall. For this reason, I believe that would agree that technologies that facilitate contact between users, as Grindr does, and can, benefit how I am pitching sexual literacy here.

What Delany contributes to this conversation deviates from Warner’s insofar as he offers a detailed account of the relationships that he had with individuals in this gay theatres. He writes of his public-sex partners:
These were relationships. … Intimacy for most of us is a condition that endures, however often repeated, for minutes or for hours. And these had their many intimate hours. But like all sane relationships, they also had their limits. (40)

Here Delany highlights a collapsing of the hierarchical relationship between casual, anonymous sex and the more accepted form of exclusive, committed relationships limited to two individuals. Delany and Warner would, it appears, agree on breaking down this hierarchy. However, it is in the inclusion of the rural, the non-metronormative queers having access to such types of sexual literacy that can be enabled through hooking-up, that I believe both authors fall short of, and Warner more so that Delany. Delany does at least attempt to include rural queers in his project as being capable of engaging with this type of sexual literacy, albeit only if they arrive at the city. Delany writes: “I hope these two extended essays function as early steps in thinking through the problem of where people, male and female, gay and straight, old and young, … rural and urban … might discover (and even work to set up) varied and welcoming harbors for landing on our richly variegated urban” [emphasis my own] (xx). Delany does include those who could identify as rural, but by positioning the rural next to the urban still reaffirms the urban/rural binary. Moreover, Delany throughout his book emphasizes that the urban space as a utopian space by placing value on his encounters in the city.

The discourse that speaks of difficulties projected onto being queer in rural areas, as I have highlighted with Herring, wasn’t necessarily absent from my childhood: I knew the risks of coming out in rural Kentucky. Garrett W. Nichols writes of a similar experience of rural queerness in his article, “The Quiet Country Closet: Reconstructing a Discourse for Closeted Rural Experiences.” His upbringing in Idaho mirrors much of what I had come to acknowledge insofar as it meant to be in the closet in the countryside. He writes, “To be closeted in a rural community is to lack access to certain available discourses through which to understand one’s own experiences.” I didn’t have the available discourses to understand my queerness until I was able to carve out a new way of communicating with my first cellphone.

This is not to say that I am vehemently against urbanism, at least as passionately as perhaps Herring—I see how the city was liberatory for me insofar as embodied technologies are concerned. There were more people in the city to hook-up with, yes. While the precise number of men I slept with in the city versus the country escapes me (if I had ever kept count, I am not sure), I do acknowledge that the city has more presented me with more gay sex than the country.
has. Most importantly, however, my point in engaging with the work of the scholars I have during this section isn’t to argue for the one space over the other: the rural and urban are equally valuable for to my argument. They are important to my writing because the rural allows me to return my body, and thus my embodiment, the very embodiment of this work’s inception. Moving from a bulky, lower grade cell phone to being able to purchase an iPhone clearly signifies my transition from the country to the city. Nonetheless, if it wasn’t for that transition, I couldn’t make the argument about embodied technologies enabling sexual literacy. The parts of me that are rural and the parts of me that are urban both are responsible for my sexual literacy.

In this section, I have aimed to show how I cannot easily separate the rural and urban parts of my identity, and by incorporating those elements of myself into my writing, I pose a risk to academic writing overall. Much akin to Delany’s strategy in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, where he writes “two pieces of such different texture and structure in one book” (xvi), I weave in and out of my narrative, presenting anecdotes along side the analysis on Grindr in the remainder of my thesis. By vacillating from the personal story telling, which is offset in italicized paragraphs, to the analysis, I hope that I can illustrate how embodied writing, technology, and rhetoric can complicate and expand sexual literacy.
CHAPTER THREE
RHETORICS OF EMBODIED TECHNOLOGY: A RHETORICAL CRITIQUE OF THE GRINDR INTERFACE

Late August, 2011 — I’m not home, instead I’m lying on a friend’s futon, 2 hours away with a headache swimming in my skull, coming down from being drunk, dreading the encroaching sunrise. The queers were always different here. I know most these faces, considering that I used to belong to the gay scene here, a few years back. I left these streets and their queens and butch queers behind for a larger city. Don’t mistake me, though. I haven’t slept with all of these phantasms here on my phone, just this one. And we didn’t even fuck. We were both wasted; it is a wonder I remember it. I remember my body though, how it was awkward because he had a twin size bed. I remember the moist air that smelled of cigarette butts and a mixture of man with chlorine from the earlier dip under the summer sun. Oh. Who is this? His profile is just a quote, by Whitman, “O you youths, Western youths,So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship, Plain I see you Western youths, see you tramping with the foremost,Pioneers! O pioneers!” His name is Zeke.

My 3rd generation iPhone allowed me to download and use Grindr in 2010; five generations of iPhones and five years later, I still have the Grindr app. Since the application’s initial development in 2009, there have been plenty of changes. For instance, it was initially the case that receiving messages was hit or miss, and sometimes messages from potential hook-ups were delayed by a few days. Now when you log on, the application runs almost seamlessly, comparable to instant messengers like AOL or Yahoo! from the 2000s. If my reader has never interacted with Grindr before, the simplest analogy I could make would be to compare the app to text messaging, except when you converse with someone on the other end of a text message, more often than not, you have exchanged numbers. You at least know (hopefully) to whom you are typing. In Grindr, this is often not the case.

When you tap on Grindr’s little, orange mask icon to open the app, you are immediately immersed in a grid of men: a myriad of headless torsos; torso-less headshots; random stock images, like a serene lake or mountaintop; photos of couples; full body (and often indistinguishable) pictures. You may know some of the guys that show up; you may not. Perhaps
when you log on you are away from your lover, or even out of town on business, looking for some anonymous sex in your hotel. You may just log on when you’re bored. It could also be the case that you are logging on for research as I have done here for this work. There are innumerable scenarios that could occur with its use. It isn’t unheard of, for instance, that when you eventually hook-up, the person you meet may be 10-years older than in their profile picture. While the parallels between texting and Grindr can be drawn, Grindr comes with a bit more possibility.

Grindr’s Interface

*Early Summer 2012— I remember the street. I had just finished a long shift, working till midnight, at the original Hustler in Cincinnati. We had received a large shipment of gonzo porn and I was the only manager on duty. Having just graduated from college and taking a year off, hooking-up was a great pastime for me. After I finished organizing the DVDs by production companies and title names, and seeing through the outlandish puns and orifices, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I hadn’t met this guy before; later that night, he would be going down on me behind the dumpster tucked away in an alley, off Race St.*

![Grindr's Interface](image-url)
Whatever the reason you log on, it is obvious that the interface design is guiding your choice of men with whom to interact. The image is privileged over alphabetic text. When you go to edit your profile, so you can show up in other guys’ grids, the profile picture is the first thing and, arguably, that most important component of your profile. In fact, when you go to “Edit Profile,” the first and top part of your profile options that you can update is your “Profile Photo.” You do get an 80 character-limit “Headline,” that acts like a primer to your “About Me” description. It actually isn’t that uncommon that you find someone that has as their “Headline:” READ PROFILE FIRST. I have found it the case that those with such a headline want to make it clear their intentions of the app are made explicit in their profile; typically they are looking for other types of hook-ups besides sex. Even so, the fact that there exists a pressure to encourage onlookers to engage with the text in their profile demonstrates Grindr’s interface’s emphasis on the visual representation of the self. The developer of the app, Joel Simkhai, makes it plain in his interview with the Guy Trebay, from the New York Times in 2014: “Grindr is a very, very visual experience. I’m not really a big believer in words.” To make a literary comparison: If Grindr was a bookstore, the books would be judged by their covers. The “Headlines” and the “About Me”s would be, to follow through with the trite metaphor, book titles and synopses, respectfully speaking.

Nevertheless, both adding an image and adding description of yourself are optional. You may just have to work harder to engage with other users if you decide to keep your exposure on the grid to a minimum by having a blank profile. You have bit more space to describe yourself in your “About Me” section, than you do in the “Headline,” having up to 255 characters. From my own experience, these have been the most important in building your presence on Grindr. You do have some other optional categories to consider exposing in your Grindr-profile that you can use to your (dis)advantage: age; your “tribe;” height; weight; body type; ethnicity; looking for; relationship status. If these weren’t enough, you can sync your Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. It may seem that these optional categories help the user have a better experience on the Grindr grid, but I would have to argue that, in fact, these choices carry problematic ideological weight and implications for mobile dating.

Viewing the profile as a construction of identity, recalling Tomlinson’s point from Chapter 1, is a laborious process, wrought with many rhetorical decisions geared as making a self for a particular audience. According to Grindr’s website after downloading you, “then, give
yourself a profile name (if you want), upload a photo (also optional, but we encourage it), and answer a couple of questions about yourself (your choice, too). Then, get out there and start chatting, trading photos, and meeting up with the many men in your area -- wherever you may be!” (Grindr.com). All of these features enable you to reveal as much or as little as you want about yourself and your sexual preferences. What you lay bare in your profile dictates your use of the app and how you choose to perform in such a particular space.

When I made my first Grindr profile, for example, I remember making some serious decisions as to how I was going to write myself into that space: What do I want these guys to see? Will they even read my profile? How did that profile represent certain parts of my identity? What if I revealed too much? Not enough? What should my profile picture be? Should I showcase my face or display a picture that was more enigmatic? Do I make explicit my sexual preferences? The list of questions is endless it seems.

Those are real questions that I find myself faced with still, even as I write this. What does it mean as a researcher and student of rhetoric, when I log on to the app I am analyzing? Should I unmask my identity? Should I tell any information about myself at all? Do I interact with other users around me? Do I remain silent and explore the app as objectively as possible? To be frank, one of the most ethical dilemmas I have faced in studying a technologic platform like Grindr is when I had one of my male acquaintances show up on my screen, who I knew to be in a committed relationship with a female. Granted, I have not and will not expose this individual’s name—my point being, these are truly ethical, rhetorical questions we are faced with when we place ourselves in digital communities.

When I began this research, and in fact, even the prospect of downloading the app as an object of study, it presented itself as an ethical decision insofar as how I thought of myself as a subject in this queer, digital community. Being committed to and in a monogamous relationship with my partner at the time, I felt that I was stepping over into a morally grey area of potential infidelity by what the app represents—this is a hook-up app after all, one which I had used in the past to solicit sex from other men. My partner knew of my work, and he knew why it was essential that I interact with the app, but it was still a learning moment for myself. I realize now that the act of downloading software like Grindr is the first step in the rhetorical process of inventing a digital space that extends both into your offline life as well as your online identity.
In other words, the means of establishing a digital identity for myself at least, did not begin with the profile construction on the app, but in the decision to download and use the app. Shaka McGlotten takes up Grindr specifically in the coda of his text, “On Not Hooking Up,” acknowledging, in agreement with my overall argument that “Grindr is a smart phone app that promises connections—platonic, romantic, sexual, and otherwise” (124). A large part of these various types of connections, which I have pointed to elsewhere, are bound up with the construction of the user’s profile. McGlotten writes on the profile construction of Grindr, stating, “What you chose to disclose, and how, matters… you have to change a profile to stay interesting and relevant, to matter. Then there are categories [listed above] that can make or break your chances…” (128). In other words: your rhetorical choices in this digital space can make or break your chances of hooking up. Even the creator of the app supports how the construction of the profile on Grindr is directly related to the construction one’s identity:

“Grindr made me get fit and go to the gym more, get better abs,” said Mr. Simkhai, who occasionally posts a shirtless photograph on his own profile.

“People criticize it for being superficial, but I didn’t invent that in human nature. What Grindr does is makes you raise your game.” (Trebay)

Simkhai’s own identity is tied up with his representation on Grindr. In other words, as his quote makes apparent, the profile—specifically for him the profile image—dictates how you interact, who you are, and implicitly informs what your intentions are in logging onto Grindr’s grid. In sum, you take a chance on the types of queer interaction with every rhetorical choice you make in your profile. Your Grindr profile is your identity when you are mapped onto Grindr’s grid.

Filtering the Grid

*Summer 2012— I am on an island, somewhere off the coast of South Carolina. I am not paying for this trip; my best friend’s parents are. All I had to do was drive us here. A poor white boy, freshly out of college can’t afford this bougie place. I changed my profile picture, and apparently these tourists like a little redneck in their pick of Grindr guys. I am wearing a cut off Hustler shirt. The guy that messaged me told me he was into my tattoo sleeves. We made a plan to meet up down the beach, in the dark, roughly around 1am. I had never been on the beach at night, and had only been to the beach once prior to this. I insisted that my best friend come with, because*
quite frankly, I was nervous. What kind of wildlife is out on the beach at night? Once he found out she was coming with me, he backed out. I don’t think I was necessarily looking for a quick fuck or blow job that night. More or less it was about the thrill of doing something different.

Without purchasing Grindr and only using the free version, you are limited to a range of approximately 100 men within your radius. Also, you are restricted to filtering through those men by photo and by “tribe.” I would like to spend time with recent categorical choices that was offered to Grindr users in late 2013: tribes. A tribe in the context of Grindr allows you further categorize yourself beyond just the general user information (e.g. age, headline, about me, etc.).

You can choose: Bear; Clean-Cut; Daddy; Discreet; Geek; Jock; Leather; Otter; Poz; Rugged; Trans; and Twink. Possibly a more problematic use of “tribes” is the appropriation of a Native American term in queer discourse.⁹ There are many implications in performing such identities when making a rhetorical choice to identify with one of these “tribes.” It would be helpful to offer a brief description of the genealogical origin for such terminology.

The etymological roots for the animal terms like, Bear and Otter, for example—could be traced back in publication to George Mazzei’s article, “Who’s Who at the Zoo?” published in 1979 for The Advocate, a news source for gay and queer communities. It is in this article that “blithely categorize other [non-stereotypical?] gay men and lesbians as types of animals in the zoo” (Advocate.com). The article breaks down the habits of such animalizing types into their “General Characteristics” or explains, “What They Eat.” Bears would, for instance, “ascertain that you will stay and cuddle all night even if nothing else happens [e.g. sex]” and may fancy “full leather at all times” (Mazzei). Habits and this sort of zoological irony are bound up with one another: what you’re titled as also enforces certain expected behavior. Grindr has done nothing new in adding these “tribes” and you are actually limited to only describing yourself as belonging to your tribe. Note: you only are permitted one tribe if you don’t pay for Xtra. If you invest in the subscription you are allowed to have up to three tribes. For example, if I were to add such specificity to my profile, I would consider myself a geek and an otter. (I am studying a mobile application for thesis writing, which is sort of geeky I figure. And by physical standards, being too slender to be a bear or cub, and too hairy to be a twink, otter is befitting.) The novelty

⁹ See Scott Lauria Morgensen’s Spaces between Us for further reading.
in Grindr’s tribe-lore is the user’s now capability to generate searches for only members of their “tribe.”

By enabling users to search, or “filter,” as Grindr has named it, by tribes, Grindr encourages users to categorize themselves and others into specific, performative roles. The rhetorical process of choosing to belong to one (or three) of the categories carries certain implications about the user’s identity, and at the same time establishes a sexual literacy in the app itself. Judith Butler has pointed out, “As that which relies on categories that render individuals socially interchangeable with one another, regulations are thus bound up with the process of normalization [author’s own emphasis]” (55). For instance in the gay male community, it isn’t uncommon that a “bear”, a typically older, but necessarily from the namesake, hairy man may be expected to seek out a younger, hairy guy, or a “cub.” While this isn’t always the case, there are overt generalizations that can be deemed “normal:” the more masculine guys are typically older, whereas the more feminized men as Grindr would have it, are younger. In other words, while the “tribes” may appear to be liberating and beneficial to the user, giving the user more room in the rhetorical decision making process when it comes to designing and personalizing profiles, the tribes can entrench and reify certain tropes of identities. Perhaps the most problematic “tribe” you could belong to is “Trans.” This isn’t because being transgender is problematic; labeling trans individuals as a “tribe” alongside other gay male stereotypes, and not acknowledging that trans is in fact a gender-identity, is the issue. Returning to the example above, being a bear is not congruent to one’s gender identity; it is a marker of sexual proclivity and body type. I can be a bear and not have it be a matter of my gender expression. It may be the case that identifying as a bear or an otter may have implicit associations of masculinity and femininity, it does not dictate my gender expression in the same way as being a trans individual would be. Labeling trans as a tribe seems to demean at worst, or overlook at best, the politics of gender that are bound up with identity. This is not to say that having trans as a tribe isn’t problematic for other reasons as well. Trans individuals can be excluded from your grid by filtering that category out of your search. However, it doesn’t allow for the possibility for trans persons to be associated with the other “tribes” as well: Can’t a trans individual be considered a geek or a bear, for example, as well?

Reinforcing social hierarchies, the mobile app’s selective filtering allows users to deem certain individuals as viewable and other not. Grindr, in addition to other types of technologies
that impact our bodies and literacies through their design, is an ethical site for discussion. I would be in agreement, it seems, with Ben McCorkle when he writes, “Built into computer interface designs are a series of semiotic messages that support hierarchical regimes along the axes of identity” (179). While it may not appear clear at first, but the freedom to search among tribes establishes certain hierarchies of identity. And, if you are willing to pay for eXtra, the hierarchies only grow.

**Grindr (XX)Xtra: Colonizing the Grid**

Recall that for a .99¢ download and a monthly subscription, Grindr Xtra comes with extended “benefits.” If you are willing to pay the price for Grindr Xtra10 you get a myriad of perks: saved phrases that you find yourself using over and over are easy to access, up to 200 more Grindr users to browse, and notifications of recent messages when you’re not using the app, plus it is ad free. As website explains, “But the best part of Grindr Xtra? More guys! And while we might not have the technology (yet) to make those guys literally jump out of your phone, Grindr Xtra can help you load more guys onto your screen and -- we hope -- load more guys into your life.” Besides the possible lewd euphemism of “loading” more guys into your life, this description supports the notion that digital interfaces are political, colonizing spaces, which Selfe and Selfe discuss at length in their article, “The Politics of the Interface: Power an Its Exercise in Electronic Contact Zones.” In their article, the authors explain how digital design and virtual interfaces draw borders that are politically and culturally constructed. They write that “computer interfaces” can be thought of as “primary representations of computer systems or programs that show up on screens…,” wherein “the values of our culture—ideological, political, economic, educational—are mapped both implicitly and explicitly, constituting a complex set of material relations among culture, technology, and technology users” (485). In other words, “the maps of computer interfaces order the virtual world according to a certain set of historical and social values that make up our culture” (485). When logging onto Grindr, the gridded-screen of

10 I want to draw attention to the missing “e” in Xtra, with this neologism, you wonder why the app designers didn’t add two more Xs just to drive home the point.
men is an obvious map. While Grindr doesn’t place other users on a geographic map per se—you aren’t a location on a map in geographical sense—, the app is still mapping out users according to their location through its interface design.

The grid becomes overtly political when you begin to pay for more options, reinscribing yet another layer of hierarchy: more money equals more privilege. Who wouldn’t want more men to choose from? The only catch: you have to pay. In a matter of speaking, the politics of Grindr can easily correlate with capitalist and colonialist ideals. Put another way, you are drawn on a map, positioned among a sea of profiles and you can pay for more access to surf through those profiles in hopes of becoming “0 feet away.” If that isn’t colonizing enough: there is still more “uncharted territory” to conquer if you make the investment. Selfe and Selfe point to how technology and interface design can reinforce such colonialist ideologies, and by result, capitalist values, when they write:

In particular—given that these technologies have grown out of the predominately male, white, middle-class, professional cultures associated with the military-industrial complex—the virtual reality of computer interfaces represents, in part and to a visible degree, a tendency to value monoculturalism, capitalism, and phallogic thinking, and does so, more importantly, to the exclusion of other perspectives. Grounded in these values, computer interfaces, we maintain, enact small but continues gestures of domination and colonialism. (486)

Grindr’s capital, from this angle, is men; Grindr’s conquest is virtual proximity. Paying more to access digital territory for the generalized and implicit goal of being “0 feet away,” (i.e. Looking for dick, as one of my interlocutors in a Grindr chat described) seems about as phallogic as it comes.

The most blatant colonizing feature of Grindr Xtra is the ability to extend your filter searches beyond merely browsing for tribes and profiles with photos. With a monthly subscription you get to filter (read: select) which profiles you’d prefer to browse. All the categories that (can) make up a profile—height; weight; body type; ethnicity; looking for; relationship status—become searchable with Grindr Xtra. My point about tribes establishing and normalizing certain identities is extended into even more complex hierarchies. Lisa Nakamura, in her book, “Digitizing Race,” for example discusses how interfaces can create such hierarchies, especially when it comes to race and ethnicity. She writes,
The interface serves to organize raced and gendered bodies in categories, boxes, and links that mimic both the mental structure of a normative consciousness and set of associations (often white, often male) and the logical of digital capitalism: to click on a box, or link is to acquire it to choose it, to replace one set of images with another in a friction-free transaction that seems to cost nothing yet generates capital in the form of digitally racialized images and performances. (17)

It could be said that Grindr is already racialized when you begin to build your profile. You can select, if you wish, to list your ethnicity, choosing among: Asian, Black, Latino, Middle Eastern, Mixed, Native American, White, Other, South Asian, Not specified. But paying for more access implicitly enables users on Grindr Xtra to establish and reestablish preferable types of bodies to populate their screen. Nakamura refers to clicking on boxes and links as transactions of sorts; when it comes to Grindr, the boxes clicked are extensions of users on the other end of the profile, presumably available, in a matter of speaking, for purchase. You can’t purchase the men on Grindr obviously (although I have seen “personal escorts” advertised), but with purchasing eXtra you can at least have more ability to organize what “types” of men show up on your screen. You are paying for more “ground” to cover, for more men to “search,” and ultimately more possibility to get laid.

For example, McGlotten highlights racist profiles that could perhaps read, “Whites only,” or, sexist/femme-shaming comments, “Bottoms need not apply” as examples of what Grindr enables because of its ability to place value on the categories that make up profiles:

Grindr is at once celebrated for allowing men to find other men nearby, and critiqued for producing anxiety as men feel subjected to a surveillance (by their neighbors or boyfriends) or for narrowing gay sociality to the space of screens in which proximate men are laid out on a grid, available for one’s perusal like an endless rows of nearly indistinguishable cereal boxes at the supermarket. (130) McGlotten highlights my point: with Xtra you can be selective about the races and ethnicities you choose to cruise. Your map can literally be segregated by race. Or, if you prefer to be selective about the waist size or height of your cereal-box selection, you can certainly pay for the privilege with Grindr Xtra. McGlotten frames Grindr further, by highlighting the exclusionary hierarchies that have come to light in such a virtual space by analyzing the blog, Douchebagsofgrindr.com: “Douchebags of Grindr is a blog containing screenshots of Grindr
‘douchebags,’ people whose profiles violate others’ ethical or aesthetic sensibilities. The site responds to the insensitive, politically incorrect, or just plain fucked up profile texts that relative anonymity of the app and the need for brevity in profile inevitably produce” (129). The capital investment of Grindr enables users to colonizing series of men, outlined by the borders of their profiles, establishing problematic hierarchies.

Sometimes Grindr’s grid, as I have been reading as a map, is more obviously spatial. Take for instance that interacting and chatting has turned into meeting up in person (i.e. “0 feet away”): you can send a map and address, generated by the app, to the guy on the other end of the chat. However, it is easy to overlook that there is a hierarchy of valuing the urban over the rural. Highlighted in chapter 2, the urban has been representative of liberating the gay community from the perils of the countryside. Grindr’s marketing doesn’t fall short of upholding the urban as such. For example, on Grindr.com, the “Grindr Gear” page or online apparel shop, the shirts depict the iconic Grindr mask along with the name of the app along with the choice to identify as either “East Coast” or “West Coast.” I can’t help but to think, “What about those who don’t live on a coast?” There is a suggestion with these tee-shirt designs that those who live in largely populated areas use Grindr: Grindr is marketed for the urbanite. Not only is this a gross misrepresentation of the transformative potential (for the better or worse) and effects the app has on its users, but it also excludes those rural queers that have found their virtual-selves mapped on Grindr.

To conclude, I have argued that digitally representing yourself through Grindr is not as innocuous of an endeavor as the marketing around the app portrays it to be. Even in the decision to download the app on your phone, you make the decision to write yourself into the complex virtual space on your mobile phone. Also, when building a profile, despite the lighthearted explanation according to the app’s website, the choices you make are important. This speaks to larger implications of embodied technologies, that I am making a case for: our bodies, our identities, and, indeed, even our sexual literacies no longer stop at the surface of our skin. Our digital selves are just as important as the bodies that we carry with us in our daily lives. Moving past looking at the interface alone, in the next chapter I look to popular representations of the app to illustrate the affective consequences of using apps like Grindr.
CHAPTER 4

LOOKING AT HOOKING-UP

Leap Year Day, 2012—I remember breaking the wall and tasting skunked Budlights. I don’t remember re-downloading the app in the bathroom, but I believe I did it out of spite. Zeke is a child, selfish and naïve. His moving here was a mistake; my once emotional attachment to the idyllic prospect of meeting my other half through such serendipity is a mistake. I find a trick. He is on his way to pick me up. Zeke catches me about to cheat on him, with a stranger I just met in the same fantastic place I met Zeke. Us queers can be deluded.

HBO’s recent series, Looking, premiered on January 14th, 2014. The show follows three gay men: 29 year old, Patrick, who works in game design; Agustín, 31, an emotional and rowdy artist; and Dom, pressing 40, an aspiring restaurateur. Having only two seasons, the series follows the three protagonists through the streets of San Francisco, depicting the complexities of various relationships they establish in the queer community. Looking emphasizes, arguably, the search for intimate fulfillment. The title acts a metaphor reinforcing the notion that the characters perpetually live in a state of seeking. The show isn’t shy about it: the audience is privy to the types of “looking” that take place in the city.

Actually, the show seems to making explicit that this series is reliant upon the notion of looking. Each episode is titled with innuendo, subtly indicating what kinds of “looking” that will take place during that particular 30 minutes. My favorites among the 18 titles are “Looking for Uncut,” and “Looking for a Plot.” “Looking for Uncut” isn’t an uncommon description in Grindr profiles, in fact. And, I find “Looking for a Plot,” to not only be self aware for the series but also exemplary of the search for meaning and connection between people that the show is insistent on representing, but perhaps never achieves. The loaded meaning behind these titles aligns well with an analysis of Grindr. The argument threaded throughout my thesis has been that hooking-up via technological platforms like Grindr enables us to discuss and become literate about sex and sexuality in new generative ways. In other words, when we are “looking” to hook-up, we are performing a certain type of being similar to those in Looking: we may be looking to hook-up with someone with an uncut cock, or we may be looking for a plot, a storyline, a relationship that will extend past the one nightstand or casual hook-up.
The Possibilities of Hooking-up

November 28th, 2012—I bet this dude is a Scorpio. He is sending me such titillating pics while we show each other our body art; he sends me a shot taken over his shoulder, the camera catching the tats on his back while the silhouetted curvature of his colorful briefs are accentuated. He says his name is Chadd. Born Chad; he added the extra d later, not legally, just because it emphasizes his personal finesse.

To cover and analyze the span of 18 episodes (8 in season one; 10 episodes in season two) could be a project in itself. For the scope of my analysis, I focus on the first episode, and series finale, “Looking for Home,” which aired on March 22nd, 2015. The exposition of episode one, illustrates and sets up, realistically, I would add, how hooking-up can vary among queer men. While Grindr makes appearances in other episodes, the finale deals with Grindr as a major plot device illustrating how it is not merely a hook-up app. Grindr establishes certain ways to talk about sex, but also impacts users’ lives in different ways. Instead, in “Looking for Home,” Grindr is depicted as having serious affective consequences for relationships; the episode showcases my argument that there are many ways to discuss and many ways to actually “hook-up.”

The series begins with a hook-up. Patrick is shown, pushing back tree limbs, glancing over his shoulder as if he anticipates getting caught for doing something wrong. Making his way to a small clearing, a bearded man approaches him. It is obvious that Patrick is not adept at the causal park hook-up. He awkwardly begins to stumble over his words, “Okay, okay. Hi. I'm Patrick.”

The stranger, stoic and seemingly unconcerned with Patrick’s failed attempt to make this anonymous hook-up not anonymous, whispers in response, “No.” It is obvious that the stranger doesn’t care for the chitchat; he wants sex.

Patrick continues with his uncomfortable prattle, “Do you come here a lot?”

“No. Shh,” the man insists.

Nervously Patrick asks, “And what's your name? I didn't catch your name.”

“Stop talking.” The guy has successfully unbuckled Patrick’s belt and has his hands down
Patrick’s jeans. Patrick’s phone rings, presenting an opportune moment for Patrick to remove himself from a situation that is just as uncomfortable for the audience to watch and it appears to be for Patrick. There isn’t any implication that Patrick has met up with this bearded strange through Grindr, although this could have easily been the case. Living up to the title, *Looking*, Patrick was cruising his local park looking for sex, something not totally uncommon in the queer community. This scene also sets up thematically what the show deals with for the remaining 17 episodes. Much as I have argued throughout my thesis, but more specifically for this chapter, this illustrates the broad spectrum of the many ways you can hook-up in the queer community. The stranger who found himself with his hand down awkward Patrick’s pants, who wanted anonymous, no-strings-attached sex, represents a type of queer intimacy as does the uncomfortable, naïve Patrick who wants to know the name of the person who has hold of his cock. There are a number of ways to hook up, in other words. Also, it seems to be the case that how we communicate—what is said or what isn’t said, even—is just as important in the various ways we become literate in these sexual performances.

Illustrating kinds of queer intimacy carries through the show’s three protagonists’ many relationships. A little backstory (and major spoilers): Up until this point we have followed the three guys in their search for love. The predominant love-plot in *Looking* portrays Patrick’s relationships. Patrick’s always complicated, and sometimes, uncomfortable need for connecting to other men truly takes shape when he comes to fall for his boss, Kevin. Kevin has been in a committed relationship for many years with his lover who lives hundreds of miles away. By the finale of season two, Patrick’s tryst with Kevin has grown more complicated. Up until episode 7, that is, when Kevin decides to leaves his long-term partner to prove his love for Patrick. In reality, Patrick and Kevin are publicly a couple in the show for only three episodes. In the finale, they have decided to move in together.

“Looking for Home” opens with Patrick, holding a packed box of what we are to assume are his belongings, struggling to get inside of an apartment building. A busy highway of cars pass through the intersection behind him. Not having a key, two men (a gay couple?) let him into the apartment building. Following the two onto the elevator, Patrick casually converses with the two men:

“Hey, are you moving into that apartment with the roof garden?”

“Yes. I’m Patrick.”
“Milo. I had dreams of switching to that place. 5 is so stuffy.”
“I’m Jake. Was that your, um, husband who I saw earlier with the moving truck?”
“No. No. We’re not married. He’s, ah, just my boyfriend.”

Grindr isn’t directly mentioned here, but this brief interaction does set up a few important points to how it will play out in the narrative: 1) Moving-in together carries with it certain implications what kind of relationship Patrick and Kevin do or should have; 2) There is an emphasis on the “couple” illustrated in this dialogue, with the two men assuming Patrick and Kevin are married; 3) The articulation of having a “roof garden” versus a “stuffy” apartment, accented by the opening scene of the bustling street, speaks to a larger theme of how the metropolitan offers a more idyllic place where gay relationships can flourish.

Once Patrick actually enters into his new apartment, greeted by Kevin, and a few moments pass, Patrick makes an astute observation to Kevin: “I just realized I don’t know your stuff.” Further into the episode, after being invited to an apartment building party, it is revealed that Patrick didn’t know that Kevin had a Grindr account either. Being greeted by the (now confirmed) couple, Jake and Milo, in their apartment, Patrick and Kevin make their way to the punch bowl. The couple is approached while getting drinks by some partygoer, “You guys are from upstairs right?”


“Yeah, this crowd. It’s a lot of the same, one party blends into the next. Ya know? So new meat is of interest.”

Patrick, perplexed, and looking at Kevin, replies, “New meat?”

“Don’t be intimidated. We’re a fun crowd. And as the night goes on we get a little wild. So drink up boys,” replies the guy as he leaves the scene.

At this point, the tension peaks with Patrick expressing concern to Kevin, worrying that this may be an orgy-type party. Kevin takes a quick break to the bathroom, and Patrick—at this point

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11 As I even imply with my parenthetical, “(a gay couple?),” the two men that Patrick is interacting with also speaks to these preconceived ideals of what type of relationship two gay men that are living together have.
pretty tipsy—makes his way to get another drink. Engaging with the hosts and some other guest, Patrick inquires, “What’s the news?”

“Oldest news ever…we’re comparing Grindr profiles,” Jake explains.

Patrick questionably agrees, “That’s the oldest news ever.” Those who have watched the show since the beginning will know that Patrick isn’t necessarily the type to hook-up.

A third interlocutor enters the conversation: “Trying to figure out who’s who. Yeah, we all know that profiles can be very deceiving. Is this the guy over by the sushi?”

Patrick points and asks, “The guy with the coat?”

The unnamed guest explains, “You have to erase the beard.”

Jake interjects, “Why would he have a beard on his profile, but not in real life? No. It’s not him.”

Continuing to browse through the app, the guy asks, “Who’s Romford?”

Jake says, “Oh. Let’s see, Romford has no pic, no profile. He’s the closest guy to us.”

Romford, England is Kevin’s hometown. After Kevin arrives back to punch bowl, a mortified Patrick insists on leaving the party. The scene cuts to the couple getting on the elevator. Patrick questions Kevin, “Are you Romford?”

From this point forward the plot unfolds into a discussion of what Kevin and Patrick’s relationship should be. Are they monogamous? Are they exclusive, with the exception of possible hook-ups? Not having discussed these facets of their relationship up until this point, the two engage in a heated discussion of whether moving in together was an appropriate step. Notice the dramatic dialogue and scene that takes place after it is revealed Kevin has a profile on Grindr. Grindr plays, then, a role in how their relationship is expected to play out. More generally, the drunken banter over the punch bowl speaks to a larger point that Grindr has real impact on types of gay relationships. In other words, there is a certain expectation when logging onto Grindr: you’re looking for sex. Kevin reassures Patrick that he “went on because [he] wanted to know who else is in the building.” Patrick not letting it go, wants to know why Kevin would even have Grindr on his phone. Kevin responds, “Why? Why? I don’t know why. Because I was bored waiting for you [Patrick]. Who doesn’t want to know what other homos are lurking in the shadows. You don’t do that?”

“No. I don’t have Grindr on my phone. Not anymore,” Patrick exclaims. When Patrick says that he doesn’t have the app “anymore,” there’s an underlying implication that he no longer
needs the app because he is in an exclusive relationship with Kevin. I made the claim in the last chapter that the rhetorical construction of your digital identity begins with deciding to download the app. I believe Patrick adds to my initial point: if the process of inventing a digital presence impacts your embodied experience with apps like Grindr, then deleting and refusing to use the software is just as important. The presence and absence of certain embodied technologies both are equally influential. Recall that Grindr is supposedly “old news:” everyone supposedly knows who’s who, and why they’re there.

Immediately after returning to their apartment from the apartment party upstairs, the next scene illustrating the affective impact of Grindr on Kevin and Patrick’s relationship occurs when Patrick gets a call from Agustín. While Kevin excuses himself to the restroom, and Patrick explains to his friend on the other end of the phone, “Just, we got into something.”

Agustín asks, “What kind of thing?”

“Um… Do you think it's weird if Kevin is on Grindr?”

“It depends.”

“Well, he, ah, doesn't have a picture or a profile or anything. It's more out of curiosity.”

Reassuring, Agustín comforts Patrick: “No, it's…ah… Look, everybody's got the app on their phone, right? It's what you do with it that matters.” But, everyone doesn’t have the app, as Patrick has already pointed out. Agustín’s comment, however, does point out that there does exist an implication that the app is part of a gay culture.

As Kevin and Patrick’s discussion of Grindr reveals, the discourse around technologies impact on our lived experience has extended into fictitious representations of real life possibilities. Grindr may be old news, but it is still being talked about. At the end of the episode, while Kevin and Patrick begin to discuss the uncertainty of their relationship, Kevin captures the impact the app can have nicely when he exclaims: “I can't believe this is happening. That this is all because of a Grindr profile. Swear to God, I want to throw my phone off this fucking roof.” Sometimes I have a similar thought when I sit down to write about the app. Then I am reminded that I am able to write about it because I have witnessed first hand how the app affects one’s relationship, with our sex and intimate lives. Grindr can inform one’s own sexual literacy, but it can also extend into larger discursive formations of sexual literacy. To put it simply: Kevin logging onto Grindr was disruptive to the couple’s relationship. The episode ends quite ambiguously. We don’t know if Patrick leaves Kevin. I think it is safe to say, however, that the
show lives up to its title. Patrick is still looking for some real connection and meaning in his life. The series was not renewed for another season, so it appears that the title will hold even truer for fans, since we will always be in a state of searching for an answer, but never will find it. The loaded meaning of the title, the abrupt and ambiguous ending, reinforces the panic that Grindr caused for Patrick. When logging onto Grindr you have to ask yourself—and surely will be asked at some point: What are you looking for? As I have attempted to illustrate, the answers will vary for everyone. Most importantly, though, I think that the value of Grindr lies in its potential for possible types of connection. Hooking-up for sex isn’t the only possibility, but it certainly can be a possibility. The app can challenge assumptions of normalizing ideals, including monogamy, among gay relationships as in *Looking*.

**Rethinking the Hook-up: The Mobile Bathhouse**

*Later Spring 2015—*As I write this, the heat of the city streets rise into my new loft apartment. With the longer days, this city has brought with it new faces that populate the screen as I log onto Grindr. The anxiety of this chapter haunts me. Am I going to finish in time? Why is this writing coming out of me like molasses? Cute pic, one guy messages me, along with an onslaught of heys and whats ups. Despite my treacherous divorce, I am still unyieldingly honest, even in my Grindr profile, that I am currently seeing someone and that, “I am on here for research.” There have been plenty of responses akin to: I would love to help you research ;) I don’t engage. If they wanted to help, they could tell me how to overcome writer’s block. After explaining my research to one particular guy, I asked him what he was logged on for, what he wanted from the app. He replied, “I’m looking for some cock.” 5 words that seemingly summarize my thesis.

“So what” if I am looking for sex when I log on? The discourse around Grindr, as *Looking* illustrates, seems to uphold my argument that Grindr is mostly about sex, but still lingering behind this idea is the critique that this is a somehow morally wrong. Of course, the hook-up, casual sex, and sex-for-sex-sake isn’t new moral ground. I agree, as I figure most Grindr users would, with McGlotten when he makes the statement that, “[T]he application updates gay cruising for the digital age” (124). Cruising, anonymous sex, and public sex are part of queer history and sociality (Delany; Warner). I would like to extend McGlotten’s claim and
propose that a particular way of looking at Grindr is to suggest that the bathhouse has been upgraded. Grindr and other hook-up apps are *mobile bathhouses*.

Bathhouses have origins in antiquity, where they were Roman “sexual meeting ground” (Hogan and Hudson, 73, 74). Bathhouses have carried into modernity and are still seen as a location for homosocial desire and homoeroticism, with the rise of explicitly gay bathhouses in the twentieth century. The gay bathhouse has also extended into more common spaces, for instance gyms and adult theatres. As I wrote in chapter 2, Samuel Delany points to the significance of his casual sexual encounters in the adult theatres. He does not refer to the adult theatres as bathhouses, but the implicit importance and desire to experience casual sex in a public location still rings true of how bathhouses are not just a construct of the Romans. Bathhouses are still a present day phenomena. Warner also discusses how cruising, “looking,” and hooking-up all resonate discourses of sex in the queer community (1999, 211). There are comparisons and correlations to be made about hooking-up that have complex histories, from modern representations of public sex to reaching farther into the past. Grindr offers new ways to conceptualize the many ways queers can find one another.

Importantly, I do not want to reappropriate the word *bathhouse*, as much as I am intending to augment its original meaning; the value, sexual legitimacy, and sexual literacy that develop from bathhouses should stay fixed in this definition. However, by digitizing the bathhouse, we allow for new lines of orientation (see Ahmed) to become viable and livable that the stationary bathhouse cannot provide. What comes along with these new mobile bathhouses as sites of virtual pleasure seeking, Grindr builds on the tradition of making casual hook-ups a reality. Now, however, the bathhouse can easily fit in your pocket. While McGlotten claims that Grindr is a new way of cruising, he does so with a limited view of intimacy. He writes, “When we abdicate our culpability to intimates or even to strangers, we might experience a sense of control or freedom, but we are sacrificing what makes intimacy nourishing: the care and mutuality, and also the difficulties that help us to grow as ethical, relating persons” (125). For McGlotten, as the quote indicates, intimacy is exclusive with nourishment, care, and mutuality, all of which make Grindr’s users ethical, relating persons.¹²

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¹² I would like to note: McGlotten’s larger argument on intimacy as a whole in the community runs parallel with my work with Grindr. It is in this particular instance, where I engage with his
Grindr challenges the meaning of hooking-up on many levels. As I have attempted to argue, you can hook-up casually but also complicate the ways we hook-up in various types of relationships (as was the case with Kevin and Patrick). When McGlotten tethers intimacy with words and concepts such as “nourishment” and “care,” he limits the capacity for sexual literacy, deeming only certain types of sexual activity acceptable. I must be careful here and very clear. McGlotten points out that there is a level of ethical concern in these mediated spaces, these mobile bathhouses, and I would agree. He frames Grindr ethically, but limits a large part of his critique to highlighting the exclusionary hierarchies that have come to light in such a virtual space, as I wrote on in chapter 3. Although I agree with McGlotten’s critique of Grindr’s limitations, as well as the types of exclusionary problems that may emerge, I believe he could have done more to acknowledge that hooking-up on Grindr can be intimate. McGlotten seems to shy away from affirming the value of casual sex overall, and this is where we differ. I believe that respect and nourishment are not conceptually exclusive to one another. McGlotten’s framing of ethics around Grindr may be on par in some regards, but it is in his failure to acknowledge other types of sexual behavior as equally valid. That is to say, by limiting the ethics of mobile dating and hook-up apps to only those connections that nourish and are care-ful, then the possibilities for sexual literacies to develop diminish. Just as Delany pointed out (see chapter 2), hook-ups can be considered as being intimate relationships (Delany 40). The men that Delany frequently had sex with in the movie theatres offered levels of intimacy. The same can be said of the casual sex that results from using apps like Grindr. In other words, both hooking up for the sake of casual, illicit sex as you would at a bathhouse and using hook up apps as a way to meet others with the hope of a lasting relationship should both be equally valid ethical outcomes, creating a sexual literacy—the discourse and stories around gay sex—that makes possible many forms of sexual expression.

emphasis on care and mutuality as normalizing queer interactions and relations, however, that we differ.
Looking Beyond Grindr

Grindr has been a vanguard of sorts when it comes to the dating application world, fusing together queer sensibilities analogous to that of bathhouses with the resourcefulness of mobile technology. My argument has largely focused on how Grindr creates sexual literacy through its interface design, mapping users’ identities digitally. As a result Grindr creates types of possible hook-ups that may not have occurred otherwise. Perhaps most importantly, it is the way that embodied technologies facilitate talk about sex that my thesis hinges on overall. Because of Grindr’s marketing towards the gay male community, the sexual literacy that I have argued for speaks to mainly the G of the LGBT community. Using a queer theoretical lens to analyze Grindr enables us to see the productivity of the app as a disruptive technology. It even enables a reevaluation of casual sex when theorized as a mobile bathhouse, building on ways casual sex has played out in the past. But there is plenty more to be said in future research, both on what the app does and doesn’t do, as well as how apps such as Grindr can challenge ways to talk about sex and intimacy.

Grindr was the first step in a series of dating and hook-up apps that came to the mobile phone scene since 2009. To list a few: in the gay and lesbian community there is Growlr, Lavendr, Scruff, Hornet, and Her; for straight users (and sometimes both, depending on the app), Tinder, Skout, Zoosk, PlentyofFish, plus Match.com and even eHarmony.com have developed mobile applications. Those are the most used apps when you go to your app store on your phone, but there are even lesser known apps on the lists. Granted that each application has its own interface, own marketing technique, and so on, but I would like to highlight that the popular applications still echo Grindr with their namesake ending in “r.” Grindr may be considered “old news,” but it still is generating vast ways to hook-up. There are even apps that are developed for more niche types of intimacy. For example, you have Whiplr for the BDSM community, Cuddlr for users who want to (just?) cuddle, or Mixxxer for swinging couples.

My research here is just beginning, for a number of reasons. There are apps and technologies always being developed so that it seems the research on those platforms may never truly be caught up because of the speed. Moreover, if we are learning new ways to hook-up and

13 I am using an iPhone to search for these in the App Store, but most of these software are downloadable for Android based operating systems.
new ways to talk sex, the study of that literacy is always going to be behind; how can you analyze what is in the making? I realize that there is plenty more to say about Grindr. At the beginning of this project, before I came to use my own subjective experience, I contemplated conducting person-based research. One of the prospective means of looking at Grindr’s impacts in sexual literacy that I would have perhaps like to have the chance to do was to reach out to other people’s experiences with the apps. Specifically, I planned to do an anonymous online survey that worked through mobile devices. With time constraints, I did not have the opportunity to request IRB approval or design the survey. This could very well be the direction I take in future research. A significant portion of my work here has been to include and argue for personal sexual experience as epistemic grounds for research and knowledge making, and I realize that in my work here I am limited to my own. It would have been productive to move outside my own experience and see what others have to say.

Nonetheless, this project has become an important means of hooking-up with my past experience with Grindr. I have the application open on my phone as I type this and I wonder if I will finally delete it. Or, should I keep it? The application has impacted my own sexuality and my sexual literacy. It has allowed me to hook-up various parts of my identity: my professional, academic self to the various “sordid” experiences of past. It has also allowed me to hook-up various modes of writing: it isn’t that common, as most know in the field of rhetoric and composition to tell one’s stories about gay sex to an academic audience. Ultimately, I have to ask myself from this point forward: In what ways can I look to hook-up next?


