

Consent and the Counterfetish: an Exploration into the Futurity of Queer Consent

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Chapter One: Introduction

What is the future?

The future is a point in time, the infinite ‘then’ that never gets to ‘now.’ From the vantage point of the past, the future is here already, even as the past is an unknowable entity itself. Still, regarding the future as a point in time without value or ambition relegates it to the realm of the scientific. Instead, the future is a site of possibility, especially at the margins. The echoes of different futurisms, from Afrofuturism to Palestinian futurism, crip futurism to the solarpunk movement, show us how hope is not just a life force moving through the margins, it is *performed* through everyday actions. Futures come with the promise that, however bad things are now, they will be different tomorrow. This is especially true at the margins of gender and sexuality, Western society’s mechanisms of reproduction.

I begin with the future to orient this thesis, not toward a liberal progress-oriented vision of the future, but as a way of being through space and time. While explicitly, this is a work about the expression and reception of consent in queer space, it is ultimately about queer futurist performance. This is because, as I will argue, a focus on the specific ways queer people express and understand consent is an investigation into queer futurism itself.

To be trans in America right now is to be constantly enraged at each coming news cycle, ensconced in one’s own fear, and to be longing for a future different from this one. Turning on the news means witnessing the air of possibility that once shaped trans futures quickly slithering away. As soon as the second Trump administration began, rights and freedoms we had grown accustomed to, like the freedom to travel or to work

free from harassment, disappeared. Marco Rubio's State Department announced an indefinite freeze and seizure on all documents for people applying to change their passport gender marker, or applying for gender marker "X". While passports with the gender marker "X" are technically legally valid, trans people are advised to not travel outside the country on the possibility they will not be let back in (Yurcaba and Williams 2025). This 'policy change' is a mere drop in the pool of legislative violence facing trans people now. As of now, 859 bills targeting the the rights and freedoms of transgender people have been proposed across 49 states, according to the Trans Legislation Tracker. The furthest reaching of these bills was one in Texas which classified identifying as a gender not aligned to sex assigned at birth in state documentation as a state felony (Trans Legislation Tracker 2025; Yurcaba 2025). While this bill did not pass, it signals the possibilities of the time we live.

Rights and freedoms are not the only markers of trans wellbeing. Legibility matters as well, whether that be social legibility, the act of being read as a "legible gender", or legal legibility (Butler 1990). Legal legibility refers to the processing of people into a computable form so they may be properly counted in data collection exercises or understood in a legal context (Waldman 2024). This matters, as another shock came when Trump's NIH announced funding pauses on all research with terms relating to so-called "gender ideology", de facto banning government-funded research recognizing any LGBTQ+ person. This order also targeted research on Black and Brown communities, as well as women's health research. A similar order was put in place at the CDC and the National Academies (Miller 2025).

Of course, some level of naivete led to this moment. If only young trans people listened to their elders, if only we read the history books, if only we paid attention,

maybe we wouldn't be so surprised. Realistically, given trans positioning as gender fugitive from the state, it was never a brilliant idea to disclose trans identity to the US, and it may never be (Bey 2019). Yet the fascination of legal legibility, a red herring eclipsing generation after generation of trans activists, made such documentation changes and the gender marker "X" so alluring (Waldman 2025). Still, the writing was on the wall for the past 8 years, and well before then. Trump's meteoric rise through the ranks of Republicans, and with that, the rise of extremist Christian nationalist ideologies, had been proclaiming their hatred for the "other" loudly, whether that be undocumented immigrants, Haitians, Muslims, leftists, women, trans people, or the next discardable minority used for political gain (Levine 2020).

Queer theorists have made many attempts to explain the current rise of so-called "anti-gender" ideology. Linguistic anthropologists Rusty Barrett and Kira Hall attribute these attitudes to "indexical misrecognition" (Barrett 2024, 128), in other words, a clashing of understandings regarding gender and sexuality between those who recognize gender and sexual diversity and those who ignore it. Yet, as queer theorist Judith Butler points out in their essay *This Is Wrong*, this "misrecognition" does not happen in the void. There are vested interests at play, aiming to simplify the array of genders and sexualities into a paradigm where gametes (so-called "sex chromosomes") determine sex expression which dictates gender presentation. Each step of this false paradigm is plagued by ignorance of well-established facts, not to mention the groups of people whose mere existence disproves it. Intersex, non-binary, and otherwise transgender people exist and have existed throughout human history; erasing them from culture requires erasing them from public life. In one view, this erasure is nothing less than the state's ploy to establish hegemony over gender expression (Butler 2025; Barrett 2024).

Countless works could be made explaining the failings of opposition to Trump and to the rise of American neo-fascism. This is not such a work. This work is past conditional temporality of sorts, a “what if” from a time when expectations for queer liberation were higher, from a time when we weren’t scrambling to maintain the relative peace of the last decade (Lowe 2015). In the end, this work is a resolute plea for research into queer sexualities and consent practices. It is also a call to analyze how we research queer consent epistemologies, how we understand their origins, and what implications those epistemologies have for queer futures.

What is a Queer Consent Epistemology?

While a consent epistemology refers to the way a person learns about and understands themselves in relation to other bodies, a queer consent epistemology refers to the specific way a queer person understands their boundaries, both in sexual and social realms. This includes how that person learned (is learning) about sex, their individuality, and their boundaries. Beyond this, it is explicitly queer to center the different ways queer folks come to terms with sex. Ahmed’s concept of queer phenomenology asserts that queer people are defined by their obliqueness to mainstream space and time (Ahmed 2006). In other words, for queer people, the traditional processes of becoming a person within a culture are altered, shifted, or entirely turned on their head. The term ‘queer consent epistemology’ recognizes that the ways in which individuals understand consent *can* be different and are inherently a product of culture, leading to an alternative framework to map sexual geographies and their products.

The assertion that consent is epistemological, not definitional, is nothing new. Rather, it is the foundation of a generation of sexual violence prevention research, based on the idea that those gendered as men understand sexuality and boundaries differently than those gendered as women, taken for so long as a biological, natural *fact*.

This work is built on a few fundamental assumptions, one of which being that scientific paradigms are social constructions relative to their place in time (Kuhn 1962). Different levels of consensus between scientific communities and the public give facts their power to influence what is known to be knowledge (Foucault 1980, Latour 2005). Yet, paradigms are not the only source of knowledge. Embodied knowledge is the knowledge informed by people's life experiences, erotic desires, ancestral connections, and a myriad of other knowledge forms cast to the margins by Western science (Lorde 1978).

Embodied knowledge is essential to queer consent epistemologies, as the idea that queer people could process consent, and by extension, sexual violence, differently is not yet considered a fact. While entire journals, such as *Violence Against Women*, exist to deconstruct the causes of mainstream sexual violence, little academic work has been done to address violence in sexuality's margins (University of Kentucky 2024). Until very recently, most research produced in this continuum presented itself as definitive and representative of all sexual experience. Only recently have sexuality researchers begun acknowledging the lack of queer experience in their work (Jeffrey 2022, 2). This lack of research produced an alternative research continuum in the past twenty years, called to fruition by researcher Melanie Beres in the early 2000s (Beres et al. 2004). Webber et al. conducted a meta-analysis of the work done in this continuum in the past twenty years, published in May 2024, and identified 30 studies done that include the

experiences of GBTQ people with sex and consent. As of then, no study had been published which included the consent epistemology of any non-binary, third-gender, or two-spirit person or group, even as they were included in the search criteria.

Research on sexual consent, boundaries, and their communication is essential to violence prevention. Deconstructing the social scaffolding that enables sexual violence has long been a feminist strategy for sexual assault prevention (Braun et al. 2009; Hirsch & Khan 2020, 7). Beyond this, these studies were biased *heavily* toward cisgendered gay men with homonormative sexualities (Webber et al. 2024, 15). This work will not end in a call to continue the work of Beres et al. in the same tradition. This work will call for research that recognizes the queerness of queer consent epistemologies, namely the anti-categorical, anti-identitarian nature of queer life and queer sex. Categorical thinking is built into the structure of enough disciplines engaged in epistemological consent work that realizing this call will require more than simply ‘doing more research.’

The second foundation of this work relates to queerness and queer life. Debates on the nature of queerness transcend what I can write in this thesis. Nevertheless, I will summarize the contemporary understandings of queer life and place my arguments within that theory in following sections.

The goal of this work is to create respected facts out of the embodied knowledge flowing through queer life. While that task may not be finished with this thesis, at least it may be a stepping stone to a greater understanding of queer consent epistemologies.

Terminology and Theory

Many of the terms I use throughout this work are currently blacklisted by the CDC, NIH, among other federally-funded organizations. While typically, a section of definitions would be unnecessary given the existence of legacy resources with greater capacity to explain terminology than I, the threat of lexical erasure makes the need for such a section so prescient (Heidt 2025).

Transsexual, androgynous, trans, non-binary, two-spirit, and third gender, among others, all refer to different identities within the “transgender” umbrella, a subsection of the queer community.

Non-binary is an umbrella gender identity for any person who does not fit into a binary gender dichotomy. An array of identities may fit into the non-binary definition, from two-spirit people (a term referring to an array of North American Indigenous gender identities), people in transition between two dominant genders, androgynous people, or people who simply don't feel comfortable with a binary gender/sex designation. Depending on individual preference for identification, these identities may not always fit into the non-binary umbrella. Non-binary is an anti-categorical categorization at its root. Because of this, non-binary has troubling implications for categorical research into QCEs, since non-binary people are often accepted into traditionally masculine and feminine sexual spheres. Legal legibility is a pressing concern for many non-binary people (National Center 2016; Butler 2005).

Androgyny is a gender presentation that is neither masculine nor feminine, but something in between. Many androgynous people aim to be illegible as either man or woman. Androgynous is a gender descriptor, used like masculine or feminine (Walmsley 2021).

Gender is traditionally the social manifestation of a person's biological sex, which includes nearly every component in a person's social life. Though gender presentation is influenced by sex assigned at birth, a person's gender does not always have to align with their biological sex or sex assigned at birth (Walmsley 2021).

Sex is a biological term, referring to a combination of chromosomal makeup, hormonal balance, and the physical expression of chromosomal complements. Though dominant, XX and XY are not the only chromosomal complements. Additionally, a chromosomal complement other than XX or XY is not necessarily a disability, though it can be in some cases. Beyond this, XX or XY chromosomal complements do not always correlate to a respective female or male sex expression (Walmsley 2021; Butler 2025).

Sex assigned at birth refers to the social construction of biological sex, which informs gender presentation. Often, people born with illegible genitalia will be given surgeries to make their genitalia legible, then assigned a sex which informs their gendering. These people fit under both the intersex and trans umbrellas (Mahowald 2021; Northern Illinois University 2024).

This is a non-exhaustive list of terminology relating to gender and sexuality. I will explain others as they come up through this work.

“Queer” is the most difficult of these terms to define, as it is subject to the most debate and includes the most people.

Queer Theorizations

Queerness commonly refers to people exhibiting marginalized sexuality and gender expressions, represented by the “LGBTQ+” acronym in the US. I take issue with this acronym as it is inherently categorical and identitarian, which queer is not. Instead,

queerness is a way of being, rather than a discrete, confined identity. One of the most prominent definitions of queerness comes from scholar Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology*, where she positions queer subjects in relation to the Western colonial order, with 'queers' inherently oblique to the colonial status quo. This definition both expands and restricts the mainstream definition of queerness. It disrupts the LGBTQ+ coalitional understandings of queerness in favor of a more coherent, albeit fluid, understanding of how queerness operates in space and time (Ahmed 2006).

I take Ahmed's definition a step further to argue that queerness inherently resists categorization, and that queer politics and queer theory must stand opposed to the bureaucratization of identity (Ahmed 2006).

Plenty of theorists precede Ahmed, but one of the most notable is Michel Foucault with his *History of Sexuality*. In this work, Foucault makes a broad argument about sexuality as a largely invisible force structuring Western society. His refutation of the 'repressive hypothesis' claims that, instead of the West being sexually averse, Western social structures (and often literal physical structures) are designed to manage what sexuality exists in that space. Foucault takes an anti-identitarian stance in this work, arguing that homosexuals only understand their sexuality as inherent to their essence because of homosexuality's medicalization. This refers to the medical establishment's process of quarantining homosexuality to a few defined bodies to be cast to society's margins. All arguments made within *The History of Sexuality* work into Foucault's broader system of thought, which analyzes how power functions to produce modernity (Foucault 1976).

Following Foucault, Mario Mieli's *Towards a Gay Communism*, published in Italy a year later, provides a similar critique of Western modernity's order of sexuality.

By taking a queer Marxist view of Freudian theory, Mieli presents a comprehensive theory of queer liberation. Mieli understands queer liberation as total liberation of the masses from their repressed heterosexuality. They theorize that a process of “educastration” teaches children from an early age to repress the queer eros living within each person, and that an undoing of this process would result in total sexual liberation, moving society in a less restrictive direction. Inherent to Mieli’s theory of a gay communism is the idea that sexuality is the lynchpin of the West, and to undo the repressive structure of Western sexuality is to wholly unravel the West’s economic structure (Mieli 1977).

While Mieli presents a “relational” queer theory, meaning a theory of queer encompassing all people, there is disagreement across theorists. Anti-relational theorists, such as Leo Bersani, expressed in *Homos*, or Lee Edelman, expressed in *No Future*, argue that queers have no commitment to the mainstream social order, and any commitment to that social order should be construed as co-optational and an attempt to further diminish queer life. Bersani began queer theory’s antisocial turn, a turn emboldened by Edelman and adopted in part by Jack Halberstam. In his work, Lee Edelman argues that the image of the Child is the lynchpin of Western “reproductive futurism” (Edelman 2004, 13), which contrasts the queer against the mainstream. To Edelman, the Child represents an untainted, ‘straight’ future to the mainstream, in other words, the mainstream’s ability to reproduce itself. In a similar vein, queerness exists in childhood, in a never-ending stage of growing up. Queer time keeps queer people as childlike subjects that cannot reproduce, since children themselves cannot reproduce. To Edelman, queer subjects should embrace their failure and refuse conformity to the mainstream social order, earning the “antisocial” or “anti-relational” moniker. He

positions queer subjects towards the “death drive” instead of a reproductive future in possibly one of the gloomiest works of queer theory to date (Bersani 1996; Edelman 2004; Fontenot 2006; Caserio et al. 2006).

Edelman’s theory is a hard pill to swallow, yet not at all unfamiliar to queer culture. The death drive follows queer culture around enough that an explanation had to be made. Persistent rates of self-destructive behavior, including drug abuse, suicidality, unrealistic beauty standards, among others prevalent within the queer community, makes Bersani and Edelman’s anti-relational theory depressingly relevant.

Edelman’s engagement with the “death drive” marked a shift in queer theory. From then forth, to engage in the critically queer, theorists had to engage with queer bodies’ proximity to obliteration. Jose Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* provides some answers to this. Muñoz is a self-described “anti-anti-relationalist”, explicitly refuting Edelman when making this claim. He argues that queerness is a performance of a queer futurism, a potential “then” made “now” (Muñoz 2009, 23). Muñoz’s queer futurity is a direct rejection of Edelman’s death drive hypothesis. Muñoz argues that queer futurist performance is the key to queer’s reproduction and future. Performance, to Muñoz, gives queers agency in their fate, giving them new tools to reconstruct queer culture (Muñoz 2009). In Muñoz’s view, queer is constantly “in the horizon” (Muñoz 2009, 31). Being such, queer is less of an embodied identity and more a utopian futurist force moving through the margins. Individuals may be queer in their expression, but its transient, fugitive nature denies ‘queer’ permanence. Muñoz will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

The basis of Edelman’s positioning of “queer” against a reproductive future echoes an age-old function of homophobia which fails to recognize the biological

diversity of the queer community. Separate from legal and socialization structures, most queer people are perfectly capable of reproducing themselves, both in the biological and social-cultural sense. In fact, much of Western culture at Edelman's time was structured to *prevent* biological queer reproduction. Same-sex adoption was not permitted broadly, trans people were often expected to undergo some form of medical castration for legal gender recognition, and queer family structures were surely not mainstreamed (Open 2015; Stack 2017; Allen 2019).

Furthermore, Edelman's position in queer theory often casts Black trans experience to the side, even as Black, trans, and queer lives are inextricably intertwined (Bey 2019). How could someone from ballroom culture running with a house claim that queer can't reproduce itself? Queer kinship is and always has been a primary method of survival for queer people, and is a form of social reproduction. To accept the anti-relational thesis in its most extreme terms is to defer the means of value creation to the mainstream, condemning queer kinship's fate to the death drive. In Edelman's own words, "fuck [no]" (Edelman 2004, 35).

I follow Muñoz's lead in orienting queer life towards futurity. In moments as dark as these, the performance of queer futures are the sparks which kindle the flames leading queer's seekers out of darkness.

Queer Linguistics

Like the array of queer theorists, there is an array of anthropologists of queer life preceding this work and whose work informs my perceptions.

Kira Hall and Rusty Barrett most recently published the *Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality*, a vast review of linguistic work on sexuality, its expression,

and methods of conducting research on it (Hall and Barrett 2018). Rusty Barrett is known for his linguistics research on a variety of gay subcultures, represented best by his book *From Drag Queens to Leathermen: Language, Gender, and Gay Male Subcultures*. One particular work in this book, *Viral Loads*, describes the construction and positioning of “barebacker[s]” social and sexual identity within gay space and the mainstream. He does extensive work situating barebackers’, or gay men who seek condom-less penetrative anal sex, identities in relation to the collective trauma wreaked by the AIDS pandemic. Through this work, he discusses the culture of barebacking in gay space as countering the stigmatization of gay men’s bodily fluids. Beyond this, he theorizes forms of barebacking and associated sexual scripts as a ritual practice (Barrett 2017, 177). Barrett’s digital ethnographic methods through this work, such as his use of blogs as public documentation of sexual practice, are informative for my own work documenting discussions of consent in queer space (Barrett 2017).

Kira Hall is a linguistic anthropologist with a focus on the performance of gender and sexuality. She has written a considerable amount on the performance of Hijras, a South Asian transgender community. Specifically, in *Intertextual Sexuality*, Hall discusses Kotis’ (another South Asian transgender community) parody of Hijras’ gender performance. In concluding this work, Hall discusses queer linguistic’s grounding in communities of practice, using her work on Kotis’ “Hijra-acting” as an example of this. Hall’s work makes great contributions to future work on queer parody and camp in general (Hall 2005, 141-142).

Don Kulick is a Swedish linguist with a focus on queer linguistics. He is best known for his work *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture Among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*, which chronicles the presentation of gender and sexuality

among Travesti, a class of male-bodied transgender sex workers. Kulick describes a series of antagonisms defining Travesti life, such as that between Travesti and cisgendered women which serves to animate a series of relations in Brazilian society. Kulick's descriptions through this work help place Travesti in a group of transgender communities across the world, including Hijras, Kotis, Muxes, and Two-Spirit peoples, among others (Kulick 1998).

Tom Boellstorff is another linguist of queer life. Boellstorff's work largely focuses on the speech of Indonesian gay males, known as 'Bahasa Gay.' In his work, *Gay Language and Indonesia: Registering Belonging*, he argues that *bahasa gay* sometimes indexes a gay identity, though other times, it registers national belonging by its 'hip' connotation within the Indonesian mainstream. This gives the speakers of *bahasa gay* great flexibility when operating in Indonesian society/ies (Boellstorff 2004, 263-264). Boellstorff also published a guide to conducting digital ethnography, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (2024), which I pull from for my methods in the third chapter.

Coming Next

Through this work, I present a theory of queer consent epistemologies (QCEs) built on this theory of queer life. I assert that QCEs, or the expressions and understandings of consent deployed and received by queer people, are a product of the liminal sexuality taking place in queer space. I will explain in much greater context what a liminal sexuality is next chapter, but concisely, it is sexuality that shouldn't be happening in a space that shouldn't exist by the standards of the white mainstream. I will explore this and its connections to queer futurity in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three,

I will explore the products of liminal sexualities, or QCEs, through a digital ethnography. The digital ethnography will focus on consent in cruising spaces, a very particular form of liminal sexuality, simply because that is the most spectacular, theoretically useful, and one I can write most truthfully about. In Chapter Four I will propose a series of workshops to address QCEs and to engage queer people in thinking critically about consent and futurity. The workshops' goals are not to facilitate top-down instruction on consent's mechanics. Instead, they aim to situate queer consent practices as a performance of queer futurism and to provide participants with strategies to counter fetishization. Chapter Five, the final chapter, gathers my conclusions and explores directions for future work on QCEs.

Chapter Two: Liminal Sexualities

What is a liminal sexuality?

A “liminal sexuality” is the term I propose to describe the specific sexual configurations which produce Queer Consent Epistemologies (QCE). There is a lot to unpack in this claim. A QCE refers to the way consent is understood among a group of people whose erotic subjectivities develop, at least partially, in queer space and time and relative to their respective sexual sphere (Halberstam 2005).

It is important to emphasize that by ‘queer sexualities’ I am referring to the practice and space, not an identity held by individuals. While homosexual affect (i.e. the limp wrist, the lilt in a femme’s voice) is employed by gay men, gay men do not hold a monopoly on the sexual scripts and cultures employed in gay sexuality (Simon 2003, 491). Instead, they exist within a sexual sphere with non-binary and otherwise trans bodies moving fluidly through their sphere among others. Highlighting the relationship between sexual space, practice, and person is essential for this work because that is how sexuality takes place. In total, liminal sexuality refers to the sexuality that, by dominant standards, shouldn’t be happening in spaces or social formations that shouldn’t exist, at least by cisgendered and heterosexual logic.

Production of Liminal Space

Liminal spaces are littered across urban space, descendant from legacies of urban renewal and revolving gentrification processes long afflicting the Black and Brown life within (Pérez 2002). Scholar Liza Kim Jackson refers to gentrification not as a novel form of colonialism specific to urban centers, but as the continued process of colonization of Indigenous and Black communities turned inwards (Jackson 2013). This

altered understanding of gentrification and urban renewal places urban infrastructure in histories of colonialism instead of allowing urban geographies to remain an ahistorical actor unconsciously shaping urban life. In short, redlining, urban renewal, and gentrification processes play key roles in where sexuality takes place in the city.

While architecture and urban planning may consciously dictate the boundaries of sex, like when it defines the boundaries of the private bedroom, history subconsciously dictates where queer public sexualities are possible (Preciado 2012). This is crucial to understand why in New York, Prospect Park rather than Central Park is the more popular cruising ground, or why Amsterdam's red light districts are in constant flux. While every city carries a different history and culture shaping specific gentrification processes, gentrification mars cities as a condition of imperial capitalism nonetheless (Sunkata 2021).

Cities operate like a clock, with gentrification processes working as their gears, creating havens for the wealthy and displacing pre-existing populations to the harsher, more industrial, and more dilapidated parts of cities. Liminal space is created in the places left behind by the gears of the city's workings.

New York's last half century of development demonstrates this process. Before AIDS, the West Side Piers, now the site of upscale restaurants and a highly securitized park, was a central site for cruisers and sex workers. The legacy of the Piers traces through popular culture today, as the acclaimed TV show *POSE* chronicles the community on the Piers (Murphy 2018). Preceding *POSE*, writer Samuel R. Delany researched and wrote about the social-sexual networks developed in New York before AIDS and through the late '90s. He documents how Giuliani's campaign to close Times Squares' porn theatres, the gentrification of the West Side Piers, and the closure of other

institutions of public sex shuttered a uniquely queer social-sexual connection in the city (Delany 1999). This led to a corporatization of Times Square, where these sites were replaced by ‘family-friendly’ venues like the Disney store. It created a culture where white suburbanites could take a train or bus into the city, see a show, shop at the M&M’s store, and never interact with a working person from New York. Instead, they receive a sanitized, imaginary version of New York, one produced entirely by corporate marketing teams and packaged for the middle class (Muñoz 78, 2009).

This flip side of this process is illustrated even more so by the gay bar and strip club Magic Touch, a venue catered towards the Jackson Heights queer community in post-Giuliani New York. With Giuliani’s regulations against sexuality, the only places venues like Magic Touch could operate were industrial areas, areas that are both prone to higher rates of anti-queer violence and difficult to access via public transportation (Woods 2003; Muñoz 2009, 83).

Yet, these spaces persevered. Now, in the post-COVID era, public queer sexuality has undergone a sort of renaissance. Specifically in New York, the last vestiges of the cruising culture that once was are growing. The Eagle, a cruise-y gay leather bar in Hell’s Kitchen, is expanding while numerous other gay nightlife spaces open nearby (Zeiba 2022). New apps, like Sniffies or Grindr, serve as digital sexual technologies, facilitating public sexuality in ever-increasing numbers (ibid). Spaces of queer public sexuality not only persevere, they evolve with the times.

In essence, New York queers were given two options: exist in liminal space at the city’s margins or be relegated to the private sphere (Wilson 2024; Muñoz 2009, 79; Delany 1999). It also must be said, while this section focuses on evolving cruising cultures in New York, similar patterns can be observed in San Francisco, Seattle, and

other hubs of urban gay life. Later in this chapter I will discuss more of these cruising technologies and the different queer sexualities they enable.

Why Liminal?

I refer to these spaces as liminal in two senses. First, to emphasize the dissonance between how the spaces are valued. In queer terms, these spaces are deeply valuable as they are where queer social-sexual connection and solidarities may be formed. Yet, in a mainstream view, these spaces are at best glossed over and, most often, cast as dangers to society. The second justification for 'liminal' is to emphasize the transformative power of the sexuality taking place here. The queering of space through public sexuality makes that place one where utopian, queer, and futurist social relations can be imagined. Thus, physically established spaces of queer sexuality, such as the bathhouse or the sex club, ingrain those ethoses, become nodes of resistance to the hegemonic order of western sexuality (Muñoz 2009; Herrera 2024). Yet, how are these queer spaces liminal in the anthropological sense?

Ritual Elements of Queer Public Sexuality

If queer sexual spaces are places where performances of queer futures can take place, they are microcosms with the goal of impacting the macrocosm, i.e. how society *should be* (Tavárez 2024, 3). In essence, they are not only sites of queer performance, they are, in part, ritual performance. Understanding them as such gives new framing to analyze these sites as producers of queer consent epistemologies. In *The Forest of Symbols*, anthropologist Victor Turner explains his understanding of liminality through an ethnography of Ndembu ritual practice. In this, he found liminality is part of ritual

performance which produces *communitas*, or the feeling arising from a collective lack of social structure, also known as anti-structure (Turner 1975).

To Turner, *communitas* happens in ‘anti-structure’, similar to queer life as a whole. To Muñoz, queer life is a performance of a utopian future in the horizon, happening opposed to the social structures of the mainstream. In this view, a queer performance is inherently a fugitive performance, constantly shifting, running from mainstream forces aiming to co-opt and consolidate the futures queer life beholds. This begs the question, if queer is a form of anti-structure, what is *communitas* in queer’s horizon? (Turner 1975; Muñoz 2009)

Arguably, much of queer social life is defined by the feeling of *communitas*. In this vein, many queer subcultures, from the punk scene to drag performance, can be analyzed as sites of ritual performance, and thus, of liminality.

This claim is complicated by queer’s anti-identitarian nature. To rectify this, we must revisit Muñoz’s queer. To him, no person is the ‘essence’ of queer. Instead, queer is a utopian force, lingering in the horizon. The people we know as ‘queer’ are performers of this future, fleeting as it may be. Queer’s most loyal devotees constantly chase this future, attempting to sustain the utopian ethos queer life promises, only to be disappointed as its futurist performance falls through their hand’s grasp.

Anthropologist Sarah Haggard solidifies her understanding of Turner’s theory of ritual in her work *Communitas Revisited*, where she identifies three manifestations of *communitas* present in Turner’s work: existential, normative, and ideological. For these purposes, her analysis of “ideological” *communitas* is the most useful. In her words, she claims:

“‘ideological’ *communitas* is used to analyse utopian simulations exhibiting existential *communitas*. This echoes the desire to experience *communitas*, the longing to stay within it, and the inevitable inability to do so. Ideological *communitas* expresses an element of social systems that aspire to achieve unattainable utopia. It describes how people ‘may best live together in comradely harmony’ (Turner and Turner, [1978] 2011: 122), but the transience of *communitas* means that attempts to permanently sustain it fail.” (Haggart 2024)

Muñoz’s queer and Turner’s *communitas* (via Haggart) share a lot, especially considering neither mention each other. Both, in essence, are performances of an impermanent social order. Under this set of ideas, queer performance is, by definition, ritual performance, giving us a more expansive toolkit to analyze liminal sexualities. Queer public sexualities are undoubtedly queer performances in all of their manifestations. They require their participants to ‘look’ for the cracks in the structure of the mainstream to facilitate their separation from what ‘should’ be happening in that public space. After the act, cruisers separate, reintegrating themselves into respectable society (Muñoz 2009; Turner 1967; Haggart 2024). By a traditional Turnerian definition of ritual performance, cruising practice does fail to meet the criteria of an official ritual performance, considering Turner understood ritual practice as “prescribed formal behavior.” Thus, I am not arguing cruising is a ritual in the strictest sense; I am arguing it carries elements of ritual performance, including the creation of *communitas*.

While the fields of ritual and queer performance are very different disciplines, Muñoz’s work in performance studies could serve as a useful conduit for ritual language scholars to analyze queer performance as ritual language.

A Crisis in Consent

The orientation of a queered *communitas* toward futurity can be used to better understand consent epistemologies broadly. Yet, before engaging in that work, we must analyze how consent epistemologies are understood now. One note: by ‘cishet consent epistemology’ I refer to a system of thought where sexual assault is imagined to an issue between cisgendered, heterosexual men and women. This epistemology is often applied to homonormative gay men by applying feminine characteristics to the ‘bottom’ and masculine characteristics to the ‘top’, although there are issues with that. When applied to trans or other queer sexual spheres, the logic behind this epistemology falls apart.

The criminal proceedings of the high-profile cases inspiring the #MeToo movement, along with others before, influenced the mainstream public’s understanding of consent. The context of a courtroom as a place to publicly ‘prove’ whether or not consent was freely given for cases of sexual assault provides a veneer of false objectivity. As Featherman et al. describes in *Sexual Consent and Its Contexts*, cases of sexual assault in courtrooms are not only rare due to the vast underreporting of assault, they are litigated under the heteronormative and rigidly masculine confines of the law (Featherman et al. 2023). The cases of Anita Hill, of the victims of Donald Trump, Harvey Weinstein, and others demonstrate this pattern quite clearly. In this vein, movements following #MeToo have resulted in troubling theoretical movements. Epistemological consent researchers like Nicole Jeffrey and philosophers of consent like Alisa Kessel are pushing for a movement away from consent as a site to organize sexual violence politics (Kessel 2020, Jeffrey 2022). This follows work by feminist sexuality philosopher Catherine Mackinnon who argues power and authority are deeply

influential to determining consensuality in sex. While I don't aim to refute analyses of power and sex, this move is troubling because it relies entirely on a cishet consent epistemology with seldom acknowledgment that non-cishet people even exist. In *Rape Redefined*, Mackinnon solidifies this consent epistemology by declaring as the first sentence that "Rape is a crime of gender inequality" (Mackinnon 2017, 431). While rape is certainly a tool used by the patriarchy to solidify the gender structure, declaring it a crime of "gender inequality" recalls a trans-exclusionary and white-centered mode of feminist organization. In this piece, sexual assaults of or between men are cast aside as statistical minorities, while transgender people are left out of the picture entirely, even as they report the highest rates of sexual assault victimization for any group (ibid, 431, Flores et al. 2020). Similarly, any mention of Blackness and sexual assault is relegated to the footnotes.

While I use Mackinnon because of her public profile, but this critique of current consent politics can be applied to the field at large. Her conclusions about the nature of consent make logical sense from her positionality as a cishet white woman, but they are far from objective, even as they are presented as such. Upsetting the cishet consent epistemology applied by Mackinnon is necessary for any research into the linguistics of queer consent.

Extensive analyses have been conducted of the sexual relations between cishet men and women, with broad theories of consent emerging from such studies. Far fewer studies have been conducted on any sexuality outside the mainstream, as shown by Webber et al.'s meta-analysis conducted in 2024. They found that only 30 studies had been conducted in the 20 years between the first study of a queer consent epistemology (conducted by Beres et al. 2004) and 2024. Further, most studies centered cisgender

gay men as study subjects. Very few included trans people of any sort, and no study included a third-gender, non-binary, or two-spirit subject, even as those genders are critical in the formation of any queer space. I must note that Webber et al. did not include lesbians or bisexual women in their search criteria, leaving a key demographic out.

Studies on queer consent epistemologies have been conducted since Webber et al., but not nearly enough to fill the gap in the literature, and nowhere near the amount needed to back up some of the grand claims of consent researchers of mainstream consent epistemology would like to make.

In total, we have a crisis in consent. In one view, political theorists such as Mackinnon relegate queer experience to the margins of consent discussions. While it is easy to levy blame on this field of researchers, the broader problem is that there is very little research on queer consent epistemologies exists in the first place. What experience are these theorists to draw from?

This brings us back to the question of the courtroom. The image of the courtroom exists in the West as a place to litigate mainstream society's most pressing challenges. In liberal society, the structural sexual assault of cis het women is one of them, where high-profile cases inform the mainstream's understanding of their own sexuality (i.e. their erotic subjectivity). Yet, in a culture where the male body is constructed to be impervious to assault, where Black bodies are 'violent', where the trans body is non-existent, where are the politics of our sexualities litigated? What informs our consent epistemology?

In part, the sphere of queer public sexuality. The public nature of cruising culture lends it an anarchic regulatory function governing at least a section of the queer

sexuality unrecognized by the image of the courtroom (Herrera 2024, 63-66; Gonzalez and Patterson-Rosso 2024).

Questions of utopia

With the mention of utopia and queer futurism, I must make the disclaimer. I reject abstract utopian ideology, ideas that present grand visions of what *should be* without a path to achieve them. This is not to be confused with futurisms from the margins, such as Afrofuturism or queer futurism, which can be understood as embodied utopias, enacted in little ways through everyday actions (i.e. the quotidian). Through this work, I refer to queer sexuality, often enacted in public, as utopian queer performance. I mean this in the sense of queer futurism, or the performance of a possible utopian future (Muñoz 2009).

The greatest site of abstract utopia is the past. As established by anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, history is produced for certain interests at a given time. Silences enter at four specific points: in what gets archived, how the archive is arranged, what gets pulled from the archive to produce narratives, and the final interpretation of the written narrative (Trouillot 1995, 52). While this process is clearly relevant to historians, it also applies to communities on the margins when interpreting our own histories. Gay men have specific intentions and frameworks when imagining a pre-AIDS past, shaped by the mass death AIDS inflicted on the community. Seeing that cruising and its derivatives are the specific practices targeted and stigmatized in the height of AIDS, constructing a pre-AIDS cruising utopia comes naturally. Mieli's theory of gay communism through mass sexual liberation seemed to be enacted through cruising

culture in these times (Mieli 1980). In the face of AIDS, the not-so-distant past became utopia.

While completely understandable, this is a dangerous fallacy, especially paired with the current rise of cruising and its derivatives. When an act becomes an act of quotidian revolution, it amasses the potential to escape critique as critique could harm the progress the act makes in changing society at large. While I agree with Mieli and Muñoz that queer public sexualities *could* be an act of quotidian revolution, there is still great potential for harm. Beyond this, part of the revolutionary potential of cruising comes in its rearranging of human relationality. Queer public sexualities are inherently social and sexual, and existing in complicated space, requiring queer actors to chart new paths. Specifically, the consent manifestations within cruising space are of particular concern. Cruising space is diverse in character, ranging from noisy darkrooms to parks where silence is required for safety. Each complicates the mechanics of how consent is traditionally communicated, meaning actors in the space rely on unique consent practices to maintain a healthy sexual space. One such practice, the ‘triple-tap’, signals a withdrawal of consent in situations where speech isn’t possible (Wheeler 2025; Herrera 2024). Others rely heavily on body-language indicators, requiring a level of empathy for consent’s communication to be maintained through a sexual act. The requirement of two (or more) people to be constantly aware of each other forces a different mode of relationality, marking the utopian potential of these consent epistemologies.

In Muñoz’s view, cruising has the seeds to defeat movements towards queer anti-relationality (Muñoz 2009). Its existence, cruising’s sexual negotiations have the potential not only to change how we think of consent but how we think of our relationships as a whole. With modernity has come a push to replace relationships with

processes that guarantee results, yet, with each relationship we replace, we lose a little more of what it means to be human (Ahmed 2021). Queer relationality is a lived, concrete alternative to modernity's steamrolling of human relationality.

Cruising

Cruising, a spectre of queer masculine antiquity, resurrects itself as I write. Cruising's potential, both for utopian liberation as many queer theorists would assert, and for assault and victimization leave it as a key site of study for consent epistemologies. The 'gayborhood', originating in the cracks of mainstream urban life, was the site of many common cruising locations in most American cities. Numerous authors, from Samuel Delany to George Chauncey, chronicle the role cruising practice had in facilitating social-sexual connections in urban space before and after the AIDS pandemic (Delany 1999; Chauncey 1995).

There is no agreed-upon definition of cruising. Even describing it as a uniquely homosexual practice is contested, as author Alex Espinoza explores in his work, as he points out that cruising with cars among heterosexual men carries similar attributes to cruising for sex (Espinoza 2019). He argues that car cruising, by nature, is sexual for heteromale people, and that the process of 'looking' is nearly the same. Espinoza goes further to highlight that what makes gay men's cruising for sex unique is limited solely to their gayness and the lack of mainstream social infrastructure for the practice. Heterosexual men employ similar tactics to homosexual men in bars among other places for sex. This also assumes that the mainstream and peripheral spaces are contained within themselves, that no person transgresses the boundaries between either, a fact

that relies on false dichotomies of gender and sexuality (Espinoza 2019; Butler 1990; Mieli 1980).

For the mind's archive to group the heterosexual's cruising in bars and the homosexual's cruising in bathrooms in different locations, and for it to maintain that these acts are dichotomous in nature, a much broader scaffolding must be in place. It must be maintained that the homosexual and the heterosexual are two mutually exclusive bodies, conducting two mutually exclusive sexual endeavors. This dichotomy also relies on a code of civil public conduct, to which public society is facilitated by and for the heterosexual, while the queer's sexuality is only "civil" when invisible. Legality and morality become one in this view, and the mere possibility of valuable queer social-sexual networks being formed by the queer's sexuality in public is washed away.

As mentioned before, a focus on the individual instead of the practice betrays us. I imagine both forms of 'looking' to be a type of cruising, with the only difference being where each happens. The mainstream (assumed to be white) man's search for sex happens within the center, with little chance to lose the status that man holds. In tandem with other men of power, his 'quest' likely bolsters his social power. The mainstream man's form of cruising is further complicated by the power he wields over his sexual subjects.

I mention heterosexual 'cruising' not to center it by any means, but to disrupt the 'stink' lingering around cruising as a whole. In the wake of AIDS and its aftermath, "cruising" is still considered a uniquely gay male practice.

Cruising's Derivatives

Cruising can be simplified down to the art of looking for sex, and considering that and the social structures that it entails, we can investigate a range of spaces vested in gay cruising, which I refer to as “cruising’s derivatives.” Other authors discuss cruising as a culture, lumping in all of the derivatives into one term. While I agree it is a culture, I find it analytically useful to specify which of cruising’s derivatives we are discussing, considering each has different boundary mediation strategies.

Cruising’s derivatives are plenty. The architecture of gay bathhouses or saunas often includes “mazes” designed to encapsulate cruising practice into a safer, restricted environment (Wilson 2024; Holmes 2007). In the digital realm, queer masculine hookup app “Grindr” was originally designed to digitize cruising culture, streamlining the process of “looking” (Jaque 2022). Other apps, like Sniffies, are designed to assist the process of physical cruising instead of digitizing it (Zeiba 2022). As opposed to Grindr’s grid display, Sniffies displays active users on a map with their locations placed as a 10-foot circle around their physical location. As I will discuss later, both apps overlay digital geographies upon the sociosexual configuration of the “gayborhood” of the ‘80s with varied implications (Jaque 2022).

While the act of cruising among gay men is understood as a strictly physical activity, the cruising *process*, or cruising’s derivatives, are analytically useful tools to investigate consent epistemologies broadly.

Digital Cruising via Grindr

Grindr is a geolocational hookup app initially designed to replicate gay men’s cruising culture (Jaque 2022). The app displays the nearest users’ profiles on a grid

structure, with ads laced in between profiles. Users can choose to put a profile picture, their name, a range of physical and sexual identifiers, including “tribe”, or what body/sexual type they fall into, kinks, among others. Users can choose to display their proximity by foot to other users. Full nudity is not permitted for profile pictures, though users frequently test the limits of this rule as the only thing seemingly not in profile pictures is penises, and even then... creativity abounds.

The layout of Grindr assists the user in imagining a geography of potential connections layered atop the physical landscape. As gay populations are concentrated in urban environments, typically within ‘gayborhoods’, the presentation of profiles changes with place. In a rural or suburban area, one is more likely to come across “DL” profiles, or those of users wishing to keep their identity secret, profiles of ‘str8’ or ‘homosocial’ users, and profiles without pictures. In neighborhoods with concentrated gay populations, users more often maintain polished profiles with better lighting, longer descriptions, and less abrasive language.

The 255-character profile description is a site to display privilege. The wealthier, whiter gayborhood has fleshed out bios and identifiable pictures as a status symbol of sorts, flaunting security in identity. This is a trademark of the masculine gay elite, otherwise referred to as the ‘dominant imprint’, as they signal mental, physical, and financial stability to onlookers (Muñoz 2009, 82). The ‘dominant imprint’ is named as such for the cultural force they exert over the rest of the queer community. White, muscular, hypermasculine men of some financial privilege who aspire to some level of homonormativity are a cultural object of sorts, serving as a totem for the rest of the community. By tracking the movements of the ‘dominant imprint’, one can locate the ‘center’ of gay life and space.

Grindr is used for a variety of purposes, though primarily to facilitate digital hookup culture. Its users use it for networking, as a dating site, to sell drugs, to find housing, to sell sex, for mutual aid networks, and a variety of other purposes (Filice et al. 2019). Community-building on Grindr is difficult due to the type of connections the app facilitates. The format only allows 1-on-1 connections, as the group chat feature has been under maintenance the past year with little sign of return. Grindr also does not have any sort of community board feature that other apps use to maintain local digital histories.

While gay men remains a prominent force, the app is not restricted to them. Grindr has self-identification options for nearly a very wide range of sexualities and genders, including Muxe, Hijras, Agender people, and far more. The app is also used by trans men and women alike, and facilitates “t4t” connections (trans for trans). While self-identification as trans opens users up to harassment and discrimination, the app has many features to protect users from harm, such as a blocking feature which deletes all chats, a reporting feature, the ability to withdraw location services at any time, and very loose requirements about what information users are required to put on their profiles.

In *Grindr Archiurbanism*, architect-turned-anthropologist Andres Jaque documents how Grindr came to replace the sociosexual fabric of the gayborhood. While before Grindr, the gayborhood was a tapestry of queer-owned bars, friendly landlords, support centers, among others spaces, the past twenty years brought sweeping change (Jaque 2016; Puar 2007). This change intersected with the digital age, where much of the function the gayborhood filled could be met online, leading to erosion of the physical gayborhood (Wilson 2024). Now, we live in a time of both/and. The gayborhood of the

'70s is a ghost of what once was, and remnants of the geographies once defining it served as the seeds for a novel, digitized way to fill the social function the physical space once served (Derrida 1978). I will discuss Grindr and the profile structure in greater depth next chapter.

Sniffies

If Grindr is a digital fabric laid over the social-sexual contours of the gayborhood, Sniffies is the map of its contours. This claim must be situated in each app's centers and margins. If the polished, whiter, denser, fleshed-out bios of Grindr are the center, then the DLs, homosocials, and sparsely populated rural areas are Grindr's margins. Sniffies' map layout centers on popular cruising spots, so naturally, Grindr's and Sniffies' centers differ.

Sniffies released its iOS in February of 2025, and since then its usership has exploded (Rodriguez 2025). Unlike Grindr, Sniffies asks if users are "real cruisers." Sniffies does allow fully nude photos, with the only restriction being that they must be of only the user. Sniffies also has "community boards" at popular cruising sites for cruisers to exchange tips about past police presences, location, and more. Additionally, Sniffies allows users to organize both map-displayed and invite-only groups. The most defining feature of Sniffies is the locator icon, which places users' profiles in an approximately 10-foot radius of their physical location. Because of this, using the app at home is implicitly discouraged, though there is the potential to organize private hookups with the app.

While Sniffies' user interface lags behind Grindr's design, Sniffies' community board feature presents a significant benefit. Not only can community members identify

particular cruising spots, they can post tips on how to best avoid security presence to other cruisers. People can post their locations, past experiences, and much else on the community boards. While often, this turns into a cesspool of nudity, it can also serve as a form of community memory for future cruisers.

A quick minute on the app shows how different Sniffies' digital culture is than Grindr's. Even in the most cosmopolitan gayborhoods, far fewer users have profile pictures with a face or fleshed-out description. It's not a far stretch to say that because of the map-location function, users are far more aware of their vulnerability on the app, leading far fewer to publish identifiable information. Culturally, this could work to level the playing field, as many potential indicators of whiteness and wealth are removed. The relative emphasis on anonymous, find-out-when-you-get-there hookups levels the playing ground further. This is not to say there aren't places for class or racial indicators to implicate interactions, or to present Sniffies as a digital utopia by *any* means. The app is predicated on an assumption of masculinity impacting every relation that happens within. Beyond this, the private 1:1 messages and purchasable privacy options give users plenty of opportunities for racial, classed, gendered, and other identifiers to work into interactions.

On Sniffies, anonymity is purchasable. The "Sniffies Plus" option is a monthly subscription which allows users to hide their location, start group chats, see read receipts, use "travel mode" (allows users to view outside their 50-mile range), among other features. Without more research produced on the app, or at least interviews, it is difficult to pick apart how the creation of two user classes (plus and free version) impacts how sexuality happens beyond what is readily clear, like that any group started on Sniffies was started by a 'Plus' user.

The culture of semi-anonymous cruising facilitated by Sniffies lends itself to the social-sexual queer network formation described by both Delany and Muñoz. The ability for a cruiser to post their location, attracting an array of local cruisers has the potential to serve the same function as the former porn theatres of Times Square (Delany 1999). It temporarily queers the space, allows for those participating to build a temporary community, and perform a queer future for that time. Conditions of anonymity typically refer to the severance of the queer space created by the cruising event from the cruiser's "real life." It doesn't imply the cruisers will never see each other again, only if they see each other in a heterosexual space, they must ignore the other as if they never met. Yet, in queer space, the social-sexual network is maintained (Herrera 2024).

Through Sniffies, in parks, bathrooms, gym lockers, and parking lots, a form of queer futurity is performed by people and in places who may never imagine themselves to be queer. If Grindr is positioned the destruction of the gayborhood's social-sexual networks in the advent of the digital age, Sniffies can be understood as those networks' recombination; a bricolage of the networks that once were in digital space.

Given the reality of the spaces, imagining many connections on Grindr and Sniffies as coming from a utopian consent epistemology is difficult. The mechanisms of the space which these digital cultures operate within provide another level of separation, preventing a more empathetically engaged consent epistemology online. Instead, they function for many as conduits to physical connection.

All too often in queer space, people's bodies are commodified, turned into a way for the other to "get off" instead of liberation embodied in flesh, or even human. When people are commodified and fetishized, both the commodifier and commodified are

alienated from the once-liberatory potential of the good they were sold (Marx 1867). In this case, that good is the body, and that body is a site of sexual transaction. In the next chapter I will expand on how the digital geographies of the gayborhood facilitates the process of self-commodification and fetishization. I will also use this chapter to explore different expressions of consent across the digital realm.

Chapter Three: Digital Geographies

The last chapter aimed to establish queer consent epistemologies in theoretical space: as a product of liminal sexualities in a process with ritual elements. This chapter aims to do two things. First, it will continue that theoretical lift disillusioned from the utopia defining *Liminal Sexualities*. This chapter will argue that the cruising space is plagued by networks of body commodification, fetishization, and alienation from queer utopian performances of sexuality (in that order). Second, this chapter will bolster that argument with a digital ethnography of queer sexual space, including material from reddit and Grindr. Building on descriptions offered in the last chapter, this evidence hopes to paint a picture of queer public sexual space and consent that nuances the utopian view offered by many theorists (Delany 1999, Mieli 1980; Muñoz 2009).

I will start with a discussion of body commodification and fetishization to frame the digital ethnographic material, using the theories of Appadurai, Marx, and Lowe, among others. Then, dispersed between the sources, I will situate the networks of fetishization within the histories of commodity production informing them.

Body Commodification

In *The Social Life of Things*, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai argues that objects, like people, have social lives and networks of connections beyond the mundane meanings we ascribe to them (Appadurai 1986). This point is furthered by Bruno Latour in *Reassembling the Social*, to a moment where the social life of a “thing” has become an essential tool of anthropologists (Latour 2005). The push to socialize non-human objects stems from a foundational tenet in anthropology to render every fact of life human so that we may understand each other in fully human terms. I include this not as

a critique of the field, but to draw a contrast between anthropology's ideals and the lives we live now. Opposed to humanizing subjects, the digital ethnographic evidence through this chapter aims to illuminate the ways the human is objectified, commodified, and fetishized in the production of the queer male's sexual sphere.

In Marxist terms, as consumerism unfolds, the consumer becomes increasingly alienated from the liberatory promise of the good they were sold. This is the process of consumerism. Yet, to produce commodities on a scale so broad, the worker must also be commodified. This manifests in many aspects of the worker's existence, where they must sell themselves on job marketplaces, performing a derivative, employable self of who they know themselves to be (Marx 1867; Klein 2023).

In *Doppelganger: A Trip Into the Mirror World*, philosopher Naomi Klein explores the idea of a derivative self in greater depth. Through the book, she explores a world through the lens of her digital doppelganger, Naomi Wolf. Wolf is Klein's doppelganger both in the traditional sense (they are mutually confused with the other) and in a digital sense. Both of their digital profiles exist in a "hyperreality", or digital space understood to be more real than the physical world. Online, Klein also has her digital double, or a derivative of her actual person expressed through her online activity over the years (Klein 2023, 54). She takes this concept of a digital 'self' further to explore the 'doubles' we create in other facets of life, like in workout spaces where an idealized image of one's self is used to motivate the physical self into a culture of 'self-improvement'. This concept of the 'body-double' can be extended to employment spheres, where workers produce "safe for work" selves for the employer's gaze, or even dating apps, where users package their romantic and/or sexual identities into compact profiles for the suitable other (ibid 54, 164-165).

While Klein explains the body double as a modern packaging tool for body commodification practices, the roots of body commodification can be traced back to chattel slavery, where Black bodies were bought and sold as literal commodities. In *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, theorist Lisa Lowe argues that slavery is not a system that was abruptly ended in America in 1863; instead, it was transformed through varying labor practices, namely indentured servitude and wage labor (Lowe 2015). Theorists Angela Davis and Saidiya Hartman highlight the legality of slavery in the prison system. This fact, coupled with the mass incarceration of Black and Brown bodies highlights how slavery was never abolished in full (Davis 2003; Hartman 2008). With this framing, we can begin to argue that body commodification is not simply a byproduct of an ahistorical capitalism, it is an inevitable fact of life in the afterlife of chattel slavery. Building on this among other factors, a queered, Marxed, and inverted reading of Appadurai tells us that the body of the object's consumer also becomes commodified, opening new routes for commodity fetishization of bodies on the margins. This is the context for what I refer to as 'body commodification.'

Sociologist Chris Shilling discusses 'bodies as commodities' in his book *The Body* by connecting extreme practices like modern slavery, human trafficking, and organ farming, to the subtler, more acceptable ways we market ourselves in modern society. Through this, Shilling argues, extreme commodification of bodies sets the standard for what freedoms may be slowly sacrificed in the wealthier Western sphere (Shilling 2016). A similar idea was first communicated in the conception of the "imperial boomerang," advanced by Martiniquais philosopher Aimé Césaire. This concept emphasizes how the repressive tactics normalized in the empire's periphery (the colonies) will eventually be turned against citizens of the imperial core as a form of social control (Césaire 1950).

This framework is complex, as imperial cores and peripheries are relative to each other. In an American context, the peripheries are not just American colonies such as Puerto Rico, Diego Garcia, or Guam. Borderlands, ghettos, and other marginalized spaces within the American homeland are subject to greater surveillance and state-social control.

Anthropologist Jasbir Puar documents a form of the imperial boomerang happening in *Terrorist Assemblages*. In Puar's view, in the wake of 9/11, a pernicious social calculus was conducted where "well-behaved" gays and lesbians, and potentially, conforming transsexuals, were given the tools of advancement within liberal society in exchange for a mass relinquishing of freedoms to the state. In 2003, a year after the PATRIOT act was passed, consensual sex between males was legalized. Years later, in 2010, the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' military policy was repealed on the same day that the DREAM Act was temporarily halted (Puar 2017, 227). Puar argues that the liberal social calculus required the reanimation of a common villain through history, the Muslim "terrorist" (which expanded in Trump times to include the 'immigrant') (ibid, 228), so homosexuals, and later, transsexuals, would have to be "saved" by the paternalist state and gifted rights. Yet, to defend the 'fragile' homo- and transsexuals from the 'terrorist', the state must surveil the population en masse. In this example, Puar identifies movement in the 'core' and 'peripheral' populations. The events following 9/11 provided an opportunity for homonormative and homonationalist gays to become part of the core at the expense of American rights overall. Yet, for this to happen, all American citizens (especially Muslims and immigrants) were subjected to the same surveillance practices made common in the Middle East by Western powers under the guise of 'counterterrorism' (ibid, 153-154). To this end, Puar describes the imperial boomerang's

return not just in the form of technological repression with increased surveillance, but also in the form of social repression, enacted by the creation of ‘acceptable’ social categories for homonormative/homonationalist gays.

In total, the dominant imprint’s sexuality (and by extension, everyone else’s) can be understood as a thing to be marketed for sale, a claim shaped both by the history of chattel slavery and the imperial boomerang’s return. I explain body commodification and the imperial boomerang in such length as part of a Marxist conception of fetishization, that commodification and objectification precedes fetishization. Beyond this, sexuality’s specificities cannot be separated from the historical flows shaping it. The afterlives of slavery, colonization, and the ongoing imperial domination of global southern regions have influence on the way we understand our sexualities in empire’s core.

Last chapter, *Liminal Sexualities*, painted a utopian scene of queer public sexuality that does not reflect the reality of what cruising and its derivatives function as. Far from liberated, bathhouses, darkrooms, among others are filled with networks of fetishization, giving cruising a horrible reputation. Physical cruising fares even worse (Gthrowg 2025). So what went wrong? Is Muñoz wrong about the liberatory potential of queer public sexuality?

Through this chapter, I will use ethnographic evidence gathered from digital space to add nuance to the conception of queer public sexuality established thus far. While maintaining the space’s liberatory potential, I will argue that modern body commodification and fetishization processes alienate queer sexual subjects from the liberatory potential of queer sexualities.

Notes on Digital Ethnographic Methods

This work, like all of queer theory, is deeply subjective. I am presenting evidence to illustrate an understanding of queer life and consent. While I offer theory and additional studies to situate these observations, nothing I say in this work claims to be objectively or permanently accurate. Instead, I am painting a picture in time to develop an understanding of queer consent epistemologies.

Digital ethnography is a particular choice to study queer consent epistemologies, notably because people choose what to and what not to make available in the digital sphere. Beyond that, the digital sphere comprises a near-infinite array of sources, from corporate-mainstream media sources to public and private discussion space. Before each site of study, I will explain the particular features that make the site unique along with its barriers to entry. The evidence I present here is a curated snapshot of online discussions of QCEs as a whole.

My ethnographic methods for this chapter, and for this work at large, include multiple ‘points of entry’ to the field. Before listing those, narrowing down the ‘field’ in question is important. In a thesis on QCEs, the goal is to produce thoughts on queer sexuality, something that typically happens in private space, even with spaces of public sexuality. To some extent, the ‘field’ is the metaphorical bedroom where queer sexualities take place, though my research is not interested in exploiting the intricacies or mechanics of queer sex.

Instead, following one of anthropologist Nick Seaver’s suggested approaches in *An Anthropology of Algorithms*, I search for multiple entry points, multiple places where queer sexuality or QCEs are talked about in public digital space (Seaver 2017, 7). In that sense, my ‘field’ is anywhere conducive for a discussion about QCEs. This

includes reddit, where users discuss their discontent with queer sexual space and culture (typically after something bad happens), and Grindr, which facilitates these interactions.

Digital space is not my only entry into QCEs. As a non-binary person born male, my experience growing into my sexuality informs my thoughts on these matters. Beyond that, preceding this work I have had hundreds of conversations with fellow queers on consent, fetishization, and their constructions that inform how I present these findings. While I wouldn't call myself a "cruiser", I have experience in many of these spaces of public sexuality. I am not currently interested in mapping out those spaces, though that could be a topic of further research. Instead, I wish to map out the networks of fetishization in these spaces and to build an understanding of how they influence consent epistemologies.

I spent considerable time on each platform to conduct this ethnography. For reddit, I had been a user in various subreddits for two years prior, though not an avid poster.

reddit

Founded in 2005, Reddit (stylized as reddit) is a site with a somewhat unique digital geography. It is made up of subreddits maintained by "moderators", users granted special responsibilities by the creator (and eventually other administrators) of the subreddit to uphold the rules and culture of the subreddit. The primary method subreddit administrators use to maintain culture in their community is establishing guidelines for posts made. Administrators also have the power to limit posts or expel users. The efficacy of the rules as upholders of the community space in a subreddit relies

on the efficacy of the moderators. redditors, or users of reddit, can make posts according to a subreddit's guidelines, comment on other posts, and upvote or downvote others' posts and comments. Reddit's algorithm places posts with the most upvotes and general positive engagement to the top of the timeline (Yasar 2025).

Beyond this, reddit is a largely anonymous platform. Some subreddits have mandatory identification, but this typically doesn't go past age, race, sex, and/or gender. People have profiles tailored to their usernames, though, unlike many social media platforms, those usernames are difficult to tie back to a non-digital person. Due to this, users are typically less inhibited by public pressure to maintain their image (ibid; Brunsma et al, 2020).

Though largely anonymous, reddit is a predominantly young (under 30), white, and American platform. Brunsma et. al discusses the creation of white digital space on reddit in their article *The Culture of White Space*, in which reddit is used as the premier example of a white digital space in the American context. While reddit's whiteness is not explicit, cultures of white domination persist by establishing white culture as "normal", while anything 'other' must be explicitly identified as such. According to a survey conducted by Barthel et al., reddit's user base is 70% non-hispanic white, while 7% identify as non-hispanic Black, making reddit far whiter than the US as a whole (Barthel et al. 2019). While reddit's structure allows for incredibly diverse communities to flourish, the communities I am analyzing consent discussions in (particularly r/lgbt) position themselves as race-neutral (in white space, means white dominant). This is a significant drawback to this digital ethnography that I attempt to overcome by bringing in sources beyond reddit (Brunsma et al. 2020).

r/gaycruising

The first subreddit I draw from is r/gaycruising, a subreddit dedicated to both cruising porn and tips for cruisers. While most of the posts are self-recorded cruising exploits, there are useful tips and discussions for first-time cruisers littered through the posts. The moderators pinned a post to the top with a how-to and tips for cruising in a variety of places, including bathrooms, parks, gyms, among others. It also has a collection of websites for cruisers and a list of regional subreddits.

The “cruising 101” page describes both best practices for general cruising in places designed for cruising, and how to safely cruise in potentially unfriendly places without disturbing non-cruisers. The format of the pinned post being just that, a pinned post, allows little discussion about how consent manifests. Instead, it establishes guidelines for signaling consent to be approached.

For “dedicated cruising spots”, to signal consent to be approached, the guide tells cruisers to:

- Make eye contact, hold it, then subtly nod/smile.
- Gesture/grab/rub your crotch while holding eye contact or looking at their crotch.
- Move somewhere private, continuing to keep eye contact. Look back if you have to walk away.

[Gthrowg] (Last Updated March 14, 2025). Cruising 101 / FAQ. [Online Forum Post]. reddit.

<https://www.reddit.com/r/gaycruising>

For unestablished cruising spots, or places where the property’s owner did not intend for the space to be used for cruising, the guide tells cruisers to

- Make eye contact.
- Nod.
- A little knowing smirk is fine; a big shit-eating grin is not. You have to expose yourself, but not in an obvious way.

[Gthrowg] (Last Updated March 14, 2025). Cruising 101 / FAQ. [Online Forum Post]. reddit.

<https://www.reddit.com/r/gaycruising>

Another section tells cruisers how to recognize if someone is reciprocating an advance. Generally, it instructs cruisers to pay attention to the other's expressions. If someone passes the same subtle advances back, then the cruiser is to advance to the next step. This much is great for establishing the bare minimum consent to make a direct sexual advance onto someone, but it does little for consent to individual actions. There is also no explanation of how to withdraw consent, especially in noisy spaces like a sauna or the club. For reference, in times when one can't speak or be heard, a double or triple firm tap on the partner's/' shoulder, leg, or arm signals withdrawal of consent. This is a near-universally understood signal, and refusal to acknowledge that signal is understood as assault (Wheeler 2024; Herrera 2024, 6; Gonzalez and Patterson-Rosso 2024).

Below is a post from user strikecoded. Trigger warning, this post does contain descriptions of violations of consent. Unfortunately, across most reddit discussions I found, consent is only openly talked about when it is violated. Some bloggers use their pages to discuss consent in queer space, though those platforms offer less ground for dialogue than reddit. I briefly describe the post's contents below if the full post is distressing.

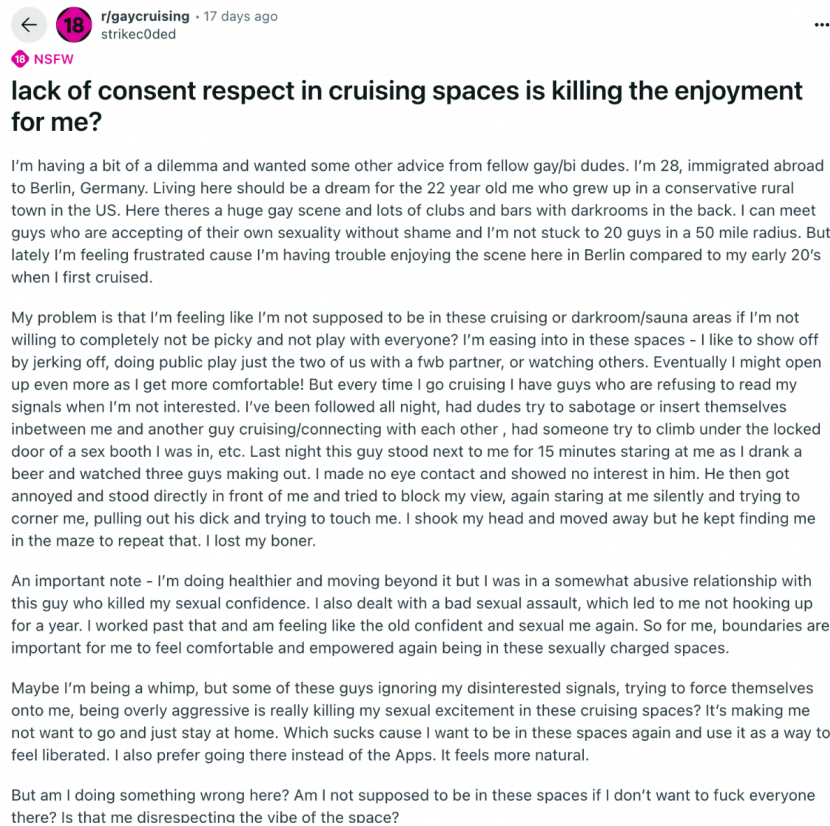


Figure 1: Reddit post about consent in cruising spaces [strikecoded] (March 1, 2025). *lack of consent in cruising spaces is killing the enjoyment for me?* in r/gaycruising [Online Forum Post] reddit.

<https://www.reddit.com/r/gaycruising/>

In this post, user strikecoded discusses the queer sex culture in Berlin compared to the United States. There are a few converging issues highlighted by the poster. First, an uncomfotability within a foreign cruising scene. The poster expresses hesitance with cruising in Berlin due to harmful experiences in their past and their bodily autonomy being disregarded once they entered the space. Next, the poster highlights an undoubtedly harmful consent epistemology: that entrance into a space of public sexuality is automatic consent for participation in any sexual act. This is a common and dangerous misconception of public sexuality spaces that, if unchecked, lets racial,

gendered, and body-type power dynamics rule. Beyond this, established spaces for public sexuality have rules of engagement within the space, typically required by law (Woods et al 2003). Allowing assault to go unchecked is not one of them. While spaces like that exist in the context of CNC (consensual non-consent), they nearly always require participants to sign informed consent forms. This is not the type of space I am discussing.

Utopian Consent and its Perversion

If ‘anything goes upon entry’ isn’t the dominant consent epistemology of the cruising space, then what is? Far from ‘anything goes,’ consent in spaces where verbal consent isn’t possible is a constant effort negotiated by body language. To some extent, this is true for all sex, though in cruising space empathetic body-negotiation holds a dominant place due to certain restraints inherent to spaces of public sexuality (some places are loud, some require absolute silence, sometimes speech isn’t possible). Cruising practice requires its subjects to be deeply aware of both their sexual partners and those around them in any space. Being the fugitive sexuality it is, participants must be in tune with each other, their environments, and the space’s history to keep one another safe.

On this, cruising spaces are often characterized by the hyper-masculine energy flowing through the space. Cock rings, penis pumps, poppers, “little blue pills”, and a variety of other masculine sexual technologies are common in these spaces. Typically, masculine presenting men (the dominant population in this space) will use some form of sexual technology to augment their masculinity into a hyper-masculinized sexual self (Preciado 2018). In *The Countersexual Manifesto*, theorist Paul Preciado introduces

“dildotectonics” as a way of reimagining sexuality (Preciado 2018, 41). By interrogating the social situation of the dildo as a phallic cultural object, both penis and not-penis, sexual and anti-sexual, Preciado expands the idea of the dildo to encompass far more than a physical sexual object. Instead, given society’s masculine construction, everything can be understood in relation to the phallic. The technologies emanating from the phallus can be understood as dildoes of sorts. To Preciado, this includes a vast array of technologies, from masculine sexual technologies as “syntactic” variations to the Empire State Building as a “semantic” variation (ibid, 34).

While cruising space is not utopia, there is a utopian potential at play here. Outside of the cruising scene, a sexual culture of augmented hypermasculine cisgendered men based entirely on empathy and co-creation of space would be a pipe dream. With current standards of masculinity in the West, garnering a shred of empathy from a cisgendered, masculine-presenting man in any situation is a long shot. Yet, under conditions of strict anonymity, creation of queer space, and a little bit of risk, men are performing a culture based entirely on mutual trust and recognition of each other’s conditions. What isn’t utopian about that?

“Utopian” characterizes the space’s potential, yet all too often, that utopian potential is violated, giving cruising space the loathed place it holds in queer masculine culture now. redditors responding to strikecoded often carried their own experience being violated in cruising space. In one response, luocha94 asks, “Were the guys perhaps a little older? Because in my experience both in Germany, France, Switzerland and Italy it’s always the older folks who act this pushy” (luocha 2025). This sentiment resonated with many other respondents as others asked about the cruiser’s age as well. The next most common response was along the lines of “this happens in the US, too. i

find that being a bit loud ‘DON'T TOUCH ME’ helps get the message through - maybe because everyone else hears it too” (sfcumguzzler 2025), instructing the original poster to be more assertive. It is important to note how the original poster’s positionality could impact their reception. The original poster identifies themselves as a 28-year-old American who moved abroad to Germany, assumed to be white and cisgendered male. The post is also on an English-speaking forum, so the assumed targeted population is in the English-speaking world. The poster’s assumed positionality could help explain the response. A young, white, cisgendered man in a cruising space is supposed to operate with confidence, and if this person is subject to unwanted advances, clearly they are failing to perform their positionality. The scene’s response, in turn, is to tell the cruiser they are too docile, too meek. Under this logic, performance of docility in masculine sexual space positions the cruiser as feminine, likely as a twink (a feminine gay person, typically a ‘bottom’ and/or ‘sub’). To some, such as user RhodyGuy1, the poster’s positionality combined with their entrance to the space warranted unwanted sexual advances:

“In my opinion if you're going to be picky don't go to places where it's rude to deny everyone.

When I was crushing heavily 15 years ago I remember guys like you lol I always wondered what their problem was.”

Post: [RhodyGuy1] (March 3, 2025). lack of consent in cruising spaces is killing the enjoyment for me? in r/gaycruising [Online Forum Post] reddit. <https://www.reddit.com/r/gaycruising/>

This response was so heavily downvoted it was hidden from view. User get_spanked responded “It’s not their problem that they didn’t want to play with you.

They were waiting for something else. Accept that.” (get_spanked 2025), affirming the space’s dominant consent epistemology. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that however few, there are actors with divergent consent epistemologies in cruising spaces.

r/lgbt

r/lgbt is the largest subreddit for gender and sexual minorities. Being that, the subreddit provides a platform to discuss a wide range of social issues impacting sexual and gender minority people. The moderators emphasize the creation of a safe space through the description and subreddit’s rules. The subreddit does not claim to be queer, although plenty of queer content and posters are on the subreddit.

User DeadOwlArrival posted “Consent in the gay community is an ISSUE”, referring to the cisgendered gay community, shown below. Again, this post contains descriptions of violations of the user’s consent. I briefly describe the post below if the post’s contents are too distressing.

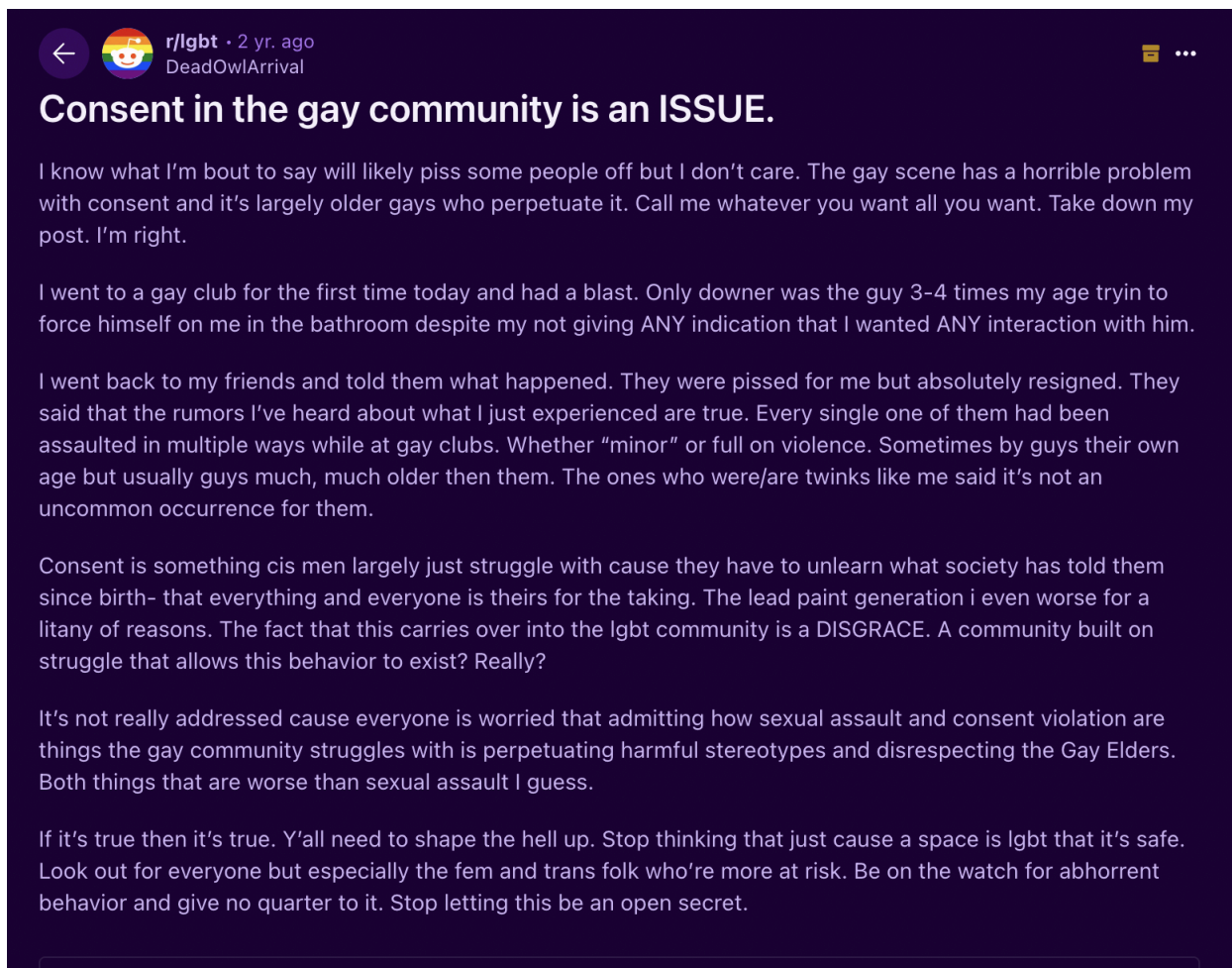


Figure 2: Reddit post about consent in the gay community (DeadOwlArrival). [2023]. *Consent in the gay community is an ISSUE.* In r/lgbt. [Online Forum Post] reddit. [Consent in the gay community is an ISSUE. : r/lgbt](#)

This user describes their experience as a young gay person being harassed, pushed around, and assaulted in gay clubs, then being appalled when their friends treated it as a non-issue. By the end, there is a tone of resignation, and an attitude that sexual assault within the community (specifically older to younger) isn't seen as important enough to raise an issue out of. DeadOwlArrival is not specifically talking

about a culture of queer public sexuality, unlike strikecoded, though the networks of fetishization highlighted by DeadOwlArrival are certainly important.

The response to this post was telling. Not only was the post highly engaged with, garnering 2.7k net upvotes and 155 comments, there were a variety of well-received viewpoints in the comments. One user, “BBMcGruff” responds:

“You're right that consent is an issue. It's very disheartening. When I was younger I encountered it a lot. You even see similar behaviour on Grindr at times.

Though as someone in their 40s now, I now have the issue from the opposite end of the age spectrum. 18-25 year old bear chasers who just assume as an older (and larger) guy I should be 'grateful for attention' when they decide to harass me.”

(BBMcGruff). [2023]. *Consent in the gay community is an ISSUE*. In r/lgbt. [Online Forum Post] reddit. https://www.reddit.com/r/lgbt/comments/13nxxym/consent_in_the_gay_community_is_an_issue/

This was the post’s top comment (977 upvotes), with the sentiment that younger men had as much of a role in queer rape culture as older men repeated through the responses. User chaosgirl93 specifically calls out “bear chasers”, or young men who fetishize larger, hairier men (chaosgirl93 2023). User fu_gravity chimed in with another rebuke of the younger gay men chasing “daddy” types (usually middle-aged white gay men, perceived to have money or social status) (fu_gravity 2023). Trans men, furies, and tall men were all discussed as fetishized bodies. The glaring absence from this discussion was any mention of race. Out of a search of the 155 comments for racial or ethnic signifiers (search terms included white, Black, brown, asian, hispanic,

latino/a/e/x, African-American, American, Filipino/a/x, and arab), only one mention was found, where a commenter was rebuking the consent practices of old white men. Other than that, the entire post and thread did not discuss the impact of race on consent and fetishization. Even in a predominantly white queer space, this was shocking.

This is particularly peculiar considering racialized bodies are deeply impacted by sexual fetishization and assault (Stacey 2021, 372). While this post and the discussion started by it is analytically useful, we must recognize that it offers a window into a white, racially-mainstreamed view of queer consent politics.

r/AskGaybrosOver30

r/AskGaybrosOver30 is a subreddit dedicated to discussions between gay and trans men over thirty. It focuses on many topics related to aging while queer and existing in queer space for middle aged men. Compared to r/lgbt, redditors were much more likely to discuss public sexuality, grindr politics, and sexuality in general, plausibly because of the gender-specific nature of the subreddit. Additionally, I found far more discussions of racialization in the queer community than in r/lgbt, the following being one of them.



Figure 3: Reddit post about racism in the gay community [D-dog92] (2023) *I'm in a relationship with a brown guy and it's showing me a different side to the gay community*. In r/AskGaybrosOver30 [Online Forum Post]. Reddit. [I'm in a relationship with a brown guy and it's showing me a different side to the gay community : r/AskGaybrosOver30](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskGaybrosOver30/post/1234567890/)

Redditor D-dog92 started a useful dialogue on race in the queer community after posting about the treatment of his brown boyfriend in white gay space. While in the social scene, Black and brown men are invisibilized, in the sexual scene, their bodies are fetishized. Redditor aromaticchicken responded (they referring to white gays):

“They almost uniformly expect us to be passive sub bottoms, if they see us at all. I could write like a 50 page essay on how jarring the fetishization is (and how painful the internalized racism we also carry can be)”

[aromaticchicken] (2023) *I'm in a relationship with a brown guy and it's showing me a different side to the gay community*. In r/AskGaybrosOver30 [Online Forum Post]. Reddit. [I'm in a relationship with a brown guy and it's showing me a different side to the gay community : r/AskGaybrosOver30](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskGaybrosOver30/post/1234567890/)

By “passive sub bottoms”, at face value, aromaticchicken is referring to a specific sexual positioning and performance of docility (aromaticchicken 2023). Yet, the history

of indentured servitude complicates their comment. After chattel slavery's staggered abolition in the Americas, East and South Asian bodies were transported to the Americas, often in the very ships used in the transatlantic slave trade, with the promise to white capital owners that newly imported Brown workers would be more docile to the racial labor hierarchy they were inserted into (Lowe 2015). Thus, this comment highlights an age old white supremacist sexual trope which expects sexual docility from Black and brown people. The expectation of docility while laboring, of being the "model minority", unbinds itself from history into queer sexual culture, where Brown bodies are expected to perform docility (or invisibility) for the pleasure of white gays.

While a "sub bottom" is a legitimate sexual positioning, assuming that based off of race and queerness alone perpetuates assault culture against brown bodies. aromaticchicken's sentiment is continued by flipinchicago who says "As a gaysian, I've either emasculated or invisible. It's disparaging." (flipinchicago 2023)

While brown queers identified assumed docility in their treatment by their white counterparts, Black men were *expected* to dominate, which, when coming from a white person, is a form of racial domination in of itself. Redditor futuremed89 explains:

"Black guy living in the middle of Houston here. This is what almost all queer POC experience constantly. I've been ghosted, fetishized, called the N word or asked to do raceplay more times than I can count. It's incredibly disheartening and makes dating feel like an insurmountable task. I decided early on to not go to gay bars cause I knew what the outcome would be. Would be nice if our community could see us as just people instead of overblown stereotypes that aren't true. C'est la vie I guess 🙄"

[futuremed89] (2023) *I'm in a relationship with a brown guy and it's showing me a different side to the gay community*. In r/AskGaybrosOver30 [Online Forum Post]. Reddit. [I'm in a relationship with a brown guy and it's showing me a different side to the gay community : r/AskGaybrosOver30](#)

By “raceplay”, futuremed89 refers to a type of roleplay recalling the trope of Black men assaulting white women, but for this case, feminine subjects. Redditor Kai_decadence expands on the expectations of Black queer men from the white gays: “they make RIGID expectations of what is deemed attractive (which really just falls in fetishization, BBC Dom Top...)”. Though appearing to negate the fetishization dynamics on Brown male bodies, fetishization of Black male bodies falls into a similar dynamic (Kai_decadence 2023).

The transition of labor models is partially facilitated by evolving myths about the bodies implicated by the system. For Black bodies, the abolition of slavery necessitated the creation of an array of myths about Black sexuality to justify further white supremacist social domination, the most prominent of these being the Black male rapist myth (Davis 1978, 27-28).

Racial fetishization works in many directions, but like all fetishization it requires a logic of domination to be legitimized. The different codes of fetishization, both racialized and body-typed, informed by their specific racialized and gendered histories, form a sort of sexual grammar that flows through the cruising space. This grammar operates reflexively, it tells its users that given their positionality, they can expect *this* response from a racialized and body-typed subject, informing the user how far they can go in their advance. On the surface, this is simply a transition of Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory into sexual terms. Yet, that analysis denies sexuality’s omnipresence in Western society. The social structures that originally functioned to

maintain an oppressive labor hierarchy remain the most rigid in the understandings of each other's sexuality (Crenshaw 1991; Spillers 1987).

For instance, the presumed white man's ask of a taller Black man to engage in raceplay solely on the basis of his height and race assumes he enjoys putting himself in the rapist's image. Either, that ask is made out of incredibly racist assumptions of Black men, or is made by simply seeing him as a racialized body, not a being capable of utopian erotics (Crenshaw 1991; futuremed89 2023).

Through its reliance on domination, the grammar of fetishization severs the social from the sexual, occluding any possibility of utopia from the relationship that could have been. While utopian in its conception, the consent epistemology within cruising space (and the gay community broadly) is complicated by networks of fetishization implicating all bodies within.

Grindr

Discussed in the last chapter as a sociosexual fabric laid over the traditional gayborhood, Grindr is a particular choice for digital ethnographic work. Primarily, because the discontent queers' voices about cruising are magnified by the anonymity among other functions of Grindr. Nevertheless, Grindr is a useful app to note how the grammar of fetishization is displayed in digital space. Because Grindr was discussed last chapter in its relation to cruising cultures, further site description will be facilitated through discussion of the digital material.

I looked through the contents of ~500 Grindr profiles across various locations for this section. Those locations include Commerce, Texas; Provincetown, Massachusetts; Sarasota, Florida; Poughkeepsie, New York; and Washington, D.C. With these locations,

I aimed to get a mix of rural and urban environments, as well as a mix of conservative and liberal environments. Commerce is rural and conservative, Provincetown is notably liberal, Sarasota is conservative and suburban, Poughkeepsie is ex-urban and politically mixed. After reviewing the data, there is not much use in separating the data by locality since I am not discussing individual profiles. While there are trends in how users describe themselves by locality, especially beyond the US, my goal is to illustrate the functioning of the grammar of fetishization within Grindr and how the site may function as a digital marketplace.

To preserve user's anonymity, and because this section aims to decenter the importance of the individual in this work, I extensively deidentify profiles. I have not engaged with any of the user's profiles used in this ethnography. Further, I do not use any user's profile in its entirety. Typically, I will separate the relevant sections of the profile (headline, pictures, statistics, tags, description, expectations, and health) and use that. In most cases, I cover specific statistical information about users. Separate screenshots refer to separate profiles.

Structure of a profile

As mentioned before, Grindr profiles can be separated into seven sections. A profile's headline contains the user's chosen profile name, location information, activity status, sexual positioning, height, weight, age, and 'body type'. Users can choose whether or not to display any of these descriptors with the exception of activity status. An example 'headline' is shown below.

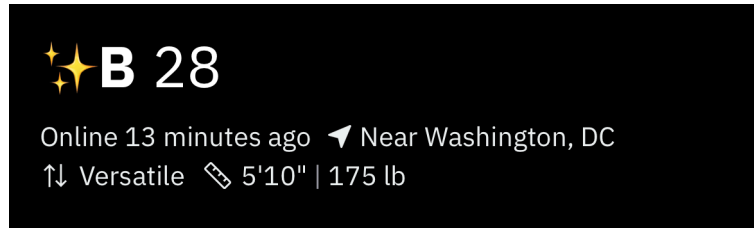


Figure 4: Headline of a Grindr profile

This section functions as a shorthand for the statistical information section, which can include a user’s age, height, weight, body type, sexual positioning, race (labeled as ethnicity), relationship status, and tribes. Tribes refer to descriptors such as “twink”, “jock”, “otter”, or “poz,” subcommunities within the gay community, many of them deriving from “bear codes,” Polari slang, or language evolving from social movements (Barrett 2017, 89). Because it serves as the profile’s ‘summary’ and combines various statistics and descriptors, its indexical flexibility varies. Height, weight, sexual positioning, age, and location are relatively stable indices of the body while choosing a name can be a site for greater creativity and indexical flexibility.

The ‘tags’ section builds on this, adding in specific kinks, hobbies, personality descriptors, and other subcommunity descriptors. The ‘tags’ are both searchable and are highlighted when one matches that of another user (shown below).

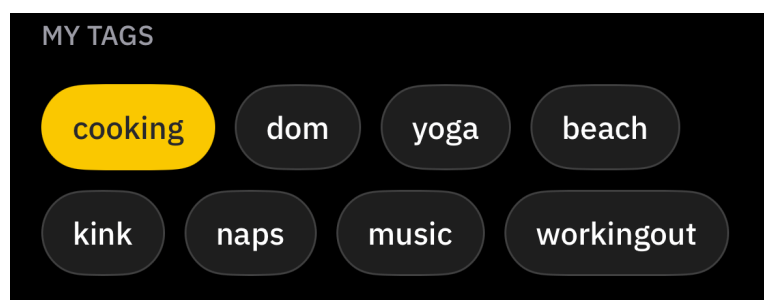


Figure 5: “Tags” section of a Grindr profile

The tags are updated for shifts within gay culture as well. For example, after the release of Saltburn, the tags section was updated to include “bathwater” as a potential kink.

The description section, labeled “about me”, is the most semiotically flexible section of the profile. In 255 characters, users can wield this section however they want. This section is followed by the “expectations” section where users list what type of connection they are looking for, how they prefer engaging with other users, and whether they accept “NSFW” (not safe for work) pictures. Following that, the health section lists HIV, PrEP, and various vaccination statuses.

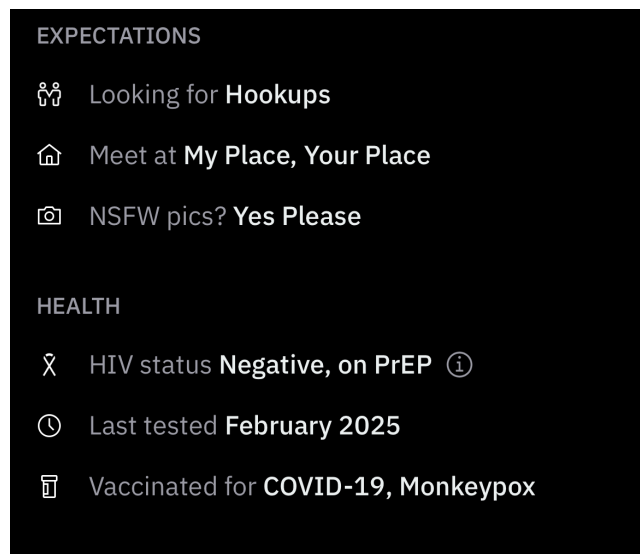


Figure 6: “Expectations” and “Health” sections of a Grindr profile

Grindr as a Digital Marketplace

To use Grindr, users package their identities into a profile of five pictures or less, bodily statistics, 255-character description, ‘health’ signs, among others. In this, the profile functions as a packaging of the user’s conception of their sexuality. Sorting through the profiles, there are a variety of dynamics employed by users. Some choose to ‘market’ their sexual identities through pictures or descriptions of themselves. Others

position themselves as someone ‘looking’ (or ‘buying’ in the market analogy) and describe the ideal description or type of what they are looking for. Often, users combine a mix of these approaches.

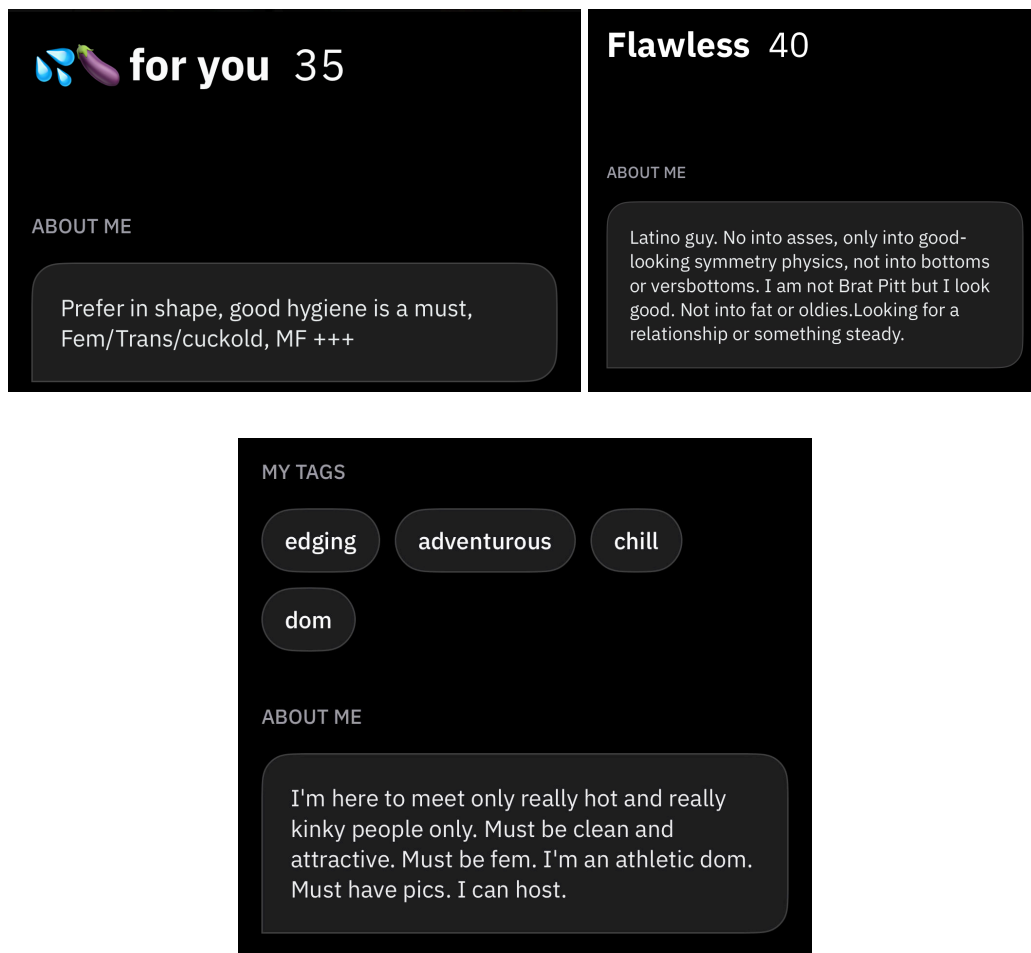


Figure 7 (top left), 8 (top right), and 9 (bottom): All three figures depict the “About Me” sections, with 7 and 8 including titles and age, while 9 includes tags.

These profiles (two with bodily statistics and location information blacked out, one with bodily statistics and profile name cropped out) show common examples of how sexual preference is demonstrated on the app. In the “description” section, users use language like “prefer ___”, “___ is a must”, a plus sign, “must be ___”, or denote what they

aren't into. In line with a marketplace, users tell others what they are 'shopping' for with concise codes, aiming to make 'transactions' more efficient.

Because of how identities are packaged into a sort of 'body double' to interact with the space, I analyze Grindr as a form of digital marketplace, with users' formatted conception of their sexuality serving as the commodity 'sold' (Klein 2023, 164-165). While this analogy may not hold up in every regard, it does help place intention on the descriptors users employ for themselves and others. Users employ multiple indices to effectively 'market' themselves with varying levels of flexibility in interpretation.

The Grindr-as-marketplace analogy also carries historical weight. As Barrett (2017) chronicles in *From Drag Queens to Leatherman*, the hanky code of the '70s and '80s of gay America carried on a similar normativising program. In this sign-system, different colored handkerchiefs in different positions indexed different sexual preferences or orientations. For instance, an olive handkerchief in a right-hand pocket indexed a preference for military wear, while a red handkerchief in the left-hand side indexed a desire to fist others (Barrett 2017, 24-26). As Barrett describes, the regimented 'hanky code' helped normalise the sexual scripts of gay male sex. In other words, based off of the color and position of a handkerchief, a specific sexual preference and performance was expected (ibid, 27). The hanky code is a mode of gay male sexual organization that can be used to unpack Grindr's various sign-systems.

For instance, the 'tags' section appears to replicate the hanky code in digital space, similar to how the app is structured to replicate cruising culture at large. The 'tags' section is the clearest section where a digital selection may translate to expected sexual performance in digital space, yet other sections echo the normativising function that 'tags' or hanky code carries. Being the most flexible section, profile descriptions

have the power to index both the user’s understanding of their own sexuality and their preferences in others. This makes the profile description a contested site as users may employ it for many purposes including for outward displays of fetishizing attitudes.

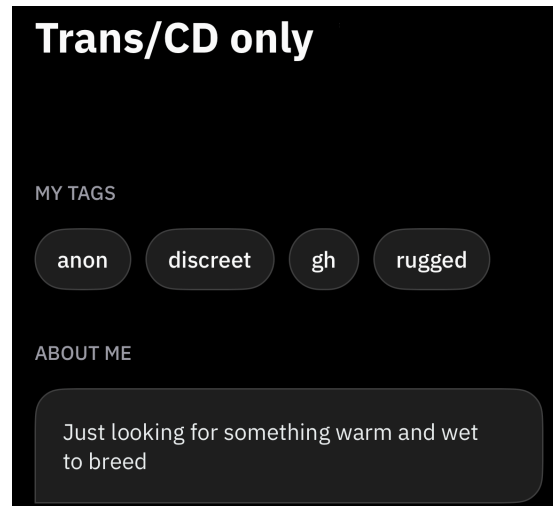


Figure 10: “About Me”, “Tags”, and title of a concerning Grindr profile

Generally, fetishization on Grindr is not explicit enough to guarantee a user holds views that a certain population is less human or deserves less respect than others. This user serves as an exception, or at least an extreme. With the name “Trans/CD Only”, listing “Just looking for something warm and wet to breed” as their description, this is a pretty clear-cut case of fetishization of trans bodies. In the profile, the user specifies their sexual preference as “Trans” or “CD”, referring to cross-dressers, then proceeds to refer to those people as “something warm and wet.”

This user was the most explicit in referring to their sexual preference as a literal object, though most others don’t as explicitly. Another user signaled his preference by saying “I like older men” in his profile. Another said “looking for someone fem”, and

“looking for chubs” for another. As opposed to the first example, these require more context to determine fetishistic intent.

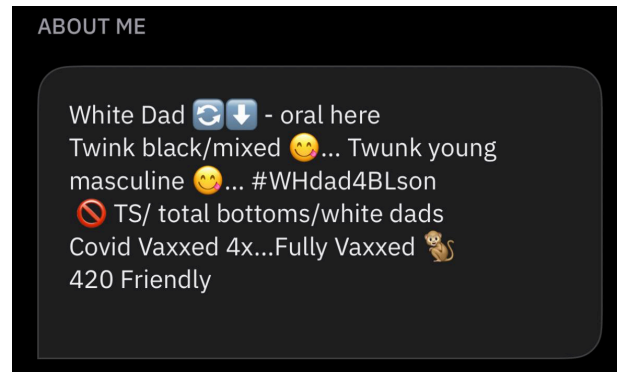


Figure 11: “About Me” section of another concerning Grindr profile

Another user used the hashtag “#WHdad4BLson”, specifying his preferences further in the description. This is another brash, outward display of fetishization of young Black bodies. For reference, a “twink” refers to a young, skinny gay person with little to no body hair. A “twunk” is an older, more muscular iteration of a “twink.” The monkey emoji, when paired with vaccination status typically signifies the user is vaccinated against monkeypox. The “🚫TS” means “no trans people” while other emojis are used to refer to the user’s sexual positioning.

These two profiles are contentious examples. While they aren’t indicative of a culture of explicit fetishization on Grindr, they do map out the extreme of this platform and should be read as such. Extremes do not exist in a world of their own; rather, they set the limit for what is acceptable/unacceptable on a platform. The grammar used to denote fetish and disgust in the extreme influences what other less-daring users use in their descriptions, as shown in previous examples. Similar to the hanky code of the ‘70s and ‘80s as discussed by Barrett (2017), the sign systems employed on Grindr can be

analyzed for its normativising of sexual scripts and indexing users' expectations of each other's sexuality on the platform. On Grindr, the 'grammar of fetishization' works alongside well-established codes denoting kink, sexual preference, HIV status, and a variety of other factors with rooted histories in gay survival.

Conclusion

My points of entry to the field site were varied. I analyzed both the "after-product" via reddit and the before via Grindr. The Grindr work exhibits the grammar of the body and how that grammar is displayed in digital space. The reddit work aims to show the aftermath of that display, albeit biased toward the pessimistic and white, as people use reddit to voice their problems.

It must be said that understanding Grindr as the "before" centers physical sexual acts as the pinnacle of consent. While this may be the intention of app usership for many, that is not the case for all. For some, the sexual interaction happens digitally, and the pinnacle of consent's promise takes place over the app. In this view, sexual interaction transcends the physical, into the digital, giving digital interaction heightened significance in the study of consent epistemologies.

Consent's Promise

Theoretically, consent is a function of the individual's agency which they have complete control over. In reality, this function is complicated by the semiotics of the body. Racial, gendered, and body-type identifiers all influence how bodies are understood in space and time, and how their agency is processed by others. While consent may have a concrete definition, how consent is understood and processed, or

‘consent epistemologies’ are constantly in flux. To determine how people are treated in sexuality’s space, the lexical definition of consent is practically useless. Instead, consent epistemologies function as cultural tools which give us a greater insight into sexual culture.

Philosopher J. L. Austin would understand consent as a ‘promise’ for a certain act, adding reflexivity to consent. Understanding consent as a reflexive speech-act in the Austinian sense opens up new directions to dissect consent epistemologies as indexed on Grindr and elsewhere (Austin 1962). This type of consent analysis is less interested in understanding the consensuality of an act (‘courtroom consent’) and more interested in the consent’s semiotics, i.e. the specific signals that people understand *to be* consent. For a simple example, the Yes Please!/No/Sometimes selection options for “NSFW pics?” in *Expectations* on the Grindr profile can be understood in multiple ways. Under definitional consent, a user selecting “Yes Please!” for themselves establishes the act of sending any picture to that user as consensual (to some extent). An epistemological view of consent understands the selection of “Yes Please!” as a sign of willingness to receive pictures on behalf of the user, yet also factors in how other users understand their selection. A second user may see that selection as an index of the first user’s promiscuity and apply that judgment to further interactions with them. Another user may understand “Yes Please!” as not enough consent and ask for further confirmation. The epistemological view of consent is more interested in different questions than whether or not an act is consensual. This gives the epistemological view a greater bandwidth to understand consent as it operates in sexual cultures outside of the context of assault. ‘Consent’s promise’ asks a variety of questions. What is understood as consent? What do consent’s givers mean with their consent? What conditions shape the giving of consent?

With this in mind, and combining the material from Grindr, Sniffies, reddit with the work of Stacey and Forbes (2021), we can begin to identify points of perversion of consent's promise. By 'points of perversion', I refer to moments when consent is perverted from its theoretical definition as the consolidated function of an individual's agency (Stacey 2021).

In digital space, the first of these points happens in the body's indexicality. Characteristics of the body carry semiotic value, which are in turn interpreted as part of consent's 'promise.' For instance, the presentation of a 'twink' is interpreted by some as a promise to act submissive, to perform the role of a 'bottom' and all that that encompasses. I use that example because it is the simplest to explain what "acting like a twink" means, but nearly every bodily characteristic indexes an expected performance from sexual subjects. Racial signifiers, as discussed before, carry even more loaded 'promises' of performance. In digital space, Blackness functions as a 'promise' of dominance and hypermasculinity without the agency traditionally afforded to masculine objects. This creates a specific subjectivity wherein Black men (and by extension, Black trans subjects) are expected to perform the role of a 'top' without any possibility to explore the range of queer sexuality.

Bodily characteristics are not indexed uniformly. In other words, there is not a formula that can determine how a body is understood and how these 'promises' are processed, even within a society contained within itself. In *Sexuality Beyond Consent*, psychoanalyst Avgi Saketopoulou explores how race and gender are not simply encoded in unconscious biases, they function within the structure of the individual's personality (i.e. their ego). To Saketopoulou, this is a process that happens starting in infancy through a person's development. Different understandings of racial codes inform

people's expectations of racialized subjects. Because of this, and the fact that every person develops in a different cultural context, the racial and gendered expectations embedded in people's egos differ (Saketopoulou 2024).

The second 'point of perversion' refers to the reflexive process of indexing bodies into language; in other words, how users market themselves. On Grindr, this is facilitated by the 'sexual marketplace' mode of digital organization, where each user packages themselves into a marketable doubling of the self to be received by the ideal 'other'. To do this, users package their conception of their sexuality into a grammar understood by other users on the app. Varying levels of standardization govern the indexical flexibility these identifiers carry. The statistical sections carry the most rigid expectations of this performance, while profile descriptors are more fluid. Users can recombine the meanings of various indices to produce highly specific preference indicators, indexing users' specific expectations or understandings of their own sexuality. "Tribal" identification (twink, bear, poz, etc) functions with characteristics of both. While they are a static list of identifications, their meanings fluctuate with the movement of various queer subcultures (Allen 2012).

This 'point of perversion' is tricky, as agency within it is deeply negotiable. While people have little control over how their body, and by extension, their erotic subjectivity, is interpreted, they have more agency in how they market themselves. Still, subjects are functioning within a sexual marketplace where they must index themselves with a predefined grammar carrying histories long preceding their existence. To define oneself's erotic subjectivity on one's own terms, astray from the grammar of the marketplace and averse from grammars of fetishization, is to render oneself sexually

illegible (not to be confused with *ineligible*), and therefore, invisible to the market (Allen 2012; Butler 1990).

Sexual illegibility is a peculiar function of unexplored possibility. Shortly, it is a refusal of market logics. It can be understood along the same lines as gender illegibility, as a performance which, to be interpreted at all, forces interpreters to temporarily escape sexual marketplace logics, tapping into truly queer erotics and forcing subjects to explore new ways of being. By denying the sexual marketplace its native grammar, sexually illegible subjects possess the potential to circumvent the grammar of fetishization and perform the “counterfetish”, a concept I will explore in much greater depth in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Moving Forward

Moving “forward” is a controversial statement, especially in a work so deeply saturated in queer theory. In queer time, “moving forward” can mean the next meal, the next bus stop, or the next coffee with loved ones. The next cigarette, the next night out, and the next time we’ll breathe easy is far more impactful than any liberal notion of progress. With this in mind, by “moving forward”, I mean moving to a place with the tools to strengthen our resistance against commodification and fetishization. Yet, that ‘place’ is not in the future. We will source our tools from different moments of past and present queer performance, combining those with the strategies for survival defining queer ancestors’ fights for life. This way, “moving forward” means reconvening with the past to produce a more livable present.

On that note, moving forward with this thesis we have established a lot. In the first chapter, I laid the theoretical foundation of this work, as well as situating this thesis in the current time of crisis for trans lives. This chapter established what I mean by ‘queer’- the performance of an unrealized utopian future, the life-force moving through the margins, enchanting all who dare to sustain it (Muñoz 2009).

The second chapter, *Liminal Sexualities*, did more theoretical heavy-lifting. It established liminal sexualities as a producer of queer consent epistemologies and theorized that queer public sexuality is a practice carrying ritual elements in the Turnerian sense. Further, that chapter linked Turner’s *communitas* to Muñoz’s queer, providing new potential directions for both the study of ritual practice and queer performance. This chapter explored the current state of cruising culture in considerable depth, establishing the utopian possibilities for such a space.

The third chapter, *Digital Geographies*, tore apart claims of utopia in the current cruising scene with digital ethnographic material from reddit, Sniffies, and Grindr. It established fetishization as a process enabled by the commodification of bodies, proposing an analysis of body commodification by inverting anthropology's humanist lens into a purely objectifying lens. By analyzing social relations as relations between objects, this chapter drew connections between the social scaffolding once upholding chattel slavery and indentured servitude to racial and body-type fetishization now.

This chapter, *Moving Forward*, aspires to the hardest task yet: developing strategies to counter fetishization. Through this chapter, I will maintain the objectification lens to explore the counterfetish as both a mode of queer performance and as an object of critique. Afterwards, I will propose a series of workshops to introduce queer consent epistemologies and to counter commodification and fetishization in our sexualities.

Introducing the Counterfetish

Discussed briefly at the end of last chapter as a potential tool to combat fetishization, the "counterfetish" is a varied term. First developed by Soviet planners in an effort to undo the commodity fetish, thus producing 'socialist objects', the counterfetish has been introduced in queer theory as a sort of queer performance meant to resist and subvert fetishization by both Muñoz and queer theorist Bogdan Popa (Muñoz 2009; Popa 2021, 157-159). I understand the counterfetish as both. Seeing that queer sexuality follows market logics, applying the tools of Soviet planners to the functions of our sexuality could work to resist commodification and fetishization of our

bodies. Through this, I will connect the counterfetish as an object and performance, then later, show the potential of these tools.

The Counterfetish as an Object

In *De-centering Queer Theory: Communist Sexuality in the Flow*, queer studies scholar Bogdan Popa explores the counterfetish as an object-commodity in great depth. Using the works of anthropologist Serguei Oushakine and an analysis of the Romanian socialist film *The Cruise*, Popa draws two pictures of the counterfetish. One, under Soviet times, was an anti-consumerist object. The object-counterfetish in the Soviet imagination was rational to the highest form (Popa 2021; Gurova 2006). I bolster Popa's analysis of the Soviet counterfetish with historical analysis of Soviet tastes by anthropologist of Eastern Europe, Olga Gurova.

The first two decades after the October Revolution of 1917 produced a culture of commodities in Soviet society aiming to produce an abundance of universal rational needs (Popa 2021, 165). This culture asserted that an object's form must follow function which follows a universal rational need, producing a deeply ascetic culture, at least for a decade or so (Gurova 2006, 93). In this imagination, the counterfetish is a durable object of absolute necessity with little to no ornamentation (Popa 2021; Gurova 93, 2006). In terms of sexuality, this could be equated to abstinence as a response to a toxic sexual culture. As history shows, asceticism did not fare well for long in the Soviet Union. The commodity fetish proved to be a persistent problem throughout Soviet times (Gurova 95, 2006). This highlights one important point of the counterfetish: to resist fetishization, it itself must be persistently seductive.

Popa explores the counterfetish further as a queer object, working with the theories of critical Black scholar Fred Moten and the aforementioned Jose Esteban

Muñoz. To Moten, jazz functions as a counterfetish disrupting racial capitalism since it warps heteronormative capitalist white time, transporting the listener to another realm of unimagined possibility. Yet, Moten's jazz exists *before* commodification as in his view, counterfetishes are objects that haven't been co-opted into the capitalist order *yet* (Moten 2003, Popa 2021, 160). Muñoz's theory of objects offers a different view. Queer objects to Muñoz are co-opted from the capitalist order into a queer paradigm. In this understanding, a brick is not simply a building block of a house, it possesses infinite potentialities to shape itself and the world around it (say, by throwing it through a cybertruck's window, the brick becomes an agent in imagining a future free of fascism, but also an index of queer liberation's past via Stonewall. This is hypothetical. Breaking laws can result in harm). Muñoz's theory of queer object counterfetishes is the co-optational agent working against commodity fetishism, falling more in line with ecological movements for commodity reuse (Muñoz 2009).

The next understanding of the counterfetish as an object comes from *Phone and Spear: A Yuta Anthropology* by Miyarrka Media, an indigenous Yolŋu collective. This work describes *bitja*, what appears to be to outsiders, a flat, digitally-produced image, later understood to be an interweaving of familial and environmental relations onto digital screens. The *bitja* are images with pictures of individuals layered over environments, patterns, animals, or other signifiers that depict a specific energy or feeling of a person. For Yolŋu youth, producing *bitja* has become a major way of strengthening bonds within families and communities. To Yolŋu, production of *bitja* is not just another game for the phone, it is most of the phone's function. From a western colonial lens, the introduction of smartphones to indigenous societies is often thought to be a 'rupturing' moment, forever warping those cultures (Wolf & Erickson 2010). Yet, as

the Yolŋu show, smartphones are used to enhance Yolŋu ontologies instead of incorporating Western ones. The *bitja* function to interrupt the smartphone's drive to further commodify leisure and introduce western ontology into Yolŋu society. In producing *bitja*, Yolŋu exist across spatial and temporal nodes, engaging with others and their environment in the same moment. These tools are used to give the same gift to other Yolŋu, resisting digital colonialism through the means of a counterfetish-object which remains largely incomprehensible to non-Yolŋu viewers (Miyarrka 2019).

This analysis of the counterfetish-object is just that, an analysis of how the counterfetish works to undo, subvert, or prevent the commodity fetish. But how can this analysis be applied to queer sexuality?

The Queer Performance Counterfetish

Discussed in the last section as contributing to the counterfetish-as-object discourse through his quotidian revolutionary theory, Muñoz has plenty more to contribute to the study of counterfetish as performance. In fact, most of his life's work was in performance studies of queers of color. His studies of the performance of legendary drag performer Kevin Aviance are, in my opinion, the most useful for unpacking the counterfetish.

For context, Aviance is a frequent performer at clubs, circuit parties, among other venues across the West. A tall, effeminate, Black gay male, Aviance's performance of gender combines both masculine and feminine gesturing. Aviance performs bald, refusing to wear a wig or tuck, yet still wears feminine makeup, dress, and jewelry. Aviance's objective in drag is not the "feminine illusion", as many other corporatized

queens perform. His objective is not to trick, but to unsettle heteronormative time and space to create moments for those with him to exist in utopia.

Muñoz points out that Aviance frequently performs at clubs overflowing with white gay men exuding another, far more masculine performance. This performance, conducted by the dominant imprint, is explored by theorists of gay male life far beyond his reach. It is shaped in part by the trauma of the AIDS past and the pressures toward homonormativity of the liberal present (Muñoz 2009; Puar 2007). While pressures to perform as a ‘man’ start in childhood with subtle corrections to gendered gestures, such as the way one walks, talks, or positions their hands, these pressures to conform magnify in adulthood. A separate thesis could be written on how these pressures, combined with a variety of other factors, push gay men into a hypermasculine gender performance and to constructing the trademark ultra-sculpted gym body. This performance is very related to the digital commodification of queer bodies I discuss in the previous chapter, and being so, I understand the dominant imprint as a form of object. They are a sort of cultural object establishing the ‘center’ of acceptable gay male life, with all others aspiring to reach their performance. Muñoz claims these men become “their own fetish of masculinity”, reinforced by social and financial affirmations from the mainstream, even as the fetish of masculinity hides the possibilities of being which led to their own masculinization. In this analysis, two normative modes of being intertwine, shaping modern gay life: the drive toward hypermasculinity and homonormativity. They reinforce each other to a point where other (read: transgendered) ways of living appear alien, and biological determinism seems to re-confirm itself in the dominant imprint’s gendered performance.

The majority population of Aviance's crowd is trapped in this prison of alienation from different ways of being, so Aviance's performance of accessible femininity is electrifying. His dance-style, mixing vogue, break-dancing, and the occasional flair is liberating as his god-like status performs another, multiplicitous, way of being for the dominant imprint. His performance of the counterfetish temporarily reveals for crowds that the conditions in which they built their identities (and their physical bodies) are wrong, and the yearning they have to escape the confines of the dominant imprint are valid. For Aviance, his specific subversion of gender within the club scene is his performance of the counterfetish. By showing others different modes of living, Aviance not only subverts his own fetishization as a Black gay man, he subverts the auto-commodification and fetishization drive present in gay male culture (Muñoz 2009).

Connecting Objects to Performance

This further developed analysis of the dominant imprint as an object of their own making, an auto-fetish of sorts, can help to connect the object-counterfetish to the counterfetish performance. It also complicates the previous analysis of the fetishization networks discussed in *Digital Geographies*. If the dominant imprint, the center of gay culture and the cruising scene, is an auto-fetish, what does that imply about those who are fetishized?

When constructing tools to deconstruct fetishization it is important to remember that fetishization moves in various ways. Likely, those fetishizing bodies on the margins fail to recognize the utopian potentialities of their own sexualities, being so immersed in their own impossible masculinity that what *could be possible* never crosses their minds.

So, while Black, brown, trans, fat, disabled, and other ‘others’ remain impacted by the objectification conducted by the center, the center itself operates within a prison.

Counterfetish as a Tool

To begin to address this, I propose a series of workshops focusing on consent and fetishization education. My goal here is not to perform a counterfetish for people. Because of the counterfetish’s situational nature, to properly perform it one must analyze their conditions of fetishization before subverting them. Thus, the workshops are geared towards giving participants the tools to subvert their own fetishization.

Workshop One

The first workshop I propose is preliminary, intending to denaturalize consent in order to give participants a greater understanding of how they process it. Being a discussion-based workshop, there is a pre-workshop form for participants to pose questions for the group. The workshop requires two facilitators, as facilitators need to discuss how to best respect participant’s triggers and other concerns. The workshop also uses small groups as a discussion tool, so it will work best with six to fifteen participants. The workshop starts with a short spiel about its nature, then a lengthy community guidelines section. After, participants are given a 3-minute “Free Write” as an icebreaker. While this icebreaker can be anything related to consent, the model uses “Imagine your consent style as a mythical creature.” This is intended to begin the workshop by denaturalizing consent as a definition, implying that it is a ‘practice’ with styles. Implicit in this prompt is the assertion that different consent epistemologies exist, and are shaped by participant’s life experience. This is an important first step to

processing divergent consent epistemologies. Participants are informed before the free write that they will not have to share with groups or facilitators.

After the free write, the first essential question is posed to the participants: What is consent to you? Is there a way your understanding of consent relate to the queer identity you hold? Definitions, values guiding consent understanding, or whatever way you want to express that is welcome. Participants are given three to five minutes to write down answers, then are directed to talk in groups of three to four about their answers. After five minutes of discussion (or when it gets quiet), participants are invited to share with the larger group. This question is a much more explicit attempt to inspire epistemological consent thought processes in participants without lecturing them (or forcing them to read this thesis).

The second question reads: In what situations is explicit verbal consent necessary? How is this communicated? Do you have best practices for certain situations? Participants should be well-primed to think about specific consent practices, so the structure starts with small-group discussions, then transitions into the larger group. This question can be modified to a target population, but the current wording aims to encompass a range of queer consent epistemologies (from requiring explicit, verbal consent for all acts/situations to preferring constant body negotiation as seen in cruising space). This question aims for participants to think critically about their position as a being operating in queer sexuality.

Lastly, there is space for one or two community-sourced questions at the end. Facilitators should discuss these questions during the small group discussions and assess which ones to choose based on how the discussion is flowing. They also have the freedom to pose their own questions based on the group's energy.

When putting together this workshop, choosing an audience and effectively marketing it are of utmost importance. I tried (twice) to host this workshop with the LGBTQ+ and SAVP centers at Vassar College and was unsuccessful both times due to lack of interest. This is not to say Vassar is an overwhelmingly cis het school, as it is not. Instead, the problem lies deeper. The mere premise of the workshop is disruptive to a cis het understanding of consent, and therefore most understandings people have of their own sexualities. Thus, the average person would likely be uncomfortable if placed in the workshop without context.

Instead, the workshop can be understood as a tool to begin teaching queer consent epistemologies in an interactive, discussion-based manner. By formatting it as a workshop, it becomes an accessible tool to be taken outside of the classroom into any interested (and hopefully knowledgeable about consent) person's hands. I imagine the workshop as a tool that could be used in conjunction with other consent education projects. The workshop (in its Vassar-oriented format) can be found in Appendix A.

Workshop Two

Following the first workshop, this workshop explicitly addresses fetishization and aims to give participants tools to combat it in a similar, discussion-oriented manner. Again, this workshop works best with two facilitators and six to fifteen participants. The beginning of the workshop is very similar to the first one. Both include forms for potential participant-sourced questions and topics to avoid, as well as a lengthy community guidelines section.

The icebreaker in this workshop aims to get participants thinking about the cracks in the social order, as that is where the keys to counterfetish performance are

found. Facilitators may choose any icebreaker they wish, but for the example I use “What spaces feel liminal to you? What’s your favorite liminal space?” Participants may not have a favorite liminal space, or even think about liminal spaces as cracks in the social order. Being so, this icebreaker relies on the connection between the popular and theoretical meanings of liminality to be effective. Participants are invited to share if they feel called to, though discussion at this stage is not necessary.

The first question asks: “What is fetishization? How does it work/how does it impact you or the people you know?” Participants are given two to three minutes to think and write down potential answers, then are directed to share with small groups. From the discussions, facilitators can begin to get a sense of how participants understand themselves in relation to fetishization in broader society. This is important for helping participants formulate counterfetishes for their own subjectivities. Participants may share from the small groups if they would like. To bridge gaps in understanding between small groups, it is best in this section if at least one or two people shared thoughts from group discussions.

The second question asks: “How can specific fetishizations be undone? Are there specific strategies you have in mind? You may draw from your understanding of your own fetishization or that of ones you know.” Participants will likely not know what to make of this question at first glance. At this point, facilitators should have example material prepared of a specific counterfetish, seductive to the participants in the room. Various drag performers like Vaginal Davis or Kevin Aviance are possible examples, but they are specific to certain audiences. As discussed previously, Aviance’s performance subverts the pressures of binary gender, so, for Aviance’s performance to be a seductive counterfetish, the fetishization the audience deals with must relate to gender’s prison.

Similarly, using Vaginal Davis's *The White To Be Angry* as a counterfetish example is another particular choice, as Davis's counterfetish performance in this piece subverts whiteness's centrality through Davis's performance of "Clarence", a hypermasculine white confederate. For reference, Vaginal Davis is an intersex Black drag performer. Davis's counterfetish may be seductive to those dealing with racial fetishization. A variety of other examples may be shown, as long as they contain a counterfetish example seductive to the participants.

After participants are given time to process the counterfetish example, the facilitators can help them work through the specificities of the counterfetish performance and what makes it an effective counterfetish. If participants are shown a counterfetish performance, it is important to note that counterfetishes do not *have* to be performative. Cultural objects can also subvert fetishization in their own ways. If participants receive information only about performance counterfetish, they will most likely come up with counterfetish-performance examples (which isn't necessarily bad, just limited).

Once participants have a clear understanding of the counterfetish, they are asked the second question again. They may have three to five minutes to ponder a specific counterfetish performance or object, then they are directed to share with their small groups. After, participants are invited to share with the larger group. This is the most important question and the largest test of participants' understanding of the counterfetish.

If there is still time, facilitators may source one more question from the pre-workshop form for discussion.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

I began this thesis by orienting it toward the future at a time when the present is bleak. Possibilities for what the future can hold seem to fade with every passing day. Yet, in times where the possibilities the future could hold constricts, the future's importance grows. With the rise of fascism in the US, the future is a site of control. The image of the reborn state, the 'America Made Great Again', expands like a gas, filling the horizon.

The image of the future is used to justify atrocity in the present, particularly toward those whom an 'America Made Great' is not compelling. To those who see queer in the horizon, who grasp for the 'not yet here', the present becomes an even more pressing challenge. The linkage of Queer and futurity is clear. Consent and futurity is less so. Through this conclusion, I aim to accomplish the final task of linking consent to futurity, or at least to how we imagine the future.

Revisiting Paul Preciado's *Countersexual Manifesto*, the role of consent in the present-world Preciado depicts is complicated. Being that a dildo is an extension of the phallus, a fabrication of sexuality, Preciado understands a cigarette as a semantic dildo, with its image conveyed through advertising acting as an extension of Phillip Morris's phallic presence penetrating the smoker's mind (Preciado 2018, 34). Similarly, the dollar can be thought of as a semantic dildo on two fronts. First, as a symbol of the state, thrusting itself into the financial lives of those forced to use it. Second, the dollar can be thought of as an experiment in levels of non-consent. No one consented to the dollar. Being as such, the withholding of life necessities because of the dollar's non-presence creates a lust for it. Like how a dominatrix may tease her sub by withholding an orgasm, the dollar teases the citizen by withholding the means to food, healthcare, and general stability (Preciado 2018, 34).

What is consent in this world? Where everything is, in part, a semantic-sexual act with no prior discussion, how is anything ‘ok’? Is digital capitalism a constant assault?

While this may seem like abstraction in the extreme, and it only seems as such because of sexuality and sociality’s severance, this abstraction *is* relevant. Say the dominatrix is paid for her duty. In this reframing, the ‘withholding’ is a reflexively sexual act (metareflexive if you factor in the exigent sadism in her actions) (Saketopoulou 2024, 169). She withholds her sub’s orgasm while her sub withholds her means to survive. While this example uses sex work to draw the example, I do not mean it as a critique unique to sex work. Any monetary transaction can be analyzed as such.

Considering this, what is consent?

Chapter Two argued that consent was in crisis. Scholars of heterosexuality like Jeffrey (2022) and Kessel (2020), followed Mackinnon’s lead in decentering consent as a mode of organizing sexuality in favor of a “social standard for ethical sex” (Jeffrey 2022, 11). This chapter spent no time refuting what a disaster for queer life this “standard” may be, instead, it and Chapter Three explored ‘liminal sexualities’ as a means for creating queer consent epistemologies. It especially focused on cruising culture, a specifically public practice in the queer male sexual sphere. Because of its unique requirements for standards of nonverbal communication, consent in cruising space developed body language indicators to determine interest and consent that mirrors the utopian. In these chapters, I argued that cruising space’s consent culture was utopian because it required hypermasculine sexual subjects to maintain a constant empathetic connection beyond the purely sexual, averse to the image of the American

man. In American culture, for a deeply masculine man to be empathetically engaged with anyone for any period of time is bizarre, beyond the bare minimum empathy required to maintain society's functioning.

Characterizing this queer masculine consent epistemology as utopian because of its reliance on empathy has potential complications. While traditionally connoted as a positive virtue, as Nils Bubandt and Rane Willerslev highlight in *The Dark Side of Empathy*, empathy has more uses than providing care, compassion, and “non-violent sociality” (Bubandt 2015, 5). Empathetic engagement with a target is an essential element of successful deception and is employed often in dehumanization campaigns. Thus, empathetic engagement shouldn't be taken as a purely positive or negative virtue, instead it can be understood as a site for future research. Research beyond this thesis could analyze how “tactical empathy” (Bubandt 2015, 29) operates in cruising space, potentially influencing consent semiotics. Regardless, the type of empathy I discuss as utopian is not geared towards premeditated violence. Even if tactical empathy operates in cruising space as a means of ‘looking’, multiple modes of empathy can operate simultaneously, depending on cruiser's intentions. I still contend that the empathy employed in cruising space is typically used for care, with the exception of cases of fetishization which I discussed previously in great detail (Bubandt 2015).

While this queer masculine consent epistemology inverts expectations of American masculinity, a queer feminine consent epistemology inverts expectations of American femininity. For the sake of length (and time), I did not include ethnographic material from queer femme sexual spaces, but at large I found that a queer femme consent epistemology more often favors explicit, verbal consent and conversations about

sexual acts before engaging in them. This direct, engaged role in consent is an inversion of the submissive, nonchalant performance expected of traditional feminine subjects.

Future research is needed to add nuance and legitimacy to this claim. Beyond that, future work could interrogate the trace of a binary formed in my depiction of queer masculine and queer feminine consent epistemologies. Further research could also investigate what this inversion of binary gender roles in queer consent space is about.

Using material collected from Grindr and reddit, I complicated the picture of utopian consent in the third chapter. I painted a picture of fetishization being an inevitable result of histories of colonialism and chattel slavery, only made possible by late-stage capitalism's turning of the consumer's body into a commodity to be packaged into "doubles" and sold across various platforms. The lineage from commodification to fetishization stretches further into history as well. Each myth about fetishized bodies can be traced back to a social code created to control one or another groups' labor. This chapter also argued that Grindr operates as a digital marketplace, with user's packaged conceptions of their sexuality functioning as the good 'sold'. Through this, a highly efficient grammar encoding user's bodies with expectations of sexual performance proliferates. Operating alongside this grammar is another one, the 'grammar of fetishization', which explicitly encodes targeted bodies with histories 'justifying' their lack of humanity.

Chapter four aimed to provide solutions to this by exploring the 'counterfetish', an object or performance designed to subvert fetishization through the performance of Kevin Aviance. It furthered this goal by introducing two workshops which participants can use to understand queer consent epistemologies and to produce counterfetishes themselves. This chapter took the 'counterfetish', discussed by Moten as interrupting

racial capitalism and by Muñoz as relieving the ‘dominant imprint’ of their prison of impossible gender, and applied it to the fetishization of queer bodies. My hope with this chapter is that the counterfetish can be explored further as a tool within violence prevention spaces to subvert racialized, gendered, and body-type fetishization (possibly using the workshop!).

In the end, consent, like queer, is in the West’s horizon. Its promise, a promise that our agency matters, that we determine our futures, is an unrealizable goal under the confines of heteropatriarchal capitalism. Only by severing the sexual from the social in our minds is consent made feasible—but only in the sexual realm, and only for some. But for a world where the sexual and the social are intertwined to be imagined, consent must take center stage, not just in sexuality, but in social realms as well.

Appendix A

Goal: To connect queer people on campus, bridge understandings of consent and boundaries

The workshop should have at least two people to facilitate. These people are responsible for steering discussions. Either one or both may be clearly labeled the facilitator, but the second person should be there to steer the discussion away from previously identified triggers.

The first thing when people walk in the room: invite them to fill out the form previously sent out if they haven't already. Mentimeter results can be displayed at the facilitator's discretion.

form results: the facilitators discuss while people are answering the first question what to ask and where.

Facilitators introduce themselves

Community Guidelines: Unless absolutely necessary, please don't share assault experiences. If you must, please give an appropriate trigger warning, tell people what they are about to hear before you explain potentially triggering experiences.

This workshop will have a lot of discussion about consent and queerness. For some folks, this may bring up traumatizing memories, though we are trying to avoid that. Feel free to step out at any time, please don't assume reasons someone steps out. If you have to, assume they are using the restroom.

This is a safe space. This is also a sensitive space. Consent digs at what it means to be a person. There may be disagreements, different experiences, different realities shared by people. Please extend grace and understanding to everyone in the room. It's ok to disagree! Work that out to a point, but if it goes to a certain point, acknowledge the disagreement won't be settled and move on (this is also mediated by facilitator)

This is supposed to be education through dialogue. The point of this workshop is not for (me) the facilitator to teach you, the participants, but for us to share the experience and values shaping our consent practices.

Stories stay but lessons leave. What we gain from this workshop shouldn't be more information about individuals, but a better understanding of consent and how we practice it.

(5 min) Icebreaker: Free Write//Imagine your consent style (how you communicate boundaries, etc.) as a mythical creature

Before, facilitators should share the time for the free write. This won't be collected, this is just to get people in the headspace for this talk.

Thesis bit: While this is a workshop through the LGBTQ+ center, this is also inspired by and informing my thesis research. My thesis is on queer consent epistemologies, basically how queer people understand and express consent and all that includes (their upbringing, positionality, etc). This work is particularly important because of the lack of work in this field. While entire journals exist picking apart the intricacies of consent within the cis/het mainstream, material that informs violence prevention work, very little exists for anyone outside the mainstream. For reference, in 2022 a meta-analysis was conducted and found only 30 studies were produced on this topic... ever. None included consent expression experiences of non-binary/third gender people. Studies have been produced since, but the field still pales in comparison to the field researching mainstream consent.

This work aims to contribute to this field. There will be an independent notetaker not participating in the conversation. They will not be recording anything individually identifiable, mostly general thoughts and lessons learned. If there's something you absolutely don't want recorded, please let me or Julian know.

(~20 min (very loose, go with the vibes)) Question 1#

What is consent to you? Is there a way your understanding of consent relate to the queer identity you hold? Definitions, values guiding consent understanding, or whatever way you want to express that is welcome.

- People get 2-3 minutes to write their answers down, check in to see if people need more time, split into 3-person groups (5 min to talk), and share with the larger group if they want.
- During the small groups, facilitators should talk about Mentimeter questions and the rest of the workshop plans. After, they can walk around and assess vibes of the room.

(~15 min) Question 2# In what situations is explicit verbal consent necessary? How do you communicate this? I.e. best practices for certain situations?

- Discussion groups (small, 3 people) (when we know how big it's gonna be)

Leave room for one or two potential community-sourced questions (repeats of the previous two do not count). If none are usable, that's ok!

Plan on an hour-long workshop

[FORM LINK](#)

Backup questions (if no one submits form questions. Or they do and the questions are bad)

- What did you/how did you learn about consent growing up?
- Do you feel your part of the queer community has a distinct understanding of consent than the mainstream?

- In your opinion, when is non-verbal consent ok? What can that look like? (what signals, etc.)
 - How do you know this?
- Can consent be expressed digitally (over text/snap)? If so, is there any difference in interpretation between consent expressed in-person/digitally?

Appendix B

Workshop on fetishization

Goal: To connect queer people on campus, develop tools to counter fetishization

The workshop should have at least two people to facilitate. These people are responsible for steering discussions. Either one or both may be clearly labeled the facilitator, but the second person should be there to steer the discussion away from previously identified triggers.

The first thing when people walk in the room: invite them to fill out the form previously sent out if they haven't already. Mentimeter results can be displayed at the facilitator's discretion.

Facilitators introduce themselves

Community Guidelines: Unless absolutely necessary, please don't share assault experiences. If you must, please give an appropriate trigger warning, tell people what they are about to hear before you explain potentially triggering experiences.

This workshop will have a lot of discussion about queerness, sex, and fetishization. For some folks, this may bring up traumatizing memories, though we are trying to avoid that. Feel free to step out at any time, please don't assume reasons someone steps out. If you have to, assume they are using the restroom.

This is a safe space. This is also a sensitive space. Consent digs at what it means to be a person. There may be disagreements, different experiences, different realities shared by people. Please extend grace and understanding to everyone in the room. It's ok to disagree! Work that out to a point, but if it goes to a certain point, acknowledge the disagreement won't be settled and move on (this is also mediated by facilitator)

This is supposed to be education through dialogue. The point of this workshop is not for (me) the facilitator to teach you, the participants, but for us to share the experience and values shaping our consent practices.

Stories stay but lessons leave. What we gain from this workshop shouldn't be more information about individuals, but a better understanding of consent and how we practice it.

(5-10 min) Icebreaker: Free Write (3 min) What spaces feel liminal to you? What's your favorite liminal space?

(The goal here is to get people to think about the cracks in the social order, as that is where we find the counterfetish)

Participants can share after if they feel called to.

Question 1# (10 min max)

What is fetishization? How does it work/how does it impact you or the people you know?

- People get 2-3 minutes to write their answers down, check in to see if people need more time, split into 3-person groups (5 min to talk), and share with the larger group if they want.
- During the small groups, facilitators can walk around and assess vibes of the room.

Question 2# (20 min in total)

How can specific fetishizations be undone? Are there specific strategies you have in mind? You may draw from your understanding of your own fetishization or that of ones you know.

- Most likely, people will not have answers. That is fine!!

Introduce material related to the counterfetish. Depending on the energy of the room that could be a variety of things, from drag performance, Kevin Aviance, Vaginal Davis, jazz artists, Tupac, a wide variety of others. This material should be introduced as strategies to combat fetishization. Whichever strategy people use, emphasize there is no “best” way to deal with it. People deal with fetishization in their own ways. But learning from others helps us all survive as a group.

Continuing question 2# (*facilitators should assess the energy of the group to decide what to ask*)

What are some strategies to combating fetishization? Can we construct counterfetishes to subvert fetishizations we face?

Question 3#- Leave time for community-sourced questions from the pre-workshop form. If time permits, and there are interesting questions, ask one.

Plan on an hour-long workshop

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