Back-and-Forth:
Between Krash Klub and Grindr

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ABSTRACT

This research paper discusses queer bodies, technologies and spaces in Puerto Rico, situating them within digital and spatial theory, in an attempt to fill a void in the island's architectural and urban discourse and their relation to the LGBTQ community. A critical exploration of the interrelation between digital and physical queer spaces, the paper is informed by two case studies: Grindr—a GPS mobile application for gay sociability—and Krash Klub—one of San Juan's most important gay nightclubs during the 1990s and 2000s. Through a material reading of Grindr's interface alongside a spatial description of the architecture of the popular Santurce club, the paper positions Grindr and Krash within a discussion rooted on marginalization within the LGBTQ community, privacy and discretion, spontaneous encounters and the importance of spaces for queer practices to unfold in Puerto Rico. Similarly, resorting to this back-and-forth discussion of a contemporary app's digital space alongside a now-closed venue's physical space, the paper explores how Grindr reinforces and highlights long-standing problems such as *machismo* and invisibility within Puerto Rican queer culture, while acknowledging the politics of space at an urban level. [Keywords: Queer Space, Grindr, Puerto Rico, Krash Klub, Architecture, Interface]

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> *One reason the city is so accommodating*
> *for the exploration of identity is that it is a place of*
> *doubles, where the individual can be both self and other,*
> *where he can become an underground man and go unnoticed,*
> *and where his secrets can remain secrets.*
> (Turner 2003, 127)

Quite a bit has changed from when I first heard of Grindr. I was, kind of, discretely—as discretely as one can be while walking along Avenida Ponce de León, one of San Juan's busiest avenues—headed to Krash with my friends, a gay club infamous for its *reggaeton* music on Wednesday nights. As far as I know, nowhere else did that many gay guys get together to dance to a music genre that is 100 percent heterosexually driven and 100 percent sexist. Dancing reggaeton is a not-so-elaborate combination of thrusting your pelvis back and forth as you either: one, pound your partner's groin; or two, pound your partner's ass. And as you *perreas*, you sing along to the lyrics— probably about lowering women's panties and spanking their ass, etc., etc. My friends and I couldn't relate to any of that; we also didn't care, we just wanted to grind on each other. As we walked up to Krash one of my friends mentioned in passing how there was now an app called Grindr, which was used for meeting guys for dates and sex. I was absolutely appalled. That was 2009, Krash no longer exists, and I now have Grindr on my phone.

Complex political, social and religious circumstances have fragmented urban histories of gay and queer culture in Puerto Rico, making them scarce, dispersed and difficult to find. For instance, even as recently as up until 1974, Governor Rafael Hernández Colón's, Penal Code stated:

Toda persona que sostuviera relaciones sexuales con una persona de su mismo sexo o cometiere el crimen contra natura con un ser humano, será sancionada con pena de reclusión por un término fijo de diez (10) años. (Laureano 2016, 173)

It was not until 2014, when anti-discrimination laws were officially put in place within Puerto Rican legislation. It then makes sense that gay and queer identities, along with their "incriminating" evidence, stories, practices and spaces needed to be hidden. Finding them now is the challenge.

Writing from an architectural perspective, queerness has either been forgotten, hidden or simply disregarded from serious urban and architectural research in the island: there has not been a critical understanding nor consideration of LGBTQ spaces within Puerto Rican architectural history, theory or design. Perhaps one of the most successful projects that has attempted to remedy this gap in knowledge is Javier E. Laureano's *San Juan Gay: conquista de un espacio urbano de 1948 a 1991* (2016). As a historian tracing the spaces and events that moulded gay culture during the twentieth century, Laureano states that our history has been silent, and while Puerto Rican queerness has been substantially addressed from from diverse research fields—and according to *CENTRO Journal*'s "Puerto Rican Queer Sexualities" issue in 2007, "Two areas have received the most attention: literature and the performing arts, particularly theater and film" (Aponte-Parés et al. 2008, 8)—the absence of *architectural* researchers within the discussion has been glaringly obvious.

Krash Klub is an icon within the queer architecture of Puerto Rico. Open from 1990 until 2012, it was the longest-running club in the island, and it played an important role within the LGBTQ community, particularly through a rich diversity of drag shows and queer performances and by catering to gay people coming from the USA. Social and cultural exchange took place between locals and tourists. But for the many who frequented Krash, the club has become a memory. Similarly, from a research perspective, Krash has become somewhat of a ghost, as evidenced by its now boarded-up entrance and its rundown external appearance at 1257 Ponce de León [Figure 1].

Calling the phone number on its facade, for RR Reality Realty, the real estate company selling the building, yields no responses. An online search for photos of the space's interior brings up very limited results, possibly because Krash's glory days took place prior to the days of Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram—tools that today have become formidable resources for documenting LGBTQ nightlife spaces.[1] Unsurprisingly, given the lack of architectural production into queer spaces in the island, there are no books or research articles currently published that specifically talk about Krash Klub's architecture. For those looking to find out about Krash Google-searching information on Krash results in a few pages disclosing its location, opening times and a few reviews, while others simply state in bold crimson red letters: "Closed!" or "The venue/the offer doesn't exist anymore!" [Figure

Figure 1. Krash Klub's original location in Ponce de León Avenue. The now-closed venue was located on the ground floor and included a mezzanine. Above it, three floors of housing could be found, giving the queer building a residential image. Screenshot from Google Street View. All images, unless noted, are courtesy of the author.

2]. On Flickr, you can find a selection of photographs from some of its drag performances (granted that the owner does not remove them at some point), while on Youtube, a user called Daliok23 has created a generous collection of performances that took place on Krash's main stage. Darren Bolan, one of the former club's owners, no longer lives in the island and declined an interview request. All of these factors leave Krash Klub to live on primarily through the distortions of rumor and hearsay.[2]

Nonetheless, it is culturally important to attempt to trace, discuss, document and speculate on the queer architectures and urban spaces of Puerto Rico—both past and present—while taking into account the role digital technologies have played in the way we practice our queer identities within the built environment. First, as essayist José Joaquín Blanco observes, history helps us reinterpret our understanding of the world. It is a tool for changing life and the spaces that unfold within them, for recognizing problematic processes and for denouncing oppressive mechanisms within the island (Blanco 1980). Second, at a global level, much queer theory is based on white male experience, con-

structed largely after a North American and Eurocentric scope (Ingram et al. 1997, 7). The inclusion of non-European and non-white populations is urgently needed within queer spatial theory to be able to discuss the broad spectrum of queer practices that take place in cultures, cities and spaces all around the world.

Lastly, exploring how digital spaces such as Grindr relate to Puerto Rican queer culture and spaces becomes key to understand how contemporary Puerto Rican queerness is being expressed, practiced and performed in the island. As sociologist Marysol Asencio asserts, "We know little about how Puerto Rican gay men perceive and negotiate their gender and sexuality in the face of these heteronormative ideals and expectations.... [...]. In fact, we have limited empirical re-

Figure 2. Various websites announced how to get to Krash, its opening times, telephone number and club reviews. Very little else has been left recorded or documented. In this screenshot, the venue is announced as closed.

search on Puerto Rican gay masculinities and sexualities in general" (2011, 336). In contemporary society, it would be remiss to ignore the role smart phones, mobile apps and digital social networks play when conducting research into gender, sexuality and the places in which they unfold. My approach is to create a critical reading of Grindr's interface, addressing its design in relation to the wider queer culture in Puerto Rico.

Cultural geographer Gillian Rose (2015) proposes that to understand interfaces we require a certain knowledge of spatiality. Reading, analyzing and critiquing digital interfaces allow researchers to offer interpretations of digital culture expressions and how these permeate into offline practices, behaviors and spaces, while a spatial reading of Grindr's interface design gives insight into how users deconstruct and reconstruct their identities to be able to fluidly navigate between offline and online contexts. Here, the work of postmodern literary

critic N. Katherine Hayles in *My Mother Was a Computer* (2005) is particularly relevant. For Hayles, there is no distinction between technological processes and the body. Instead, both are mutually responsible for shaping each other—as opposed to thinking about technology as a substitute for humans. In my work, reading Grindr's interface through a critical description of the space of Krash Klub offers me a way to address and contribute to a much-needed discussion on how queer identities experience and give way to alternate constructions of space in twenty-first century Puerto Rico.

We have to acknowledge that in Puerto Rico, the internet has provided a group of queer individuals that are encouraged—and at times forced—to live closeted lives, to explore unconventional ways of finding each other and creating communities within the island as well as outside of it. In other words, because there has been a historical placelessness[3] within the Puerto Rican built environment for gay or queer individuals, with the arrival of the internet, queer individuals have spatialized through cyberspace, thus making queer networking sites such as Gaydar, Adam4Adam and Grindr extremely popular—albeit at different points during the last 15 years.

These dating networks have often been used as spaces to set up potential hookups, as alternate spaces for cruising (*ligue*)—the practice of walking or driving around spaces to find sexual encounters with other men—and Grindr has arguably been the most successful out of all them by virtue of it being a free, downloadable GPS-based mobile app rather than a web-based platform. A phenomenal piece of technology in contemporary culture, Grindr is used in 192 countries by a reported 2.97 million users, according to reports on Grindr's website back in July 2013. In fact, the app has been so successful that in January 2016, Grindr—valued at $155 million—sold 60 percent of its share ($93 million) to a Chinese gaming company, according to *The New York Times* (Isaac 2016). Instead of having to log in via a computer, Grindr is used on-the-go on a smart phone screen, and this has positioned Grindr as a popular, digital alternative for cruising for sex. As a result, the app is charged with social stigma, often associated with immorality, drug-use, drug distribution and promiscuity. Although there are many positive uses for it as well—such as for finding housing (Shield 2017), as a form of tourism (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2017) and for research recruitment (Burrell et al. 2012)—the topic of cruising practices and sexual hook-ups on Grindr is a recurrent re-

search topic (Souza Coto et al. 2013; Rivière et al. 2015; Licoppe et al. 2016; De Simone 2016; Brennan 2017; Ramírez García 2017), and today's media has overemphasized the hook-up aspect of it in such a way that analyzing Grindr from a sexual perspective borderlines on repetitive (Woo 2013; Winetrobe 2014; Fielding 2016; Ball 2017). Admittedly not enough of it has been written from a Caribbean perspective, nor has it been intellectually and rigorously studied within the island of Puerto Rico. However important it is that we fill in these gaps within the production of knowledge, solely focusing on the sexual aspect of Grindr limits the scope in which the app can be problematized and discussed. I propose that the material qualities of the interface, the way that the app has been designed and the company's branding offer original and compelling perspectives into how Grindr has defined and shaped our contemporary queer culture, not just sexuality.

When Grindr launched in 2009, its logo featured a black, skull-like mask over a vivid, orange background [Figure 3]. When you tapped on the app to launch it, the logo appeared on the screen with the words "Get ready to Grindr"; the presentation felt like a cautionary disclaimer or an omen intimating you were about to enter someplace evil. Also, back then, I was using Grindr on iPad, so the sheer size of the screen, the advisory wording, the overwhelming brightness of the color orange and the rough, black skull made Grindr unnecessarily intimidating. The logo felt overtly masculine, like it was trying way too hard in an attempt to separate itself from the stereotypical image of gay men—what in Puerto Rico has been contemptuously and problematically been called *las locas*. Grindr's logo reminded me of the skull on a pirate ship's flag, as well as the symbol I vividly remember seeing printed

Figure 3. Grindr's original branding from 2009, featuring a bright orange background and its skull-like logo.

Figure 4. Grindr's redesigned logo is now a more stylized, softened mask.

on animal poison when I was a kid. Neither made me feel comfortable. They only gave me the impression that Grindr was something dirty and that I should be embarrassed about using it—as if discretely walking up to Krash did not make me feel dirty enough; as if I needed to be further reminded of how tarnished we non-straight individuals are. And by a gay app no less.

Now, though, Grindr has muted its orange color scheme down to a deep, warm yellow. It has also redesigned its logo to make it look less like a skull and more like a contoured, stylized mask [Figure 4]. It's smoother and less aggressive, while still maintaining its air of mystery. Initially, according to an interview with Grindr's creator Joel Simkhai, his intention was to not label Grindr as a gay app, but rather as "a tool for men to meet men" (Salerno 2015). Simkhai continued by stating, "We're mixing people up together, a bit of a social stew. It is a little bit rough—not to mix, but to grind." For its branding, he reportedly wanted something rough and masculine so that it could be about anything, not necessarily about being gay. But Grindr proved that try as they might, it was not about *anything*, it was an app primarily used by *gay men*—and not just *any* type of gay men.

Grindr's aggressive interface design was designed to steer away from the glossy, flashy stereotypes of homosexuality, but it is by no means an app that promotes the brawny, ruggedness associated with hyper-masculinity. The men who are considered most desirable on Grindr are usually clean, athletic, well-groomed, with soft faces. On the app, the most desirable men are reminiscent of the models in fashion shows and magazine ads. With this particular type of standard of beauty it makes sense that Grindr softened its logo—that they went from aggressive skull to alluring masquerade.

Images—such as a graphic of a mask—are not apolitical, they are loaded with meaning and suggested intentions, they make references to sociocultural contexts and transmit messages (Mitchell 1986, 1994). The Grindr mask, therefore, is not simply a *logo*. It acts as a spatial marker for the digital threshold being crossed. In other words, the mask, displayed on the screen upon launching the app, marks the boundary between a user's physical identity and their digital one. Floating on its own over a charcoal grey background, the mask stimulates multiple readings and interpretations. Firstly, it references a disguise as the user enters a space heavily charged with non-straight sexuality. It gives the Grindr guy a shield from onlookers in a way that is not possible in a physical space such as a gay bar. There, on Grindr's screen, in the privacy of this digital dark room, a user can put on their mask and keep walking.

Figure 5. The redesigned Grindr loading screen features a dark grey background with its mask outlined in a lighter shade of grey. As it loads, a streak color traces the contour of the mask before finally lighting up and launching the app.

Second, and perhaps most important, the mask encourages those individuals who do not actively identify as gay, bi or queer to enter Grindr and look for other men—whether for sexual purposes or others. The floating Grindr mask on the app's loading screen is a product of a minimalistic, sleek design decision that's further strengthened by the fact that the mask is not solid, but *outlined* in grey. As the user waits for the app to load, a vivid streak of color traces the contour of the mask's outline, becoming fully colored once the app has finished loading [Figure 5]. And so, the dull, inactive mask lurking in the dark room comes to life, acquiring color when a Grindr user taps on the app's icon, and digitally puts it on. It really is quite beautiful—the pirates and rat poison are nowhere to be found.
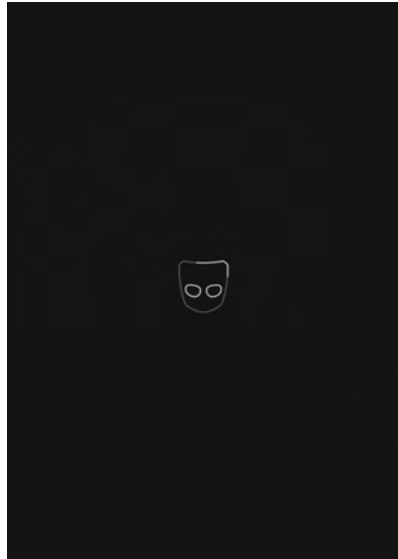
From these interpretations of its design, Grindr's mask suggests two things: that we can put it on and be whoever we want to be on Grindr, or that we can take it off and be our true selves. In this sense, a problem arises: the presence of a mask is still an explicit reaffirmation that with homosexuality comes, first, a sense of hiding, and, second, a need to portray a *certain* appearance—something which is particularly problematic in an island where *machismo* still abounds, even from within the LGBTQ community (Ramírez 1999; Ramírez et al. 2003; Asencio 2011). In fact, the company's official website stated in 2012, "Grindr is quick, convenient, and *discreet*." Whether Grindr's branding is intended to reappropriate society's negative labels and give them a positive spin them through the use of irony is anybody's guess. However, the relation between discretion, secrecy and hiding one's identity has strong links to the historical oppression of the LBGTQ+ community and to its spatial repercussions. According to architectural theorist Aaron Betsky, in North America:

The only thing that distinguished many gay bars until the 1970s (and still sets them apart from straight gathering places in many small towns) was a sign that announced a name. The only way queer men often know to go into such a space is through an invisible spatial network, that of rumor and hearsay, which is sometimes codified in gay travel guides. The entrance is often in the rear, to allow greater degree of anonymity. The queer bars wear a mask that only fellow wearers can read. (1997, 159)

In Puerto Rico, prior to the internet, gay spaces were often advertised in LGBTQ newspapers and publications such as *Caribbean Heat*, *PR Breeze* and *Pa'Fuera!*, because these spaces were often hidden in plain sight. Krash, which was a child of the Nineties, was slightly different, however: the entrance to the club was right on Ponce de Léon Avenue and its signage explicitly stated it was a gay space. However, from street level and judging from the building's appearance, it was difficult to tell that this was a nightclub.

In architecture, the word 'typology' is used to create a general taxonomy of building types, sorted by their functions—i.e., museum, airport, church, school, retail. Typologies usually share common architectural and spatial characteristics that help visitors, users, and citizens identify the building's use without having to read its signage or entering it to know what it is—for

instance through the use of towers with crosses, in the case of a church. Typologically speaking, buildings use their spatial organization and their formal elements to convey a message, to act as their own signage. Krash's sign was not lit, nor was it written in bold, punchy letters. Instead, it resembled an ordinary banner which was difficult to read at night by drivers zooming by because of its size, the fact that it was dark and because the avenue is transited by cars at moderate speeds. Also, typologically and architecturally speaking, the fact that the facade was composed of various balconies on each of its top three floors—giving the impression it was a residential building—helped give Krash somewhat of a dual identity: a club hidden by domesticity. Krash certainly was not and is not the only gay club in Puerto Rico to typologically act as a hybrid. This is something to do with, primarily, the fact that these spaces are appropriated and transformed for queer use and nightlife—they are not designed for these uses prior to their construction.

Queer culture has always been rooted on this back-and-forth negotiation between discretely coded spatial boundaries. Prior to the Internet—with the exception of visiting gay bars and clubs—finding another man to have an encounter with heavily depended on urban and architectural spaces that were "misused": parks, beaches, public restrooms, alleys and even the restroom at the University of Puerto Rico's library at the Río Piedras Campus, *la Lázaro,* are common sites for cruising. Knowing *where* these misused, queerly appropriated spaces were and being-in-the-know that they were used as cruising spots was essential (Turner 2003; Laureano 2016).

If we revert to a pre-twenty-first century Puerto Rican reality—where being gay could send an individual sent to jail, get them fired and/or physically assaulted—these spaces were the lifeblood of homosexuality and queerness. Although gay culture is commonly portrayed as being amoral and sexually charged, it's important to take into account that spontaneous, sporadic sexual encounters were one of the very limited ways to practice a non-straight identity; in-the-moment relationships and exchanges allowed individuals to partake in acts of desire, and then return to their daily lives.

Today, Grindr has changed the way that men meet by translating this act of looking and *wanting to be found* onto a digital space. At the tap of an icon, Grindr subverts the heteronormative, coding of a space—urban or domestic—by overlaying a queer space over it. Secretly and discretely, Grindr
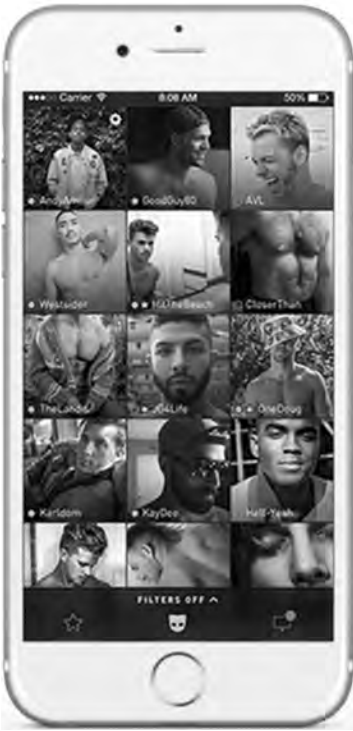
Figure 6. Promotional image of a typical Grindr screen, with a grid of profiles arranged from closest to farthest. Image courtesy of Grindr.

users are able to navigate back and forth between the physical and digital spaces by virtue of a mobile screen, easily finding others while also allowing ourselves to be found. So when you consider that historically queer men have always been forced to perform their identities clandestinely—homosexuality is still a criminal offense in 74 countries (and punishable by death in Sudan, Iran, UAE, and parts of Nigeria, Somalia, Syria and Iraq, to name a few)—Grindr is, in itself, an urban marvel. Encouraged by society to hide our non-normative identities and punished by the island's legislation until 2014—or at the best of times, to not ask, not tell—the mere act of finding others like us has been a major hurdle in most of our individual processes of self-acceptance, as much as it has been one in the LGBTQ community's history. For centuries, as a way around this, queer people have appropriated symbols to signal their identities to others in-the-know, such as through handkerchiefs, the rainbow flag or the pink triangle—a testament to the immense difficulty in not just locating, but in recognizing other queer people. Grindr changes this.

On Grindr, each user turns on the app anywhere, any time, to display a spatially limited network of other men: the closest hundred users to them [Figure 6]. Despite Simkhai's initial apprehension at branding Grindr as a gay app the truth is that Grindr remains an app mostly used by gay and queer men who were (and are) unaware that the app was *not* in fact a gay app. For many of Grindr's users, homosexuality is the norm—it always has been. In the space of Grindr each user is boxed into the category of "gay" or "bisexual" due to *association*—a term I borrow from Erving Goffman.

In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), Goffman discusses "stigmatized" identities, ranging from a person with a physical deformity to someone with a stammer. He does not focus on sexuality, but I have certainly found it helpful when thinking about Grindr, particularly because Goffman claims that "the social identity of those an individual is with can be used as a source of information concerning his own social identity, the assumption being that he is what the others are" (1990, 64). In other words, who we surround ourselves with plays a part in how other people see us. However, sexual difference on Grindr is reverted—those who are not queer are seen as non-normative.

Spaces in the city don't work like this. During the 2000s when I frequented the club, the straight men and women who visited Krash didn't necessarily get labeled with *our* sexual identity; straight people weren't assigned Krash's sexual coding—though this might not have been the case throughout the club's entire lifespan. However, whenever someone goes on Grindr, the users displayed on the grid automatically challenge and reverse heteronormativity in a way that a gay club cannot—in turn, they become marked, or "stigmatized," as Goffman calls it. Because of this spatial stigma related to sexual identity, Grindr helps identify—and at times misidentify—other men without the need of any verbal affirmation. Instead, the spatiality of Grindr and being seen there, signify a particular intention: a desire to be found or to find others. Courtney Blackwell and Jeremy Birnholtz (2014) discuss this through what they call a "co-situation," arguing that co-situation collapses or erases contextual cues about normative behavior.

Spatially speaking, misidentification occurs in the app because users do not *accidentally* walk into Grindr—even if somehow a user downloads it by mistake, they still need to create a profile linked to an email address and password. Yes, queer spaces are still often hidden in plain sight and kept secret, but even so, straight men could inadvertently walk into one by mistake. During the 2000s, from the outside of Krash, for example, there was no ominous "Get ready to Grindr" equivalent—though it's important to clarify that through parts of its years, Krash enforced strict admission policies solely for LGBTQ people, meaning that any straight visitors may not have been admitted and, if caught inside partaking in heterosexual affections, could be expelled from the premises. Inside it, however, Krash was a whole different

Figure 7. Miss Lajas Krash 2010, Lineysha Sparks, performing at Miss Krash 2010. Image courtesy of activist and journalist Samy Nemir. Reprinted by permission.

matter. While the outside appearance provided a domestic cloak, the interior space was a complete surprise.

Going through the very limited pictures that show the club's interior, I came across an image of a drag contest taking place on Krash's stage. There, all eyes on her, a drag queen dressed in bright yellow feathers and a Big Bird headpiece [Figure 7]. As a close follower of Donna Haraway, the humor of the image—this was a man (perhaps) performing as a woman, performing as a bird that was performed by a man—was not lost on me. This stage played an important part in Krash's interior architecture because it was one of the spatial features designed to showcase the male body, for men to be looked at. The stage was of generous size, and Krash, being a double-height space, featured a mezzanine level along all its perimeter. This allowed a greater degree of visibility, where men could stare at others from above, and vice versa, creating more opportunities for men to be seen, meet and interact. It also allowed a larger crowd to congregate in the space by increasing its usable square footage area [Figure 8]. Betsky comments that these interiors facilitate social relations within the group

Figure 8. The mezzanine at Krash Klub inceased the venue's usable square footage. It also allowed greater visibility for its visitors to be seen and to see each other, as well as the stage performers. Image taken the night of Miss Krash 2010, courtesy of activist and journalist Samy Nemir. Reprinted by permission.

by using mirrors and stages to allow the inhabitant to display himself or herself, but also throw together queer people in social relations that do not directly rely on sexual acts. (Betsky 1997, 143) Architecturally, mirrors are useful in spaces for a few reasons other than being decorative—they make interiors appear bigger and they maximize illumination, for starters. Though I do not recall any mirrors in Krash, it has been a strategy used currently, in particular in San Juan's most popular gay club located in Santurce: Circo Bar. With the bright, flashing lights in the darkness of a club, mirrors allow the physical space to virtually extend itself, multiplying the amount of people inside it—the reflections creating the illusion that the club is more popular, busier, livelier than it might be, while also maximizing the chances of seeing and being seen by others.

Grindr borrows these characteristics by arranging users within their respective profiles, displayed neatly in an orthogonal grid of the nearest hundred users in order of proximity, even when they are not all online at the same time. Online users are marked with a small green dot on a corner of their profile, while offline

users are marked with a grey dot. Although Grindr is meant to show users who are nearby—bringing people together through spatiotemporal synchronization on its grid—there is a quality in the software itself that provides a time lag: when a Grindr user closes the application, their profile remains visible on the grid for a certain amount of time. Depending on the grid's saturation, a user will be visible on Grindr for a maximum of one hour after they have closed the app (Grindr displays how long ago the user was online). This means that even though the user may no longer be physically present in the space, Grindr still registers them as being present in the location they were last online at. Thus, whenever a user opens and closes Grindr, they leave an imprint in space, detectable by other users' digital devices via the Grindr app. In my work I call this "digital residue."

This invisible imprint makes a user's embodiment split into two: their digital embodiment is shown as present in a given space in the city, while their physical body is present elsewhere. Back in 2015, Grindr's website disclosed that Grindr users spend an average total of 54 minutes online a day, at various points of the day, out of habit. Part of the addictive nature of the app that makes users check it sporadically has to do with the digital residue. Because one's profile is visible for an hour after closing, it is possible that upon opening it again there might be new messages from users who—detecting you in your absence—have made contact before the time of expiry.

Digital residue enables spatiotemporally displaced bodies to come in contact with each other, increasing the number of potential interactions. Once the volume of online Grindr users increases in the particular zone or when the 60 minutes expire, the Grindr user disappears from the grid. A Grindr profile can also disappear off the grid before the 60 minutes are over, when and if a user opens the app in a new location; then, Grindr will update their location automatically moving the user from the previous location to the new one, showing that the act of Grindring is as physical as it is digital. Like the mirrors in gay clubs, digital residue is helpful to Grindr in a few ways. Firstly, it allows a greater amount of users to interact with each other—online users are able to see, "tap," favorite or message users who are offline. And, secondly, it gives users an impression of a saturated, competitive market—much like the optical illusion of seeing a massive, gay crowd by virtue of the mirror's virtual, reflected space.

Queer spaces are characterized by their ephemerality. True of Grindr as well, the queer space "appears for a moment, then is gone, only to reappear when the

circumstances are right" (Betsky 1997, 142). But differing to Grindr, men who visit queer spaces in the city are able to leave whenever they please, and with their departure, any trace of their presence disappears too in a way that is impossible to track on this mobile app. On Grindr, users cannot leave undetected, and although the app lists them as being offline, their urban history is recorded, exposed and displayed on the interface for a significant amount of time: in one hour, there are scores upon scores of users that might be able to see, favorite, contact, screenshoot or block a profile without the user ever being aware of it, thus compromising privacy. The gaze on Grindr is unidirectional. A user has no way of knowing when they have been seen or identified on the screen.[4] And although digital residue benefits some, it is a violation of privacy to others, leaving them vulnerably exposed to Grindr's stigma, echoing Goffman's claims, "More importantly, perhaps, he must face the unknown-about knowing, that is, persons who can personally identify him and will know, when he does not know they know…" (1990, 86). As a result, in Puerto Rico, the concern for privacy has resulted in a large percentage of profiles without a picture of the user—instead the profile picture box is left blank or substituted with landscapes, quotes or other images [Figures 9, 10, and 11].
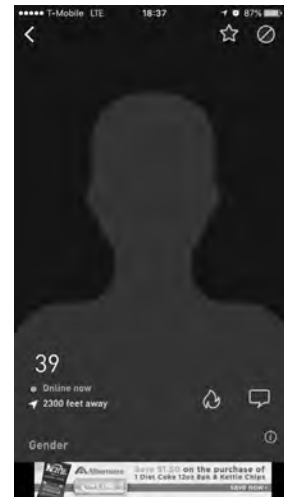

Figure 9   Figure 10   Figure 11

Figures 9, 10 and 11. Screenshots of anonymous Grindr profiles in Puerto Rico, in which users decide to not disclose their identities.

These faceless profiles usually belong to men who for very many rea-
sons choose not to show who they are. They choose to put the Grindr mask
on to avoid being identified: some are married, in relationships, closeted,
discrete, worried about being seen by family or coworkers; or they want to
appear more sexually mysterious, live in homophobic places, are not confi-
dent about the way they look or are avoiding having their face seen, screen-
shot and shared over the internet. Grindr does not foster a safe space for its
users. In fact, the app is notorious for how horribly men treat each other,
especially for those who do not have muscular or toned bodies, and par-
ticularly if they are not white nor masculine.

Globally, cases of racism and marginalization can be seen in a surpris-
ing number of Grindr profiles, in which users write things like "no asians,"
"no older" or "no fems." "Not racist," a disclaimer will often read, or "Just
not my preference." The issue has become so noticeable and problematic
that in July 27, 2018, Grindr hinted at the launch of an initiative under the
slogan, "It's time to play nice." They did this through a post on their Insta-
gram account, and launched a teaser website with pink suede fabric as its
background, with their logo floating atop. Next to the logo, the word "Kindr"
[Figure 12]. On the Kindr landing page, as of September 2018, five vignettes
allowed visitors to tap into hints at what Kindr will presumably set out to ad-

*Figure 12. The Kindr teaser website as of September 2018, displaying vignettes with
audio clips narrating Grindr stories of racism, body-shaming, transphobia and other
forms of marginalization.*

dress. Among some of the phrases we could hear, Grindr included, "Do they give you shit because you're HIV positive?"; "If you don't fucking have a six-pack, you're not fucking getting laid"; "We're unpacking the issue of body-shaming in the gay world"; "There's an anti-fem thing"; "What *is* the word masc [masculine]? Why can't you just be yourself?"; "When someone says something like, 'You know, I don't date black people—talk to all black people—that would be referred to as 'sexual racism.'" Today, Kindr has launched a series of episodes with influencers and public figures to talk about racism, body shaming, transphobia, HIV stigma and femme shaming. A campaign to attempt to increase understanding and respect between members of the Grindr community, along with revisions to the app's Community Guidelines, Kindr encourages users to "Report discrimination when you see it." Queer digital theorist Sharif Mowlabocus claims that Kindr in fact brings tension over the politics of moderation on the app. In his keynote lecture for the "Sites Queer: Technologies, Spaces, and Otherness" conference I organized last spring, Mowlabocus presented his research on Grindr and Kindr, stating that the initiative is a sort of digital cleaning "which falls disproportionally on the shoulder of black people, disabled people, queer people [...] The job of tidying rarely falls on those who occupy positions of power" (Mowlabocus 2019). The problem with Kindr thus becomes that the targets become the ones responsible for cleaning up the mess; they are both the cause and production of a racist comment (Mowlabocus 2019).

Racism on LGBTQ dating and networking apps has become a subject of much discussion (Callander et al. 2012, 2015; Shield 2017, 2018; Winder and Lea III 2018). Media culture theorist Andrew DJ Shield, who conducts research with immigrants' use of Grindr in Copenhagen and their experiences with racial discrimination, argues that Grindr's interface over-emphasizes the importance of the body, especially when these bodies provide "visible cues about a racial or cultural minority position, gender-conformity, or disability" (Shield 2018, 150). In Puerto Rico, where the island's population is mixed in terms of skin color, the issue of *racial* discrimination is less obvious than cases of body-shaming, ageism and discriminating against effeminate men [Figures 13, 14, 15 and 16]. Scrolling through profiles, it is common to spot phrases such as "*no locas*" (no fems), "*macho pa macho*" (masc for masc), "*solo varoniles*" (straight-acting only),

Figure 13

Figure 14

Figure 15

Figure 16

Figures 13, 14, 15 and 16. Screenshots of anonymous Grindr profiles in the San Juan area, showing disclaimers against non-fit, effeminate or older men.

"*no gordos*" (no fat men) and "*no viejos*" (no older). These prejudices against people who are deemed undesirable from mainstream gay culture run rampant on Grindr. Shield upholds:

These statements treat masculinity as a natural or essential, and not as a social construction. As a scholarly field, masculinity studies (e.g. Connell, 1992; Kimmel et al., 2000) arose of queer insights into gender as performative and intersectional (Butler, 1990). So it is somewhat ironic that this rejection of men's femininity remains so visible in a queer environment. (2018, 156)

In the context of Puerto Rico, the rejection of femininity by gay men is nothing new. In fact, it has been an important topic in scholarly research, particularly through the lens of machismo (Torres 1998; Asencio 2011; del Río Gabiola 2012; Ramírez et al. 2003). In her article "'Locas', Respect, and Masculinity: Gender Conformity in Migrant Puerto Rican Gay Masculinities", sociologist Marysol Asencio explores masculinity in the cases of 37 Puerto Rican migrants who, having been raised in the island, attested to the importance of masculinity in their development and interactions with other men. Asencio writes, "*Machismo* represents a form of manhood that is dominant, aggressive, and sexual" (2011, 337). Machismo reinforces the male/female binary, privileging masculinity as the dominant of the two. Meanwhile, in *What It Means To Be a Man: Reflections on Puerto Rican Masculinity* (1999), Rafael L. Ramírez upholds that Puerto Rican men distance themselves from women and men marginalized by class, race and sexuality. Both Asencio and Ramírez find a rejection of the figure of la loca—a word used to refer to a feminine homosexual man among Puerto Ricans and Latin Americans. Asencio states of her research participants, "They resist identification of themselves as effeminate and distance themselves from *locas* (effeminate gay men). They associate *locas* with overt homosexuality, disrespect, and marginality" (2011, 335). The rejection of la loca, a pejorative portrayal of femininity in gay culture, remains very present in on their profiles—as well as other forms of outright rejecting femininity—shows that although Grindr is changing the way queer men in the island meet, it is also a space reflective of our culture. Men in Puerto Rico still struggle with masculinity, coming out and expressing their identities. In Ramírez and colleagues' research ar-
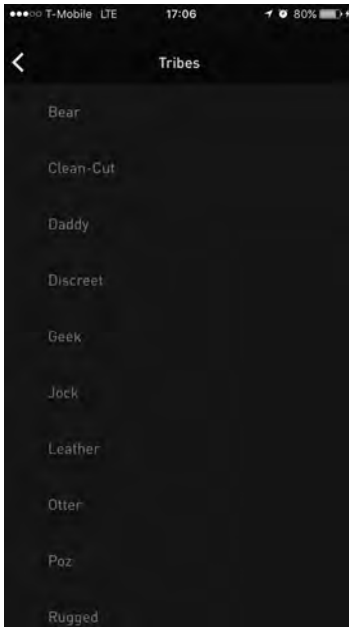
Figure 17. The Grindr "tribes" filter creates categories of subcultures within queer and gay culture based on looks and sexual interests. Turning on the filter makes the Grindr screen display only those who meet the criteria, erasing every other body from view.

ticle, "Men Coming Out in Puerto Rico," the authors found that, upon becoming aware of their sexual preferences, their participants initial reaction were mainly fear, curiosity, guilt and shame. As a consequence, Ramírez and associates uphold that their participants tried to hide their sexual attraction and pass as heterosexuals at different points in their lives (Ramírez et al. 2003, 49). Grindr, however, creates a space of experimentation for a variety of non-heteronormative identities in an environment where their identity can be kept secret if they so desire.

In 2014, Grindr added a "tribe" function on the app. It allows users to taxonomize themselves within categories of gay culture—bear, clean-cut, daddy, discreet, geek, jock, leather, otter, poz (HIV positive), rugged, trans or twink [Figure 17]. At first glance it seems that Grindr did this in an effort to embrace the variety of identities, bodies, and subcultures it houses. But the tribe function acts as a filter, and selecting a category actively *hides* every user who falls outside the selected category. The problem with these labels is that they are dependent on body type and sexual interests, and do not represent common values; they privilege aesthetics rather than substance. In their research article, "'Blocking' and 'Filtering': a Commentary on Mobile Technology, Racism, and the Sexual Networks of Young Black MSM (YBMSM)" (2018), Terrell J. A. Winder and Charles H. Lea III argue that blocking and filtering may even have repercussions in public health, as they found that digital settings create restrictive sexual networks that may explain an increase in disease transmissions. It is likely that Grindr has a perfectly marketable reason for adding their tribes filter—it helps men meet the

type of men they want to meet—but through it, Grindr is guilty of reinforcing marginalization on the app, enabling the active separation of queer people. In an already invisible space, tribes further hide any user falling outside the margins of what they each deem desirable—and valuable. Mowlabocus has pointed out how Grindr has 'attempted' to tackle marginalization, while also not touching their profit margins (Mowlabocus 2019). Through the filtering function, he claims, "The very infrastructure screens out and disavows what it claims to be advocating for in the Kindr campaign; Grindr validates and reproduces the very qualities it seeks to combat" (Mowlabocus 2019).

Originally, Grindr simply displayed the nearest hundred users in order of proximity. In its attempt to "not to mix, but to grind" people together, it provided an honest and inclusive mapping of queer bodies, in which users were forced to come in contact with each other, even if only visually. The screen displayed all types of users, regardless of tribe, in a way that the unlikeliest types of people might be able to meet (or simply just chat), even if they were outside of each other's ideals of desirability, like the many different types of guys I saw, talked to or danced with at Krash: there were effeminate guys, muscular guys, older guys, *cacos*, geeky guys, guys who were high, guys who were sober and everything in between. They were not invisible. They were *there*, they were equal and they were not a threat.

The erasure of bodies that fall outside certain social standards of beauty or desirability does nothing but actively divide our queer community by creating a digital extermination of an already marginalized group. In Puerto Rico, where queer culture is still actively persecuted by right-wing political agendas and religious groups; where misogyny is still strongly present in our culture; where the lack of sufficient queer spaces to congregate is a struggle; and where migration to the US mainland is so common, it is vital to propose, promote and build ways to bring LGBTQ individuals together, not separate, belittle or hide them away. Grindr did not create the problem, but it certainly made it evident, and it certainly perpetuated it by creating alienating boundaries for us to cross in the fight for equality and acceptance, making us *other* to each other through a visual absence on the mobile screen.

Looking back, I ask myself whether my selection of these two spaces—one digital, thriving, and one physical, closed—is a matter of coincidence, a byproduct of a seemingly trivial conversation between friends a decade ago.

However, the physical act of walking from the nearest parking lot to Krash—which happened to be at Burger King, even though it was illegal to park there if you were not going to visit the fast-food joint, as evidenced by our many parking tickets throughout the years—marked my first experiences of what it meant to live a non-normative public life in Puerto Rico in terms of sexual orientation. Visiting Krash was almost a rite of passage for queer people in the Island, a point of entry into the LGBTQ nightlife circuit for me as much as it was for many of others. It turned us into queer urban citizens for the first time, navigating through the social and spatial complexities that entailed: the dependence on the automobile to get to the club, a shortage of parking facilities that often left us walking in dark and dangerous streets late at night, having the financial means to enter the club and consume at the bar, and of course being seen walking to-and-fro and being identified as queer. My initial desire to be discrete and seen by as few people as possible as I walked towards Krash's entrance was a signifier of the sociopolitical conditions of Puerto Rico—which may perhaps have shifted today, in comparison to a decade ago. The act of walking Avenida Ponce de León towards a gay club left people exposed to being recognized—something which becomes a significant factor for visitors who are not out to their families or friends. It also left us marked as a *type* of queer: one who goes to Krash on a Wednesday night to *perrear hasta abajo*—a genre which has been long associated with a lower economic class.

In my ongoing research project on how queerness is being performed and spatialized in San Juan—digitally and physically—the matter of economic class and social strata is something I have been considering in relation to the spaces that are being frequented by the LGTQ community, as well as the mobile apps they use. Although this is something I have not finished researching and therefore prefer to not assign any definitive conclusions to, I do feel it is relevant to mention here when talking about Krash's *noches de perreo*, particularly because I cannot help but see strong links to Grindr. Today, Grindr is widely used in Puerto Rico, an alternative meeting ground for potential encounters, especially for those men who live in rural areas of the island and lack public spaces for them to partake in, as well as those who do not seek to make their identities known in public. However, there are many—especially a younger generation in their teens to mid twenties—that reject the use of Grindr because of its association to hookup culture, the abundance

of so-called *"viejos verdes,"* "locas" and *"cafres."* For this reason, there is a taboo in relation to connecting with men on Grindr, an apprehension to use it at the risk of partaking, being associated or intermixing with an undesirable *type* of Puerto Rican queer—something we clearly see when two-thirds of Grindr profiles in the island do not have a face picture.

Ramírez (1999, 2003) and Asencio (2011) both have noted issues of class and race marginalization in regards to sexuality, discussing them in relation to self-presentation, positions of power and a rejection to femininity—la loca. Asencio writes, "Underlying respect is an awareness of one's own social position both within the larger society and within the social encounter. Respect is equated with social power" (2011, 340). Krash and Grindr were/are popular spaces to meet queer people in Puerto Rico, and although they are both points of entry into their respective temporal queer, local culture—reflections of the queer, boricua zeitgeist of the time—they both stir conversations on what it means to be respectable and desirable, who we associate with, what activities we partake in and how we want to be perceived by others. Often constituting the first experiences for living a queer public life in the Island, Grindr and Krash act as spaces that destabilize the notion of a queer Puerto Rican social order and what it means to be respectable—and perhaps righteous.

And even though discretion plays a role in both spaces, once inside, Krash and Grindr privilege the body. The stage highlighted specific people, separating them from the masses and placing all the attention on them, something which Grindr now does through its recently added feature, displaying "new users in the area" on a horizontally scrollable bar at the top of the main screen. Through its open floor plan Krash disabled separation of bodies, throwing everyone together in the same space without any walls creating visual blockages—a free-for-all of bodies bumping into, gyrating and grinding on each other, contrasting sharply with Grindr's neatly displayed, logically organized orthogonal grid of bodies (and landscapes, memes and blank profiles) lined up in specific coordinates in relation to each other. Krash's bar was centrally located in such a way that people could stand at every side of its rectangular perimeter, allowing queer men and women to be able to look directly at those around and in front of them as they each attempted to get the bartender's attention—or each other's. And there, from the bar, looking up, one would see a conglomeration of more people dancing

and mingling along the mezzanine's entire perimeter, which in a u-shaped formation, surrounded the bar below providing more opportunities for visual exchanges and potential social interactions—whether it was chit-chat, dance partners or hookups—which, when all is said and done, is what Grindr seeks to do as well: to bring people a distance zero feet away from each other. But different to Grindr, Krash's materiality—its architecture—did not allow for filtering of any kind. All bodies mattered and were present, performing, visually coexisting in the same space. I cannot help but think of feminist theorist Sara Ahmed's ideas in her book, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), when she discusses that the closeness of objects and bodies play a vital role in the construction of identity (2006). For Ahmed:

[T]he orientations we have toward others shape the contours of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies. Importantly, even what is kept at a distance must still be proximate enough if it is to make an impression. (2006, 2–3)

I have to say, I agree with her. Making queer bodies invisible on Grindr is no different and no less of a problem than the placelessness we have experienced in our island's municipalities and cities. Erasing queer bodies on Grindr sets back the LGBTQ community's search for visibility and goes against the efforts of every individual who has appropriated our streets during the marches that have taken place over the last 40 years (Hernández 1996). Instead of pushing queer bodies outside with the conventional mentality of 'out of sight, out of mind', I suggest differently: throw us all together in the same space, and whether in Grindr or at Krash, just let us grind.

NOTES

[1] Whether it is by searching through library databases, or otherwise, our modern system of archiving relies primarily on the internet. Laureano himself states how difficult it is to find LGBT publications that speak of Puerto Rico's queer spaces because there are no queer archives. I push against a purist claim that internet-based research is not a valid methodological tool. Undoubtedly, in the twenty-first century, Google, for instance, is a powerful archive of information. As Max Kemman, Martijn Kleppe and Stef Scagliola (2003) write, "The transition from analogue to digital archives and the recent explosion of online content offers re-searchers novel ways of engaging with data." Clinging to traditional and analogue forms of research and belittling the use of internet search engines in scholarly research is problematic—academic research should be accessible and democratic. Now, what I believe is the heart of the matter is that, both, in analogue and digital research looking at queer histories in Puerto Rico, there are problems in index-ing and cataloguing metadata. This is the case in Google but even more so in academia, with tends to be obscure and fragmented. We are faced with a problem of accessibility of information—our indexing systems further hide these histories and identities. These were heteronormative technological systems in which queer histories needed to be adapted to by means of retrospective categorization and archiving of data. On the other hand, social media is, although heteronormative in many cases, is appropriated and queered on-the-go by queer culture, acting as a technological tool for documentation, categorization and indexation of queer places and narratives. This queering happens when the software's design and features are used as a mode of contesting the invisibility queer culture has histori-cally faced: through the use of algorithms which suggest which users to follow based on similar interests (usually other queer people, as is the case of Instagram and Facebook), geotags and hashtags.

[2] As this issue went to press, an article by the Puerto Rican newspaper *El Vocero* (2020) informed that the building on #1257 Ponce de León Avenue has been refur-bished as an up-for-sale, 12-apartment housing project rehabilitated by Habitat for Humanity.

[3] Here it is important to mention that although there have been a number of queer spaces in Puerto Rico throughout its history, the criminalization of homosexuality meant that they lack spatiotemporal fixity, creating conditions of ephemerality and constant mobility for their users. Furthermore, it has othered these spaces to the point that architectural discourse has traditionally has ignored them altogether; thus, they are seen as illegitimate objects of study—spaces designed by minorities for minorities, and not by architects.

[4] While this issue went to press, a recent Grindr update now allows users to see who has viewed their profile, with the purchase of Grindr's paid service.

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