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Introduction: Dating Apps beyond Dating

Fabian Broeker and Branwen Spector

Tentative beginnings: a meeting in digital anthropology

Since 2012, when Tinder's explosive arrival on to the global apps market generated both excitement and controversy, dating apps have been the subject of both media scrutiny and academic study. Despite early responses that attempted to stigmatise their use through attention to an imagined explosion of immorality (Sales 2015), their global reach (an anticipated 440 billion online dating users by 2027; Dixon 2023) suggests that dating apps have an established role in the facilitation of sex, romance, and intimacy in many global contexts. Anthropologists have approached dating apps in this vein, demonstrating the ways that they both reinforce and challenge dynamics associated with these themes, including the exacerbation of racial, gendered, and class tensions (MacLeod and McArthur 2019; Ong 2017). Such studies have largely approached dating apps according to their a priori association with romance, dating, and intimacy. In this Special Issue, however, we broaden our approach, situating our analysis of dating apps alongside the search for and facilitation of intimacy whilst also attending to their more non-prescriptive and creative uses, both by their global users and the anthropologists who study them.

Anthropological attention to the diverse uses of dating apps, we believe, comes with some urgency. As two scholars who have approached dating apps differently, we originally met at the first annual Digital Anthropology Day, held at University College London in the summer of 2023. The event was intended to unite scholars from divergent areas of research, all within the subfield of digital anthropology. The day was built around some of the core tenets of digital anthropology, as outlined by Heather Horst and Daniel Miller (2012) in their introduction to this disciplinary label, namely a rejection of the digital as homogenising, the consistent acknowledgement of digital worlds as being neither less nor more material than those that came before, and the attempt at making room for ambiguity within the wide range of studies conducted under these disciplinary pillars. The day was intended to form a touchpoint for academics working in this oftentimes disparate and interdisciplinary field. Debates ranged across a variety of topics, such as artificial intelligence (AI), digital work, and, of particular relevance to the journey that led to this Special Issue, digital intimacies. Within this topic subgroup, dating apps formed a key component of research interest. However, it became

quickly apparent that debate on dating apps was almost *restricted* by this focus on intimacy and that there was scope to widen the discourse to consider elements living in the shadow of this overarching umbrella term standing at the forefront of what these apps were seen to index.

We are both scholars with an interest foremost in digital media, but with a particular curiosity for dating apps. However, we came to this work from two slightly different perspectives: Spector with a focus on the methodological opportunities these platforms provide outside of their position as tools for matchmaking and Broeker looking to situate dating apps as part of a wider system of communication platforms inflected by the distinct cultural contexts of users. Through the connections made during the Digital Anthropology Day, it became clear that dating apps would warrant their own subfield of sorts within the realm of digital anthropology. This would cast aside the most obvious ties dating apps hold to studies centring on intimacy. Instead, they would act as a nucleus around which links could be built with other subfields inside and outside of digital anthropology, breaking down borders between research approaches, territories, and, indeed, any false binaries between the digital and the physical.

Transcending intimacy

Dating apps have woven themselves into the everyday lives of many, as part of the tapestry of technology available to the increasing number of people across the globe who, irrespective of socio-economic constraints, possess a smartphone and thus the means to participate in this network of global connectivity – but also, in many cases, hyperlocal connectivity via the geolocational functionality of these devices. A huge array of dating apps now exists, spread across different community groups, national contexts, and competing desires, alongside the globally established and recognisable stalwarts such as Grindr and Tinder, forming a polymedia environment of possibilities for anthropological scholarship and engagement. The *appification* of software has been key to embedding these, alongside other computer programmes, more deeply into all spheres of everyday activity, from commercial to leisure and education (Morris and Elkins 2015), and has freed them to move alongside their users, passing into and through spaces, physical and digital, side-by-side, or, rather, pocket to screen and palm to aluminium or plastic casing. In their ubiquity, and through their firm integration as part of the communication toolset available to smartphone users, dating apps stand alongside platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp as staples in the digital ecosystem of networked interactions.

The articles within this Special Issue showcase not only the intercontinental reach of these platforms but also the way in which they are integrated into embodied experiences of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other forms

of existence within specific sociocultural environments. The broad reach of this Special Issue across borders and socialities was not designed to contest the term *dating app* nor seek to redefine the perceived purposes of these platforms, for at their core these apps draw users through their capacity to facilitate intimacy, whether that be in the search of a potential partner, a physical encounter, or something else escaping categorisation within the exciting and sometimes illusory field of human connection. The articles in this Special Issue thus do not shy away from or seek to replace the concept of intimacy: this stands at the heart of many dating apps and indeed weaves itself through encounters and experiences across these. However, the thread which unites the anthropological investigations that follow is a desire to move beyond intimacy or, indeed, alongside, above, beneath, or through it to arrive at alternative lenses through which to see these apps and their users, particularly from an ethnographic perspective. Dating apps, via their aforementioned integration into a vast set of behaviours and practices, enmeshed within digital media – part of a larger network of connectivity – are now more than simply vehicles for intimacy; or, rather, they were always more than this, but these entanglements had not quite risen to the surface. There has been a lack of scholarly engagement with the way these platforms function beyond their label of *dating* apps – which in itself is no longer a completely apt term to describe the vast medley of platforms this label encompasses, nor the unclassifiable number of practices it seeks to index.

As the contributors to this Special Issue show, dating apps are relevant beyond notions of dating, as objects of study spanning economic, gendered, and caring relations. The apps can impact their users profoundly in areas of their lives that would seem to be located far outside of the perceived affordances these apps are seen to host. Indeed, as anthropologists, the contributors to this Special Issue are also offered the chance to be self-reflexive so as to approach dating apps not solely as objects of study but as facilitators of engagement with those phenomena and users they seek to study. The contributors speak to the methodological implications of these spaces, the fertile ground for ethnography they can unearth, but also the ethical and personal risks or quirks they carry for researchers entering these spaces.

As anthropologists, we often grapple with the blurred boundaries between our personal lives and our occupation as researchers (Hedican 2001). This is a position often taken to extremes when our field site shifts to a platform such as Tinder, for example. As researchers tasked with archiving and mapping human experience but also with remaining ourselves a part – or rather a participant – in these experiences, we are pushed to inhabit spaces umbilically linked to the centre of many people's lives, existing somewhere between their smartphone and their personal network of connections. Alongside these methodological implications, the articles in this Special Issue focus on the socio-digital spaces these apps produce to facilitate a more in-depth

examination of the particular cultural contexts these apps exist within, taking on the specific experiential viewpoints of communities in widely varying circumstances. As such, the authors, encompassing scholars from across the globe who focus on a unique and divergent assortment of platforms and user groups, unite this Special Issue into one which seeks to cross borders, both territorially and within the discipline of anthropology, to strive towards a new conceptualisation of dating apps as more than intimate media.

Our approach

Online dating has become a common form of matchmaking not only in Europe and the United States but, increasingly, globally (Albright and Simmens 2014). Early concerns with and discourses around authenticity, safety, and stigma (Albright and Conran 2003; Finkel et al. 2012; Gibbs et al. 2006) have been tempered as these practices have slowly come into the mainstream and online dating has been assimilated into dating culture more broadly (Degim et al. 2015). As regards design, Tinder brought forth the swiping mechanism subsequently adopted by many of its competitors. Profiles of potential partners are presented to a user in the form of a card stack, which users swipe through, moving profiles left or right in order to discard them or signal interest. If two users like each other, they are matched and can message one another. Tinder features in the contributions to this Special Issue, but it stands alongside a medley of other apps, which have their own design quirks and flourishes, as outlined within each piece.

At first anthropology found interest in these dating platforms via the route of intimacy, coming from a history of discourse around digital intimacy more broadly (Alinejad and Candidatu 2022; Kaya 2009). There has been ample scholarship exploring the impact that developments in online dating have had on kinship, relationships, sex, and desire (MacKee 2016; Das 2019; Stoicescu 2022), but less so on the broader methodological nuances and deeper societal implications across socio-economic spheres. We seek to build on voices which have sought to push research into this underexplored direction, as regards methodology (Atienza 2018; Spector and Sutton 2024; Esquinas et al. 2019) but also to form a holistic understanding of the broader networks these dating apps exist within, networks not solely anchored in questions of intimacy but rather in myriad forms of lived experience that permeate everyday life (Broeker 2024; Walter 2021). The articles in this Special Issue do not refute the literature that has come before, nor do they seek to distance apps and intimacy; rather they seek to apply the broader goals of digital anthropology to this emerging subfield to paint complex ethnographic portraits of the messy and convoluted lives expressed through and across digital media. There is certainly room for intimacy here, but it should not be an all-encompassing focus and it must be contextualised within each socio-digital space.

Dating apps lend themselves to more than their specific set of affordances in procuring a connection: they can be seen as vehicles for practices that go beyond those which are easily categorised within dating culture. Dating apps offer their users the opportunity to reach into the unfamiliar; they can recast spaces between the extremely local and the boundless, borderless digitality they appear to offer. As contributions to this Special Issue highlight, dating apps act as lenses through which users can view their community via a novel, and sometimes surprising, perspective. When we as researchers enter these spaces alongside users, an element of self-reflexivity emerges that casts the ethnographic lens inwards and opens us up to musings on the feelings these spaces invoke around questions of ethics and identity. Is it possible to conduct ethnography within these spaces without first considering the prominently displayed markers of desire these apps host for their users – and how does it feel to exist alone in this network of profiles looking to connect to one another?

The articles in this collection also speak to the distinctive methodological affordances that dating apps allow for. As platforms that facilitate networking amongst previously unknown individuals, the ethnographic method of participant observation and the selection criteria for inclusion are in many ways streamlined through conducting research through dating apps. The contributing articles in this collection speak to both the benefits and limitations of using dating apps as a site of ethnographic study but also a method for ethnographic research, appraising and advancing social scientific scholarship by proposing a uniquely anthropological and reflexive way of engaging with our interlocutors. Throughout this collection, authors draw attention to the benefits and limitations of the unusually easy access to research participants the apps provide.

In this Special Issue we also propose a unique disciplinary advancement on the ethical ramifications of using dating apps in research with particular attention to researcher safety. As Spector's contribution engages with in depth, whilst social scientific scholarship has offered an ethical framework for the use of dating apps in research, these largely focus on dating apps as a field site rather than as a method of participant recruitment (Condie et al. 2017). Applying a reflexive method, Spector proposes a specific approach for an anthropological engagement with apps. Noting the prejudices prevalent in our discipline surrounding the use of dating apps in research, Spector suggests the necessity of considering users' rights to privacy, paying attention to the potentially disruptive nature of ethnographic research in contexts designed with intimacy in mind, and managing participant expectations. We expand on the position of the researcher within these spaces in just a moment.

Categories of race, gender, age, and other markers of self are neatly stored and presented across the vast majority of platforms discussed in

this Special Issue, and the articles probe not only how these categories are changed online but how they inflect the platforms and practices being studied. They seek to answer these questions alongside the way in which notions of failure, economic strain, and ageing or changing bodies, removed from debates around intimacy, exist within the practices on these platforms. In this way, contributors create in-depth societal portraits through the canvas of these apps, crossing the technological borders of these platforms to grasp at the lived experiences which transcend these spaces.

That is not to say that our focus is solely on transcending these spaces. Indeed, many of the articles within this Special Issue deal particularly with the process and experience of entering these platforms as a researcher. We believe it is folly to create an all-encompassing set of guidelines, or rules, for accessing online dating spaces, to specify what researchers should or should not do, or, worse, who researchers should or should not be. This would not only be an incredibly limiting exercise but also stand in ignorance to the endless nuances of anthropological fieldwork. Any anthropological fieldwork and any attempt at participant observation may have unpredictable consequences and can more often than not lead a researcher to stumble upon moments of intimacy or, indeed, encounter experiences otherwise confined to the privacy of the individual, whether via an observation garnered through building a close relationship with a research participant, through the details shared in an interview, or simply by being within a field site as an unexpected phenomenon unfolds in front of their eyes. We would not wish to censor researchers as to where they should and should not focus their scientific gaze.

As regards dating apps specifically, we are also not here to confine researchers to specific ways in which to approach these platforms. There have been fantastic, insightful, and ethically sound ethnographies where researchers have participated in dating culture (MacKee 2016) but also where researchers are fully immersed in the field site alongside their research participants solely to observe (Ong 2017). Of course, when utilising technologies such as dating apps or other social media, so firmly and pervasively embedded in everyday life, it may also be the case that researchers have experienced them in their personal capacity, either before or after turning their scientific gaze at them. This can of course inflect understandings of these spaces. However, it is impossible to enter any field site with complete objectivity. Rather, having prior personal knowledge of platforms can help to integrate seamlessly amongst users and can provide a more rounded comprehension of how to exist and act alongside research participants (Broeker 2024).

In anthropology, personal life and working life often intermingle, particularly during extended fieldwork periods. This is one of the essential principles of anthropology and one of the great sacrifices researchers often have to be willing to make to gather data. Such sacrifices can take the form of physically moving to a different territory, immersing oneself within a new

community – whether this gravitates around a physical location or is hosted on a server – and spending days, months, and even years away from friends and family. A new field site may often also become a new home. Sexuality, intimacy, and personal relationships – these are certainly not phenomena constrained to spaces designated to specifically cater to them, such as dating apps, but rather staples of human experience which may permeate any field site a researcher enters. Researchers must respond to these dynamically when conducting themselves within dating apps, but it would be an oversight to operate on the assumption that these spaces are somehow more charged emotionally than other mediators of human relationships, beyond their narrativisation. Dating apps must be approached with the same care as any other form of media through which users may share in practices and communication alongside a researcher.

It would be unwise to raise dating apps above the surrounding polymedia environment of communication platforms to seek to limit which platforms the scientific gaze should be allowed to run across, for users flit between these spaces constantly and dynamically. It is also important to note that dating apps are not private spaces; Tinder, for example, may be easily and freely accessed by anyone choosing to register. Users do not experience Tinder as a platform immediately more intimate than all others on their smartphone simply because of its promise of facilitating connections to others. In fact, the inverse is often true: it is only when matched partners move away from Tinder to a communication tool such as WhatsApp that they have more access to the private elements of a person's life, now operating within a more intimate sphere on a user's smartphone (Broeker 2021). Existing on a dating app alongside research participants does not automatically place a researcher within a heightened private or personal environment – yet they may of course be exposed to both the private and personal during their time there. There is an awareness of being observed built into these platforms. The same ethical principles apply here as they do within fieldwork conducted in other online or offline spaces, for example, preserving anonymity of research participants when appropriate and operating interviews only when explicit consent is provided.

We do not feel any researcher should be discriminated from entering these spaces. However, how, why, and where researchers enter field sites is, of course, often entwined with their personal circumstances. In anthropology, gaining access to a field site and building rapport with a community can be a laborious practice, one often constrained by financial barriers but also by language, gender, and ethnicity. As such, authors in this Special Issue often discuss their own position in regard to the field site and how the markers of their identity may open or close these spaces to them. This can be an important practice more broadly as regards building self-reflexivity into fieldwork, which can elevate ethnographies. Fieldwork should be a democratic and open

practice, and digital ethnography, or work within communities that offer access outside of physically defined territories, has the potential for new and exciting research ventures for those who may not usually be able to participate. Of course, just as in any other field site, there will be people who wish to engage with us and people who do not wish to do so, and navigating these connections delicately is the duty of the researcher.

Uniting perspectives across borders

The Special Issue features five original articles, and hopefully the thematic thread weaving these together, or rather the foundation that underpins the perspectives offered by the researchers in this collection, has been conveyed thoroughly already. To condense this expansive venture here, the contributions are united in the goal of examining the impact of dating apps beyond dating, anchoring these applications within specific cultural contexts, and moving beyond the narrow milieu of dating and intimacy to interrogate their wider societal impact on communities, on the basis of anthropological theoretical frameworks and methodologies. Indeed, as is the goal of this Special Issue, the articles are intended to form a fertile foundation for future research contributions in how we can utilise dating apps as tools to move beyond their sociotechnical borders. Moreover, the articles showcase a variety of global voices, seeking to give a more holistic and cross-cultural understanding of how dating apps are integrated in different cultural and community contexts. We have already covered Spector's contribution in detail above and now turn to give a brief overview of the remaining five articles which tie together this Special Issue.

Paul Michael Leonardo Atienza delves into the digital lives of queer Filipino men in Manila, the Philippines, and Los Angeles, United States of America, to explore how experiences of failure shape his participants' complex negotiations, both online and offline, in their quest for connection. These experiences are further complicated by the intersecting social categories of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, amplifying emotions and interactions. Drawing on Dasgupta and Dasgupta's (2018) findings from India, which highlight that sharing failures in virtual spaces fosters unique forms of intimate subjectivity and affective bonds, Atienza reflects on the pervasive theme of failure and disappointment as a significant area of ethnographic enquiry. The research examines how feelings of failure permeate various aspects of the researcher's life, influencing writing, thinking, and self-perception, and his study underscores the enduring nature of these emotions. Atienza grapples with what it means to be a 'native' ethnographer, and how he feels he is situated within the community he has turned his research to. Whilst the notions of native-ness have been critiqued before (Appadurai 1988), for Atienza they play a consistent role within the digital platforms he

occupies and allow him to reflect on the difficult and frustrating role he is forced to play. Atienza underscores the necessity for ongoing ethnographic research whilst cautioning against the pervasive insecurities that animate interactions within dating app socialities.

Aligned to Atienza's cross-cultural ethnography anchored within the queer community, Shannon Philip's article tilts the ethnographic lens outwards. Philip charts how rapid digitalisation, neoliberal expansion, and globalisation in countries such as India and South Africa are dramatically reshaping sexual identities and sexual politics within contexts of the Global South. Dating apps like Grindr are playing a pivotal role in redefining how young gay men construct, mediate, and embody their identities and relationships. This article presents an ethnographic exploration of how Grindr provides crucial visibility for young middle-class gay men in India and South Africa who face marginalisation under dominant heteropatriarchal structures. However, the digital and neoliberal advances also perpetuate existing inequalities of race, caste, and class exactly through platforms like Grindr. Philip's article reveals the growing commodification of gay identities and sexualities, creating hierarchies between 'classy gays' and 'poor gays'. In this process, desire itself becomes commodified, with 'poor gays' being deemed undesirable whilst class performance and consumption become key to achieving sexual desirability. Grindr's geolocating technology exacerbates these disparities, allowing middle-class gay men to spatially and socially discriminate against 'poor gays' in cities like Delhi and Johannesburg. This digital landscape gives rise to 'Grindr Wars', which expose the social and symbolic tensions, conflicts, and violence that shape queer life in India and South Africa today.

Where Atienza and Phillips examine the concrete aspects of what dating apps can offer their users as regards their identities and marginalisations, Leah Junck shifts her focus to the inconcrete: the ambiguities of the experiential dimensions of dating app users. Also focusing on South Africa, Junck shows how the strategies employed by Tinder users in Cape Town reflect the ways wider sociopolitical dynamics of distrust and suspicion coalesce with the search for intimacy and companionship. Junck's contribution explores how the ambiguities of connections with the unknown that dating apps facilitate can complicate the somewhat technologically solutionistic approaches that media and academic approaches to dating apps often uphold. In slowly building trust with relative strangers, 'reality' is something that has to be progressively co-created, with and beyond technologies, in ways that have to accommodate both a sense of control and a sense of freedom to explore. This is true not only as regards research participants but also as regards the researcher.

Junck's contribution engages directly with the criticisms of Tinder and other dating apps as producers of inauthentic and hedonistic encounters and instead suggests their role as a means of engaging with and renegotiating the

unfamiliar. In Cape Town, where Junck feels trust is uniquely complex and suspicion is a constant presence, the dating app Tinder serves as a method for exploring the unfamiliar. Despite Tinder's lack of clear definitions and boundaries, it presents a challenging framework for users to connect with both the strangely familiar and the familiarly strange. The app's romanticisation and fetishisation of authenticity makes it tempting to see Tinder as a metaphor for a world seeking to provide easy technological solutions for the complex and extremely varied canvas of human needs and experiences. Of course, in truth, these platforms operate within the same complex, unpredictable realm of experience as non-digital practices and cannot provide the simple solutions many users desire, for example, in their quest for a potential partner. These apps are embedded in pre-existing rituals and practices, and thus they cannot simply circumvent these, nor render dating a less complex field.

As well as highlighting the unfamiliar, articles in this collection draw attention to the unseen. Attending to an understudied demographic, Irida Ntalla explores the experiences of single mothers using dating apps in the United Kingdom. These women are situated between competing demands of childrearing, wage labour, and social moralities in challenging the heteronormativity of the nuclear family. Within these demands they also, Ntalla shows, compete for space to express and explore their sexual subjectivity, for which dating apps offer a convenient space. Ntalla's work demonstrates the unique socio-digital space that dating apps create in which women's sexual and romantic identities can be incorporated into their identities as single mothers. This article delves into the complex and diverse experiences of single mothers using dating apps through the application of anthropological methods, including autoethnography and digital ethnography.

Through reflective self-analysis and participant observation within online community groups, Ntalla examines the emotional, psychological, and sociocultural factors influencing single mothers' use of dating apps. The article challenges cultural and social stereotypes by exploring the intricate relationship between motherhood and sexuality, dealing with myths that portray mothers as asexual beings, and engaging with concepts such as 'MILFs' – Mum I'd Like to Fuck – and 'yummy mummy'. Ntalla asks what types of intimacies exist in this context and how the tensions between single motherhood, womanhood, and sexuality impact subjectivities and self-representations. By analysing how single mothers balance their identities as parents, women, and seekers of intimacy within online dating environments, the study enhances our understanding of contemporary social dynamics and the interaction between technology and identity. The article considers themes of self-representation, constructions of sexuality, sexual agency, negotiation of connection and boundaries, and privacy. It argues that single mothers on

dating platforms navigate the intricate landscape of sexual capital through strategies of visibility.

A final word

Whitney Wolfe Herd, co-founder of Tinder and founder of Bumble, recently spoke on how she envisions the near future of dating apps (Pahwa 2024). She introduced the notion of AI dating concierges, who would look to chat within an app on a dater's behalf, screening potential partners and bringing forward only those considered most suitable. In this future, Wolfe Herd sees a likely scenario where various AI dating concierges are in dialogue on behalf of app users, essentially outsourcing initial courtship and only progressing users to a date if the concierges conclude there is potential for the app users. Whether this appears a dystopian, or indeed utopian future is up for debate, but elements of this systematically mediated dating dynamic are certainly already in place with the algorithms that in effect sift through profiles on a user's behalf within apps such as Tinder and Hinge.

The rapid technological progress we are currently experiencing across all facets of our lives, with the further integration of AI systems and the magical properties these evoke in media discourses, brings with it the fear that research ventures dealing with digital technology, and longer-term ethnographic projects in particular, could become outpaced by societal progression. However, the role of anthropology, and indeed digital anthropology, has never been to ride the wave of technological progression and measure the crest as it races towards civilisation. Rather, as anthropologists, we float beyond the break, searching for connections between the vast ocean of human experience and the current field site, the community, in which we find ourselves. As such, this Special Issue seeks to return scholarship to a segment of digital media which has felt exhaustively mined, particularly in terms of intimacy, over the past few years and attempts to bring a fresh perspective, and indeed a diverse group of research voices, into its midst – abiding by both ethnographic and autoethnographic principles to study a set of platforms which have often been subject to rather narrow interpretations. This is not a criticism of previous scholarship, which has been rich and has provided invaluable insights not only for the editors but all authors featured in this Special Issue. Rather, the desire which brings this group of scholars together is the notion of building on our existing understandings of dating apps and revisiting these to broaden the scope of approaches available towards them, whether from a methodological standpoint, via an ethical inflection, or through a shift in the theoretical lens applied – always taking care to avoid falling into the already exhaustively mined concept of intimacy.

Scholarship around these platforms, and indeed the realignment of their functionality, as the AI boom inevitably further encircles this particular sec-

tor, will likely unearth new approaches within this field and within the anthropology of these devices. However, we are confident that there will always be room to revisit, and to reframe; to re-enter a field site which may already feel familiar, and to dig deeper.

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Tindering in the Field: Dating Apps, Ethnography, and Discomfort

Branwen Spector

Dating apps have revolutionised how people meet. Enabling individuals to get in contact by browsing through profiles and matching with those they find appealing, they provide a new means of networking amongst previously unknown parties. As such, these apps also revolutionised how I as an anthropologist conducted my fieldwork in a situation where physical and social barriers made making contact with local people difficult. During my research in the Occupied Palestinian West Bank (OPWB), these apps helped me meet new research participants whilst navigating some of the political and ethical complexities and discomforts of working with both Palestinian and Israeli groups. However, this unorthodox method of conducting research was received with discomfort by some members of the academic community because of the practical and ethical implications of using an app associated with sex and romance for professional purposes. These discomforts and the ethical complexities of this method are the subject of this article.

When I decided to use dating apps as a research tool, I was in the final year of a three-year fieldwork period in the OPWB and beginning to work with Israeli settlers. My research explored how both Palestinians and settlers experienced mobility in the region despite and around its numerous boundaries, barriers, and dangers. As I detail elsewhere (Spector forthcoming), I found the experience of conducting ethnographic research in Israeli settlements in the OPWB emotionally difficult because of the extreme differences in our politics. Settlers can be wary of outsider researchers and journalists who they feel misrepresent them as extremists, which made making contact and building meaningful relationships with them challenging. After many months of persevering, both online and offline, I began to be incorporated into the lives of older and first-generation settlers but not into those of younger settlers, whom I was especially interested in including in my research, particularly those working in military and security roles involved in the policing of Palestinian mobility.

Dating apps are commonly marketed as opportunities for meeting new people; some are explicitly advertised as tools for dating, others for friendship or networking (though many are commonly associated with 'hook-up culture', or the facilitation of casual sexual encounters). Profile matching for most apps is integral and bilateral, meaning that only those users who

consent to connect with each other can chat with each other.[1] These apps therefore act as something of a directory of other (presumably) single users in one's area, creating a unique hybrid space in which unknown individuals can browse each other's profiles, chat, and meet in a relatively easy manner and short space of time. Tinder and other dating apps operate through geolocation, so by selecting for users based on their distance from me to approximately within the boundary between the West Bank and Historic Palestine,[2] I was able to see the profiles of Tinder users either resident or working in the region, easily identifiable as Israeli, and match with them. These users were the younger and temporary residents of Israeli settlements whose mobilities I sought to understand, many of whom became key informants in my research.

Using dating apps for professional research, however, elicited multiple forms of discomfort for me, my interlocutors, and my professional peers. Discomfort can be understood as a (negative) affective response where 'our body thinks with pure feeling before it acts thinkingly' (Massumi 2002: 266). Associated with unease, embarrassment, or anxiety, discomfort can impact 'how we as scholars process and assign value to the content offered' (Petillo 2020: 15). Discomfort is also relative to safety, or the condition of being protected from risk, danger, and injury. Both discomfort and safety are predicated on the subject's individual identity and positionality; we can feel uncomfortable and unsafe for different reasons. In this article I speak to both discomfort and safety, acknowledging that whilst discomfort is an emotion, safety is a condition.

Dating apps also come with a discourse around user safety. Whilst imperfect, the suggested safety practices for meeting previously unknown strangers go far beyond what is often recommended to anthropologists-in-training, despite the fact that our work also often involves meeting new people. Safety is surprisingly under-theorised in the social sciences, despite the wealth of literature on how to conduct research safely (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000; Grimm et al. 2020; Koonings et al. 2019; Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Procter and Spector 2024; Weiss et al. 2023). It was to my surprise, then, that safety discourses provided by and written about dating apps helped me conduct my research better than what my ethnographic training had prepared me for. Naturally, conducting fieldwork in the OPWB entails some specific challenges and circumstances other researchers may not be exposed to. Despite this, however, I argue that anthropologists have much to learn from dating apps.

1 The only exception is Grindr, which allows users to contact each other without matching.

2 By Historic Palestine I am referring to what is otherwise known as the state of Israel. I include Historic Palestine in an attempt to decentre accepted truths and to remind the reader of the contested nature of the land that Israel occupies.

In what follows, I reflect on what ethnographers can learn from both the scholarship on dating apps and dating apps themselves. By situating this discussion around discomfort and safety I also incorporate a critique of western practices of research and training for ethnographers that often exclude these themes because of the unease they generate. I begin by outlining my practice as an ethnographer using Tinder before attending to the ethical matters at stake in using dating apps to conduct research. For this I explore the role of intimacy in ethnographic fieldwork and in relation to dating apps, and link this to the point that anthropology continues to adhere to a western, heteronormative, and patriarchal standard of professionalism that does not universally apply to the work we do. In the second half of the article I consider the implications of using dating apps as a research method in relation to both physical and psychological safety. I conclude by making a case for the value of dating apps as an ethnographic research method and for engaging with scholarly discomfort.

Tinder for research: a user guide

Working in the OPWB and with both Palestinians and Israeli settlers comes with its own set of ethical and safety concerns and challenges (see Spector 2021). In order to understand the daily lives of both colonisers and colonised in Palestine, I spent three years learning about how both sides navigate the space of the OPWB every day, moving through different legal regimes, segregated spaces, and occupation infrastructures designed to separate the two groups. For the first two years (2015–2017) I worked with Palestinians in the Bethlehem region. In the third and final year of my fieldwork I began to work within a nearby bloc of Israeli settlements in Gush Etzion. This new field site brought both physical and psychological challenges. Accessing a settlement can expose one to being mistaken for a settler, which can be dangerous. Once inside the settlement, engaging with settlers can be difficult for personal, ethical, and political reasons, given their active role in colonising Palestinian land and their participation in colonial violence.

I began my fieldwork with settlers by using traditional ethnographic methods in an effort to meet people. This included attending local events, spending time in cafes, and, for a gruelling three months, attending women's exercise classes in a local fitness centre twice a day – the traditional ethnographic tactic of simply *being there* (Schnegg 2015). I also joined settler Facebook groups and tried the virtual equivalent of cold calling, or messaging group members at random, introducing myself and my research. Eventually I was able to build relationships with a small group of middle-aged settlers and, once vouched for by them, make friends and contacts within their network.

However, because the subject of my research largely concerned younger demographics more involved in the everyday policing of Palestinian mobility, including locally stationed security guards and soldiers, I was keen to connect with younger members of the settlement infrastructure who make up three often overlapping categories. One consists of the children of settlers who have finished high school, completed their mandatory conscription, and either joined the labour market or embarked on university study. They tend not to be permanently resident in the region as they typically remain in the urban centres of Israel/Historic Palestine. The second category comprises those who have completed their military service and taken up employment in the private security companies that employ former conscripts to guard settlements. The third category includes active conscripts, the active-duty Israeli soldiers who are stationed at the nearby Gush Etzion military base. These members of the younger demographics are impermanent residents of the OPWB, either returning to their parents' settlement homes at the weekends for the Jewish celebration of Shabbat or being present only during working hours.

It soon occurred to me that, for researchers conducting fieldwork amongst temporary, impermanent, or highly mobile populations, dating apps could offer a useful means through which to 'catch' them whilst they are temporarily in geophysical reach. I set up a Tinder profile with pictures of myself and a short explanation clearly stating that I was 'a researcher looking to conduct interviews to learn about everyday life', a common practice amongst ethnographers using dating apps to conduct research (Atienza 2018; Broeker 2024; Condie et al. 2018; Duguay 2020; Shield 2017). After I set my user preferences to search within a 14-kilometre radius,[3] for both men and women,[4] and for individuals under the age of thirty, Tinder provided me with a seemingly endless list of young settlers. Almost all of these proximate Tinder users were easily identifiable as Israeli, either by name or profile content, and I quickly matched with ninety-five male users. I greeted each of them with an invitation to consent to take part in the project (Fig. 1). Some thirty users immediately unmatched me, indicating their refusal of consent and curtailing my ability to speak to them further. Of the remaining sixty-five users, I engaged in regular conversation with nineteen.[5] Eleven of them I met in person once I was sure they understood the nature of both my work and

3 This radius was calculated in relation to the approximate distance of the settlements where I was located to the Green Line that separates Historic Palestine from the West Bank.

4 Tinder at the time of research did not allow for non-binary or alternative gender identifications. Although I selected for both male and female users, no female users consented to match with me.

5 The remaining forty-six users did not unmatch me but did not reply to my opening message seeking consent to include them in my research. They were therefore not included in the research.

my intentions. Eight of these invitations turned into useful and informative ethnographic interviews. I decided to cut contact with the other three as I did not feel confident that we had the same intentions for the meetings.

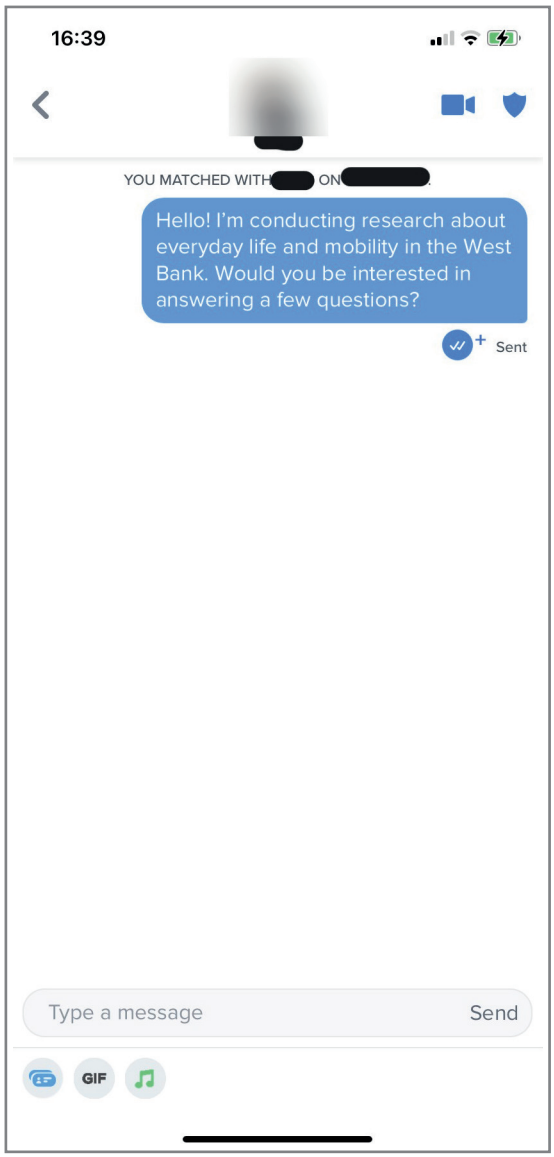

Fig. 1. Screenshot of an initial message to a Tinder match. Source: Branwen Spector, 2017

There are obvious limitations to this method (see also Spector forthcoming). Initially, using dating apps to recruit research participants is likely to yield younger and (presumably) single individuals. Tinder was, at the time of my research, heteronormative, so as a female user I only received male matches. The space of dating apps is largely one in which users seek to make romantic connections and matches are based on a dynamic of mutual attraction. Therefore, whilst I swiped right or sought to connect with every profile with-

in my preference settings, I only matched with those who presumably either read my profile or felt drawn to my profile picture.
Intersubjectivity is, then, a significant factor in how successful researchers may be when using Tinder as a networking tool in fieldwork. Paolo Sorbello (2023) discusses how his whiteness and foreign status in his field site of Kazakhstan lent itself to forming matches with users who saw him as an opportunity for social mobility. Seeing that my status as a white woman who had made a position for herself in an elite western university was central to my profile, it is possible that I was accorded a similar positive bias, although my non-Jewish name and status in the context of West Bank settlements may have worked to undo this. It is more likely that my method was successful because of a proven gender and racial bias that favours white female users of dating apps (Narr 2021), making them more likely to receive matches than users of other backgrounds. It is certain that, given the specific racial demographics of Israeli settlements[6] and the wider racialised context of the apartheid segregation regime of the OPWB, my whiteness proved favourable in making matches with the majority Ashkenazi Jewish population of the surrounding area.

In this paper I do not make the argument that dating apps are a universally applicable tool for making contacts in new field sites. I do, however, argue that dating apps are, unlike other social media platforms, inherently designed to connect previously unconnected parties to chat with each other, with 'the intention to meet offline', as Chiao-Yin Hsiao and Tawanna Dillahunt (2017: 2) note. It is now common to incorporate social media use into ethnographic fieldwork, particularly for early stage networking (Spector and Sutton 2024), but in this research project digital cold calling did not prove successful, likely because of a wariness felt towards unknown outsiders. This unique feature of dating apps makes apps like Tinder a highly useful platform through which to locate potential geographically proximate but socially remote research participants.

Discomfort, ethics, and their challenges

In the process of conducting, discussing, and publishing this work, I met both appreciation and discomfort for using dating apps as research tool. Some research participants agreed that it was a useful means to overcome boundaries of access, but others expressed their disappointment or frustration that I was subverting the use of a platform through which they sought sex or romance. Some colleagues shared bemusement and approval of the apparent legitimation of this approach, 'unofficially' used by some new ethnographers

6 Settlements tend to reflect and exacerbate pre-existing ethno-class stratifications, both between Palestinians and Israelis and within Jewish Israeli society (Tzfadia 2008).

to the field.[7] Others privately suggested that I do not publish on this subject as it may damage my reputation as an early career academic. One reviewer of an earlier iteration of this article even expressed concern beyond discomfort, stating that my method was as unethical as 'the recently retracted article from *Qualitative Research* but also the well-known discussions about anthropologist Jacques Lizot's sexual contacts with Yanomami boys and young men'.[8] This located my practice alongside paedophilic and other sexually violent and criminal acts, framing it as putting the safety of both my research participants and the reputation of the anthropological community at risk. Clearly, using Tinder as a research method elicits strong affective responses.

In this section I consider these three different discomforts: my own as anthropologist; that of my interlocutors on Tinder; and that of my peers in the anthropological community. I begin by reviewing how anthropological fieldwork is often presented as a necessary discomfort and therefore part of career progression in anthropology (Procter and Spector 2024). This idea of a necessary discomfort is problematic and violent in numerous ways (Berry et al. 2017; Cearns 2018; Freed, Procter, and Spector 2024; Pollard 2009; Procter and Spector 2024), not least because it absolves the university and the discipline of anthropology of the responsibility to care for their practitioners. I recommend strategies for managing and negotiating the discomfort of disrupting the space of dating apps for anthropological research. I also reflect on how my own subjectivity as a young white woman with British citizenship informed how I was able to make and build relationships on a platform designed for romance and intimacy amongst Jewish Israeli settlers. I then address the potential discomforts of interlocutors in experiencing this disruption, reflecting on the ways that I learnt to manage expectations and enact strict boundaries around dating app use in research. Finally, I attend to the discomforts of other anthropologists in their reception of the idea of using dating apps for ethnographic research, locating the use of an app associated with romance and sex as at odds with conceptions of professionalism in the context of the academy. Because dating apps are an under-researched area in the social sciences (Condie et al. 2017), there is limited ethical guidance for their use, particularly for accruing research participants. I therefore also summarise the advancements of the approach offered by Condie and their co-authors and present my own reflections for an ethical practice.

7 This is evidenced by the social media engagement with my blog post on the use of Tinder as a method, which at the time was published under a pseudonym and was shared on AllegraLab's Facebook and Twitter accounts (Evans 2017).

8 Regarding the article in *Qualitative Research*, the reviewer was referring to an infamous article, now retracted, in which the anthropologist author espoused the use of masturbation over pornographic images of children as an autoethnographic research method (see Retraction Notice 2022). As regards the debate about Jacques Lizot, see, for example, Borofsky (2005).

Affective responses are sometimes non-verbal or exist as tensions, atmospheres, or private comments, and as such can be difficult to trace. As Paul Michael Leonardo Atienza (2018) notes, such responses are manifested through informal and private recommendations from supervisors, colleagues, and publishers to censor references to romantic or intimate relations in our work. Though difficult to render concrete, these responses are presented as objective and 'determine the scholarship's value' (Petillo 2020: 18). The discomfort of others holds power, particularly over more junior colleagues who are often placed in situations of precarity in the current neoliberal academic setting. The discomfort of our colleagues can hold drastic consequences for career progression, financial well-being, and the ability to coexist in the racist and oppressive structures of the neoliberal academy (McKenzie 2021). Following Wanda Pillow's (2003: 188) notion of a 'reflexivity of discomfort' that 'seeks to know whilst at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous', I too propose that we should sit 'in discomfort long enough to examine what we amplify (or should), whom we invite or exclude, and what we engage (or not) [and that this] must be part of how intersectional, feminist/queer activist ethnography does public anthropology publicly' (Petillo 2020: 21). Ultimately, these forms of discomfort around the sexual and romantic subjectivity of anthropologists (or in my case the *potential* of sexuality and romance, as I go on to show) 'might reveal truths worth wrestling with in scholarly anthropological spaces' (Petillo 2020: 14).

My first concern in using Tinder for the purposes of research was in finding an ethical way of navigating my disruption of the space of the app, commonly understood in the context of my fieldwork as one that facilitated the pursuit of sex and/or romance. Anthropological engagements with ethical considerations related to conducting participant observation in spaces where sexual activity takes place are primarily concerned with negotiating informed consent (Martin and Haller 2018; Pérez-Y-Pérez and Stanley 2011). As described above, the affordances of dating apps easily lend themselves to securing informed consent. The greater concern, for me and my interlocutors, was rather their right of privacy to use the platform.

Dating apps necessarily generate concerns over user privacy given the intimate nature of the practice for which they are designed – an issue for which Tinder has been criticised (Stoicescu and Rughiniș 2021). There are, broadly, two types of privacy that users may seek to protect on encountering researchers on dating apps: institutional privacy, or the concern about how third parties will *use* personal data; and social privacy, or the control over 'who has *access* to their personal information' (Young and Quan-Haase 2013: 482, emphasis added). Amongst those Tinder users who declined to take part in my research, few explained why, many simply unmatched me following my introductory statement and request for informed consent. Those few who explained why they declined to take part in the study justified their decision

on the basis of motivation rather than privacy: they were seeking to date, and they were not interested in someone whose motivations were not romantic (Fig. 2).

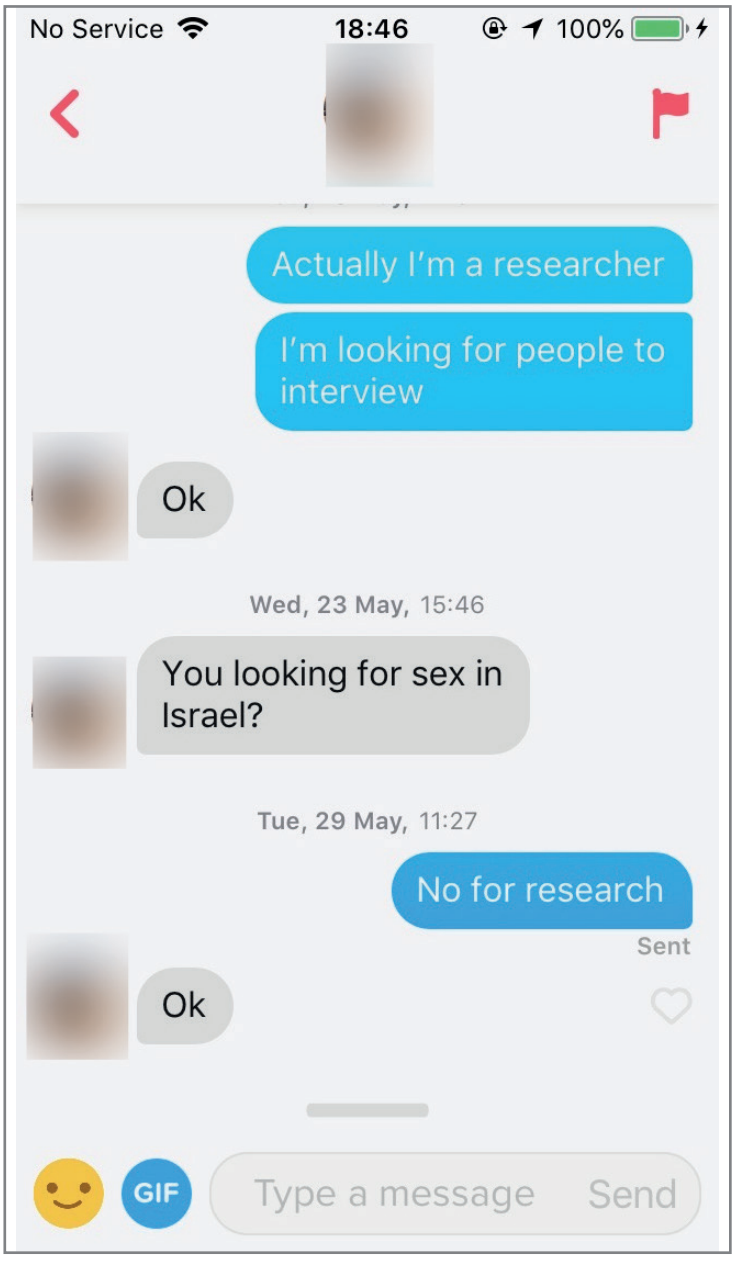

Fig. 2. Screenshot of a Tinder conversation with a settler. Source: Branwen Spector, 2017

As Jenna Condie and her colleagues note, as long as images of user profiles are not reproduced and informed consent is sought, anthropological research ethics have not been breached in this step (Condie et al. 2017). Because of the public nature of Tinder profiles (De Souza e Silva et al. 2010), Kane Race (2015) similarly argues that data collected in ethnographic studies of dating apps are ethically permissible. I add to this the point that, because of the bi-

lateral nature of Tinder (users cannot engage with each other without mutual consent), the ability to contact users is severed once one user 'unmatches' the other user, thereby retracting their permission for contact. Although I clearly identified myself as a researcher in my user profile, an improvement on this for future users of this approach could be to specify whether they are collecting data from other user profiles or only looking to network with users, as users may have concerns about data harvesting without their consent.

The appropriate treatment of users who may be motivated by romantic intentions rather than the desire to take part in research (or perhaps both) should also be considered. Although helpful, the alternative ethics framework for research using dating apps that Condie and her colleagues suggest is somewhat limited in this regard as it more closely attends to the permissibility of using user profiles and obtaining informed consent rather than the sexualised nature of the platform itself (Condie et al. 2017). This is because they take user profiles rather than interactions with users as the primary point of their study, reflecting the fact that most studies of dating apps focus on dating apps as a field of study rather than a method for networking in one's field site (with some exceptions, such as Atienza 2018; Broeker 2024; Shield 2017; Sorbello 2023).

Dating app users may be motivated by the ease of making connections, the promise of finding long-term relationships or casual sex and the excitement associated with that, and the search for validation of their self-worth (Sumter et al. 2017). Although being the subject of anthropological research is unlikely to be a consideration for dating app users, often being the subject of research can serve the need for excitement, connection, and validation (Kaspar and Landolt 2016). Indeed, some of my interlocutors openly expressed that it was interesting to see themselves through an anthropologist's eyes. Because dating apps, like ethnographic interviews, facilitate an environment where seeking information about each other's lives and lifestyles is common and encouraged, I was able to capitalise on the nature of early dating conversations to build familiarity and trust with other Tinder users, whilst reminding them of the direction and nature of my intentions.

This was aided by my making my scholarly intentions clear in my own profile, reinforced through links to my university profile, which I encouraged users to review. Sorbello (2023), who used dating apps in his field site for both professional and personal purposes, did not employ a researcher 'disclaimer' on his user profile but sent written explanations of his interests and expectations to those matches he sought to connect with as part of his research interests. Although I regularly reminded users during conversations of my presence on the app as a researcher, I found that research participants often interpreted this as a form of shyness or 'cover' for what they assumed to be underlying romantic or sexual intentions. I felt unsure of how to navigate this perceived ambiguity by the few users who would persistently pursue me

as a romantic interest, and my status as a researcher in a sexualised space became a source of discomfort to me. When I discussed this with other research participants from Tinder who had consented to take part in my research, they advised me simply to sever these relationships, much as I would have in an offline context.

Some of my professional peers received the information that I was recruiting research participants through dating apps with some discomfort, likely because of Tinder's association with sexuality and the potential of sexual encounters with research participants. This is framed as being at odds with western and heteronormative codes of academic professionalism and the reputation of the institutions to which the research is affiliated (Sanders 2006). Interestingly, Tinder is itself described as reproducing western (Toomey 2017), heteronormative (Christensen 2020), and patriarchal (Thompson 2018) behaviours, but the sexualised context places these logics into opposition to those of the professional academic workplace.

Professionalism, previously interpreted as 'an occupational or normative value', has more recently been re-interpreted as a discourse with disciplining effects (Evetts 2013: 782). This discourse is often dispensed and weaponised to reinforce internal hierarchies and protect the legitimacy of professions' claims to 'expert' status (Johnson 1992). Though Valerie Fournier writes of managerial labour which uses professionalism to 'inculcate "appropriate" work identities, conducts and practices' (cited in Evetts 2013: 786), I argue that evidence of such appropriacy also extends to the context of academia. As such, professionalism is, in a variety of contexts, linked to morality, ideals, and rules of conduct (Kultgen 1988: 5).

Professionalism is often used as a logic by which to discipline relationships both between colleagues and between colleagues and clients. However, few universities in the United Kingdom attempt to control romantic or sexual conduct between colleagues, and only sometimes between staff and students (which in any case are often breached; see, for example, Ahmed 2021; Srinivasan 2021), and hardly mention the status of PhD students (as I was at the time of this research). Similarly, codes of ethics compiled by professional associations of anthropologists – for example, the American Anthropological Association's Statement on Ethics (AAA n.d.) or the British Association of Social Anthropologists' Ethical Guidelines (ASA 2021) – make no mention of sexual or romantic relationships between anthropologists and their research participants. Despite these omissions, professionalism appears to be interpreted as opposed to sexual acts.

I remind the reader at this point that in the case of my research I am merely discussing the sexual *potential* of dating apps as a setting for research. The connection between dating apps and sex has been generated from a somewhat scandalising media discourse around the sudden seeming availability of casual sex between strangers, seen as originating from the

apps themselves (Sales 2015). Discomfort emerging from this association amongst anthropologists may be linked to the omission of our sexual subjectivities from much of our work, which is surprising given the high valuation of reflexivity within anthropology and a disciplinary fascination with the sex lives of others.[9]

This omission is also surprising given the importance placed on intimacy in our methodological practice. Ethnographers-in-training are generally advised to build intimate and kin-like relationships with our research participants as a strategy for achieving integration into and enhanced understanding of their cultures, something we might assume from the wealth of canonical ethnographic literature that presents their experience as such. At the same time, however, there is an expectation that these relations will be platonic in nature (Newton 1993: 4). This assumption is perhaps a remnant of orientalist notions of maintaining racialised boundaries between the anthropologist and the 'other' (Dubisch 1995). Certainly, the gendered, racial, and financial power dynamics in the event of sexual activity between researcher and researched can become exacerbated and problematic (see, for example, Bolton 1995). However, and as Evelyn Blackwood (1995: 82-83) notes, 'many male anthropologists, through their silence on the subject of sexuality in the field, have failed to make connections between their own privilege and power as situated (rather than unmarked) men and the very personal experience of sexual involvement'.

Sorbello (2023), writing from the field of Central and East European Studies, engages directly with his positionality when describing his use of Tinder for accruing research participants in Kazakhstan. He identifies that, for local women, matching with a foreigner may have been useful for achieving upward social mobility. In the context of the settlements where I worked, in which residents are largely observant and mostly middle-class Jews, my non-Jewish status in fact rendered me impermissible for marriage or a serious relationship – a point often reiterated to me by my Tinder matches. It is notable, however, that for women, particularly when conducting work in sexualised fields, a wider social stigma of online dating and casual sex persists (David and Cambre 2016; Duguay 2017) in a gendered fashion (Condie et al. 2018: 7). This can result in women researchers not feeling safe or comfortable to include a consideration of their sexual subjectivity in their work.

Despite these silences and stigmas, the paradox of developing intimate but platonic relationships with our research participants has been discussed in the anthropological scholarship (Atienza 2018; Kaspar and Landolt 2016; Kulick 1995; Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999; Newton 1993). It concludes that sexual and romantic encounters can potentially be analytically useful for the researcher's understanding of both their own subjectivity and their theoretical arguments (Atienza 2018; Kulick 1995). Speaking to dating apps more

9 See, for example, Malinowski (1929), Mead (1928), or Morgan (1907).

specifically, Jonathan Ong's (2017) study of dating app use by humanitarian workers in their host countries details the ways these encounters reinforced colonially informed power dynamics between visiting white humanitarians and locals. Race (2015) points out the relevant concerns with privilege and access for dating app users – namely access to mobile phones with internet and, for those using them with sexual intentions, to a private location in which to host the event.

The fluidity of sexualised power dynamics (Duguay 2020: 39) is also worth considering, particularly in the gendered context of dating apps. When I used Tinder, where gendered and racialised stereotypes are often drawn out and emphasised (Hess and Flores 2018; Mason 2016; Sales 2015; Shield 2017), I was interpreted with regard to local patriarchal ways of understanding and relating to single, foreign, white outsiders. I benefitted from being understood as an innocent ingenue, someone who knew nothing about Israeli and, particularly, settler life. Though I offered nothing more than an opportunity to talk about everyday life in the region, I was in part relying on gendered notions of female naivete and the informal and sometimes flirtatious nature of exchanges on the platform I was using to conduct research.

Safety first: what we can learn from dating apps

In anthropology, ethnographic research is often framed as a necessary discomfort (Berry et al. 2017; Cearns 2018; Procter and Spector 2024). This view is problematic: at best it normalises research as potentially damaging and at worst encourages researchers to place themselves in danger. Discomfort can feel unsafe or lead to the material conditions of a lack of safety. As such, discomfort as an affective response can certainly contribute to a lack of mental safety, something that is often undervalued in the process of ethnographic training (Freed, Procter, and Spector 2024). In this section I outline the ways in which, contrary to my expectations, the use of dating apps to conduct research enhanced both my physical and my mental safety in ways that western training in ethnographic methodology often does not consider.

To do this, I use the safety discourse that the rapid adoption of dating apps has generated as a source from which anthropologists might learn. These safety practices are linked to the social changes that facilitated the emergence of dating as a practice in the Global North. From the early twentieth century onwards, the cultural practice of finding a partner evolved from supervised and family-organised marriages to two adults leaving their parental homes and moving together without family supervision. This has led to individualised forms of dating that are now embedded in digital and smartphone-based technologies, which typically eschew the involvement of human third parties. The rapid adoption of dating apps that connect previously unknown individuals has also generated public discourse about the

dangers this can entail, particularly for female and LGBTQ+ users (Byron et al. 2021; Giles et al. 2022), including harassment, stalking, revenge porn, and scams (Phan et al. 2021).

Popular media (Ellen 2020; Iovine 2023) and dating app developers responded to these dangers, offering guidance and commentary on the ways in which users could stay physically and financially safe when meeting people through apps.[10] Such discourse includes recommendations such as meeting in public, alerting a friend about the date, being in control of your transportation, and leaving if you feel uncomfortable or threatened (Bumble 2024; Tinder n.d.). In the United States, Tinder has even introduced a 'panic button' feature that users can activate to alert local emergency services if they feel unsafe whilst meeting another user, a response that acknowledges the fact that meeting strangers from the internet can be a particularly unsafe practice.

Such features, however, do little to attend to other discomforts and physical and psychological threats users may experience (Gillett et al. 2022), including harassment and abuse (Gillett 2020) and receiving unwanted sexual advances (Douglass et al. 2018) and unsolicited explicit images (Giles et al. 2022). It is, of course, significant that whilst Tinder claims it has been developed with safety in mind (Friedman 2013; cf. Mason 2016: 824), its safety features and advice have been developed retrospectively. Tinder and other dating apps have also appeared reluctant to enforce more in-depth identity and criminal background checks of their users, which (amongst other reasons) are in conflict with user reluctance to provide the platforms with additional personal data, leaving 'the responsibility of cautionary use on the shoulders of their users' (Stoicescu and Rughiniș 2021: 460). Although Tinder introduced a user verification method which partially reduces the risk of physical impersonation,[11] this does not limit the use of the app by those with 'fake identities, fraudulent intentions, distorted realities, or harmful practices developed on the app' (Stoicescu and Rughiniș 2021: 460). As such, the practice of meeting strangers through apps leaves users vulnerable to danger. This is evidenced by a 175% increase in police cases in the United Kingdom linked to dating apps in the five years to 2021, rising from 699 in 2017 to 1,922 in 2021 (Hardy 2023), though it is likely that this statistic also reflects the increased use and normalisation of dating apps since their introduction in 2012.

Both the mainstreaming of safety advice by dating apps and the dearth of attempts to manage the discomforts users may experience is highly relevant to anthropologists. Despite empirical similarities between many fieldwork encounters and dates – meeting a stranger outside of one's social net-

10 This includes, for example, specific pages of their websites dedicated to safety tips; see Tinder (n.d.) or Bumble (2024).

11 The verification method uses facial recognition technology to match users to the pictures they upload.

work, often in their homes or private places – fieldwork skills are often taught without consideration for researcher safety and mental health (Procter and Spector 2024). Often in ethnographic training courses, the freeform and vague aspects of the ethnographic method are emphasised at the expense of reminding researchers that their and their interlocutors' safety is paramount. Reading through Tinder's safety tips on the platform's blog shows that user safety is central (even if the responsibility for safety is located with the individual), with numerous tips reminding users of the importance of consent, protecting one's physical safety, and the freedom to leave if feeling uncomfortable. In this section I examine how anthropologists might learn from the safety guidance of Tinder and other dating apps. I divide my findings into three categories: expectation management, physical safety, and boundaries.

Expectation management with research interlocutors is not, to my knowledge, commonly discussed in ethnographic training programmes or texts beyond informed consent agreements. When building relationships with new research participants, anthropologists commonly set time limits for interactions, make clear subjects for discussion, and share information about where data will be stored and used. What is less managed, and less manageable, is what the relationship will look like. As previously discussed, relationships in ethnographic research are often blurred between professional relationships and friendship as intimacy develops.

Expectation management has, however, become paramount in dating discourse. The often-dreaded questions 'So what are you looking for?' or 'What brings you to Tinder?' are commonly asked amongst dating app users and daters offline (Arias and Punyanunt-Carter 2023). The management of expectations between me and the research participants I accrued from Tinder was achieved in part by reinforcing my intentions as professional rather than personal, both through the text on my user profile where I explained the project (with a link to my university profile page), which the participants could see before matching, and in conversations after matching. Some of my interlocutors expressed surprise at this insistence on the professional nature of our relationship, with it becoming a running joke with a few of them. Others, however, agreed it was a helpful practice, especially when they initially suspected it may be a cover for shyness.

This way of managing expectations and research relationships occurred in stark contrast to my experiences conducting research in offline contexts. Often during my fieldwork I found relationships built with research participants expanding beyond the scope of what either of us expected. In many cases this was pleasant and an appreciated privilege – becoming a driver for female friends who could not afford or did not feel safe in taxis, for example. In others, however, my presence as a young, curious, and polite female outsider in a religious and socially conservative space, operating both without a male guardian or family member to come to my defence and external to local

codes of religious morality, was mistaken for a demonstration of my sexual availability. Ultimately I had to cease a number of interactions and break off several potential research relationships, either discretely or explicitly, for my comfort at best and my safety at worst.

Yet, in such a conservative setting it would have been quite inappropriate to enter into a face-to-face relationship by stating explicitly that my presence and interest was *not* motivated by a romantic or sexual interest in the interlocutor in question. This contrasts with dating apps that, perhaps complemented by their distancing nature, allow for such crude exchanges. The chat depicted in Figure 2 is typical of numerous other early exchanges with Tinder users that set the terms of our engagement in fairly frank terms, designed to dissuade any potential research recruits of the notion that our relationship would be romantic or sexual.

Managing expectations around relationships formed on Tinder therefore offers an insight into how we might safely build research relationships formed either face-to-face or online. Although 'little evidence in terms of visible cues from others to confirm or refute expectations' (Blackwell et al. 2015: 1128) is available amongst Tinder users, the features of the platform, as I have shown, can be harnessed to make our own expectations clear. Prior to using Tinder, there were in-person meetings or research events that I had to cancel, hold in safer locations, or delay when my interlocutors misinterpreted my intent. Like many researchers, I was under pressure to complete my research, motivating me to chase any potential connection, agree to any potential meeting, or accompany research participants to locations using their modes of transport (something that Tinder and other apps explicitly advise against). As a result, I often found myself alone with strangers in dangerous situations, experiencing both discomfort and a lack of safety.

Using the safety practices recommended by Tinder, however, I felt more confident that I would be able to conduct my work without compromising my physical safety and navigate around the discomfort involved in negotiating platonic research relationships. We may not always be able to explicitly set expectations in relationships with research participants, but we can take cues from the safety discourses of dating apps to reinforce our own safety and expectations. By including expectation management into discussions around informed consent or by drawing on the safety practices recommended by Tinder, I quickly found that I was able to practice research in a way that centred on avoiding discomfort through clear communication and on mitigating the risk of finding myself in an unsafe situation.

There is a growing literature on safety in ethnographic research (Grimm et al. 2020; Koonings et al. 2019; Lee 1995; Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Procter and Spector 2024). This work is a welcome departure from anthropology's implicit masculinist 'shut up and take it' attitude towards researcher safety (Berry et al. 2017) that often casts ethnographic research as a neces-

sary hardship to be endured. Researcher safety, one might understand from such an attitude, is to be sacrificed at the expense of data collection. In the context of the OPWB, safety is almost entirely predicated on one's subjectivity: my whiteness, non-Muslim dress, and British citizenship determined my ability to navigate, avoid, and challenge occupation-related violence. At the same time, however, my whiteness and female gender also made me vulnerable to gendered violence. Having spent three years conducting research in a context that required navigating the physical, gendered, and psychological dangers of life in the region, with little institutional regard for risk assessment or safeguarding training for researchers, I was surprised and pleased to find a wealth of safety discourse and, later, safety research accompanying my forays into dating apps. In fact, the guidance on physical safety in dating as suggested by Tinder (n.d.) includes advising against many activities or actions that are commonplace in ethnography: getting in strangers' cars, going to strangers' homes, or accepting invitations from people we do not know well. Such discourse includes recommendations such as meeting in public, telling a friend about the time and location of the date, being in control of one's own transportation, and leaving if you feel uncomfortable or threatened (Sales 2015).

These measures are widely employed by dating app users, as a growing body of scholarly research into safety and dating apps details (Gillett 2018, 2023; Gillett et al. 2022; Rowse et al. 2020; Thompson 2018). This research explores in greater depth the safety work, or precautionary measures, that women often carry out in public and private spaces to protect themselves from male violence (Gillett 2023: 211). As Jonathan Petrychyn and his colleagues note, dating apps reproduce existing safety concerns for users but also generate new opportunities for intimate intrusions (Petrychyn 2020) or behaviours 'women themselves perceive and/or experience as intimidating, threatening, coercive or violent' (Stanko 1985: 1), eliciting both discomfort and a lack of safety as a result. These strategies are similar to what is recommended by dating apps themselves, though with more comprehensive strategies for managing online harassment.

I employed many of these measures in my encounters with Tinder users (see Spector forthcoming). I coupled these with additional safety work done in moving through the space of the West Bank and working across political boundaries, including dressing conservatively and always relying on my own means of transport. However, the safety work described and the advice offered by both popular media and dating apps often *seems* obvious but is not *made* obvious in pre-field training curricula for ethnographers and is often at odds with how we conduct ethnographic research. As Maya Berry and her colleagues note, its inclusion is important in refusing 'the emblematic racially privileged male anthropologist and the assumptive logics of doing ethnographic fieldwork' (Berry et al. 2017: 538).

I take the conversation with David, a local settler, as an example (Fig. 3).[12]

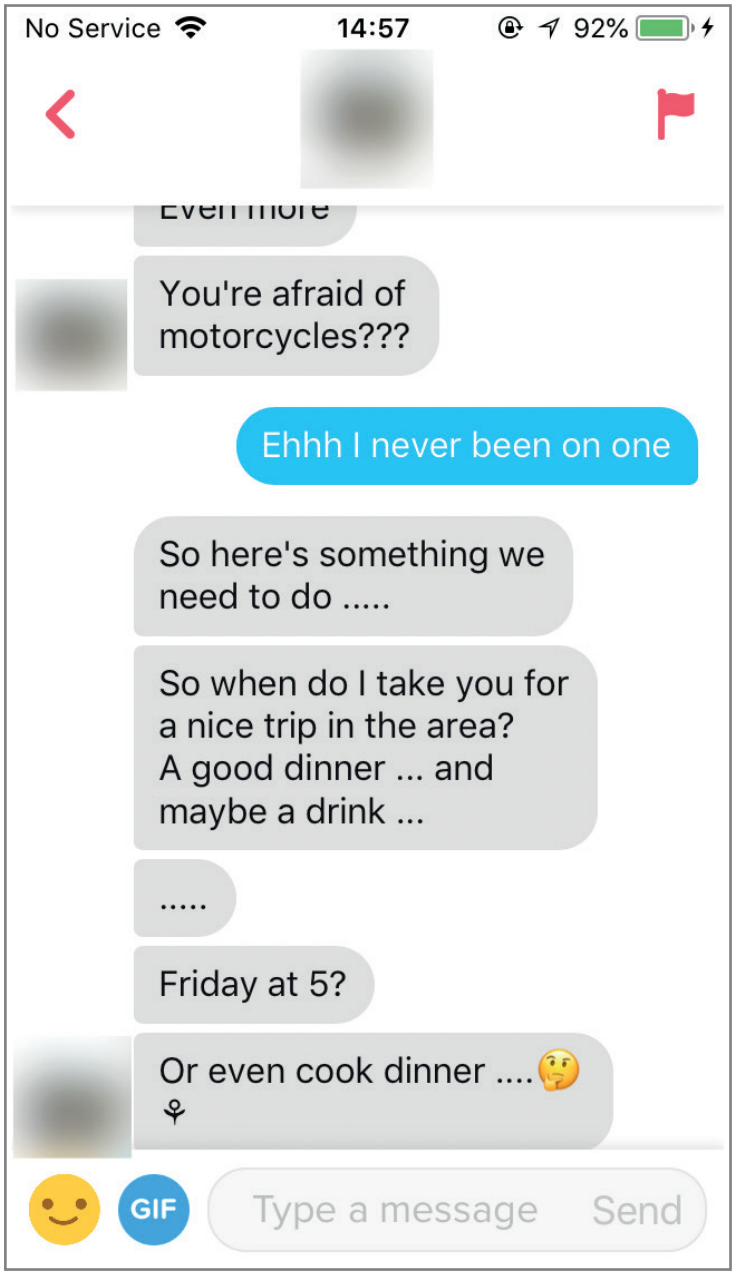

Fig. 3. Screenshot of a conversation with David on Tinder. Source: Branwen Spector, 2017

I first consider it from the perspective of the initiate ethnographer. Invitations like his are, if we are lucky, commonplace and are good opportunities to get to know the local community and setting. The additional offer of a dinner and a drink could be interpreted as platonic, but they could also be

12 All interlocutors have been anonymised and their names obscured from images and screenshots.

unwelcome flirtation (though perhaps understandable since at this point I had not yet managed David's expectations). Yet ultimately the invitation includes a visit to a local's home – the ethnographic jackpot. Had this invitation been made to me in a context outside of a dating app, it is likely that I would have accepted it. Now consider, informed by Tinder's dating safety tips, how we might interpret this as a young woman meeting in person someone she matched on a dating app. In that frame, the suggestion to meet a stranger, for the first time, alone, without the own mode of transportation, to go to several locations (including the local forest, implicit in David's meaning of 'the area'), ending up at his home to cook a meal might set off several alarm bells for a dating app user.

Applying the safety tips aimed at dating app users to my interactions with David, I declined his offer for a motorcycle tour and instead suggested we meet for coffee at a café in a local mall, informing him that our meeting would last two hours, reiterating my interest in him as a researcher, and reminding him that our meeting would not be considered a date, though I was grateful for his offer. In a happy ending to this story, David became a key informant, and we met several times to discuss his life and experiences in the Israeli settlements. I also adopted the recommended practice of keeping a friend informed about my whereabouts when meeting new research participants, despite the fact it had never occurred to me (and nor had I been advised) to do so with any other kinds of fieldwork encounters. I must note, however, that dependent on the setting, informing friends or contacts about meeting Tinder users as part of one's research activities may not be appropriate. I was able to do so because I had foreign friends who were familiar with dating apps; many of my local interlocutors and friends did not know about the existence or function of these apps and would possibly have not approved of this method of conducting research. It is also significant that Tinder's report function only works in some countries and requires collaboration from local police forces, something that may not be possible in many fieldwork contexts. Safety work is therefore required to understand how local authorities may receive victims of harassment, particularly for LGBTQ+ users.

After three years of working alone, in difficult physical conditions and across political boundaries, I was not mentally well. Adding to this was the discomfort I felt in the connections I was building with settlers, with whom I did not share political convictions and where the ambivalence I felt made it difficult for me to build meaningful relationships (see Spector forthcoming). As my incorporation into the fabric of settler life increased, I found myself both relieved that my research was proving feasible but also desperate to retreat and limit my exposure to this community whose politics I saw as so destructive towards the lives of my Palestinian friends and interlocutors. A welcome and unexpected aspect of working with Tinder allowed me to con-

trol the pace of my engagements with my research participants in ways that benefitted my health.

Initially, containing my research to a single app allowed me to apply boundaries to my exposure to settler life in ways that helped me manage my needs as they emerged. It is commonplace to migrate conversations initiated on Tinder to more personal messaging platforms like WhatsApp or iMessage (Broeker 2023). I decided to decline such invitations, for two reasons. Initially, I sought to mirror other practices of separation in my work with both Palestinians and Israeli settlers, including keeping separate Facebook accounts for communicating with each group (see Spector and Sutton 2024). I practiced this form of digital separation to limit the discomfort each group would have experienced if they learnt of my dual role in the region. Whilst I was open with Palestinian friends and interlocutors about my work amongst Israeli settlers, it remained a source of tension for some. Similarly, I knew that Israeli settlers would feel discomfort at knowing the extent of my connections with Palestinians. Opting to keep different platforms and accounts in use for different relationships with different groups became a way of navigating the potential discomforts of my interlocutors, as well as my own discomfort with crossing political boundaries. This method, however, limited the ways that my interlocutors were able to 'verify' or 'authenticate' me beyond my university page linked from my Tinder profile, and, similarly, this did not allow me to verify other users. It is acknowledged, however, that authenticity in digital research is a complex matter (Boellstorff et al. 2012), and the ways in which we present ourselves online depend on the varying affordances and environments of the different social media platforms and audiences (Spector and Sutton 2024).

Containing my interactions with settlers to Tinder also allowed me to practice digital boundary building in order to protect my health. By limiting my conversations with Tinder-using settlers to the app and adjusting both the notification settings and the hours during which I engaged with them, I was able to choose when I conducted ethnographic research on a subject I found increasingly difficult to manage (see Spector and Sutton 2024). Using dating apps, like other forms of digital ethnography, allow the pace, schedule, and intensity of communication to be controlled. By avoiding working across an ecosystem of different apps I was able both to limit exposure to this group and to keep strict working hours, avoiding conversations late at night and managing the expectations of my interlocutors about when I was able to talk with them; interviews could be scheduled or ad-hoc as user availability changed, but ultimately they were curtailed to within set working hours. Only replying to messages during the daytime and keeping our communications to Tinder also reinforced the professional nature of the relationships I was seeking to build with other Tinder users in a non-professional setting. This method proved successful in alleviating the discomfort I felt around

potentially misleading those users who I observed might have ulterior or alternative motives, allowing me to reiterate the nature of our relationship and refer back to the informed consent agreement if necessary.

Conclusion

In this article I explore the ethical and practical discomforts of conducting ethnography using dating apps for ethnographer, interlocutors, and academic community. On one hand, as an early career scholar, it can be difficult to write about discomforts that are not made explicit by colleagues or caused by the divulgence of any 'unprofessional' references to sexual subjectivity. On the other, it seems a helpful exercise to engage with discomfort as a vague and difficult-to-trace affective response by tracing it. By unpicking these numerous discomforts, I do not mean to convince all anthropologists that using Tinder is the perfect method for their future research. Rather, I hope to demonstrate some of the ethical complexities of ethnographic fieldwork as a whole whilst emphasising that we can, as scholars, respond to new technologies and the discourses they inspire to the benefit of our research.

The article also provides a series of prompts, recommendations, and considerations for those seeking to take up this practice, which I now summarise. Disrupting the space of dating apps by using them for 'off-label' or non-prescriptive uses is not a new phenomenon for users (Duguay 2020) but far more so for those few ethnographers and researchers using them to network in their field sites rather than approach them as field site itself. The ethical considerations for this type of disruption include being mindful of users' rights to data privacy, both institutional and social; being aware of how we might mislead users who use the apps with different motivations than ours; and being sensitive to the possibility of having one's own intentions misread. I also recommend managing research participant expectations explicitly and in multiple ways: in user bios, by informed consent agreements, and through chatting.

Despite the risk of being exposed to stigma when sharing research conducted in sexualised contexts (Condie et al. 2018: 7; David and Cambre 2016; Duguay 2017), researchers should not be put off from using dating apps to conduct research as long as we pay due attention to the ways in which it can inform power dynamics in the field. The dismissive attitude within the discipline also does not pay due attention to the fact that outside the context of dating apps, as Eszter Kovàcs and Arshiya Bose (2014: 116) note, 'regardless of the country, culture, or social network, relationships can become sexualized'. When conducted with consideration and care towards the well-being of our interlocutors and ourselves, attention to our sexual subjectivities can reveal powerful and analytically useful knowledge that challenges lingering patriarchal attitudes within the academy.

The safety recommendations that now accompany dating app use placethe responsibility of safety on the user rather than the app (Stoicescu and Rughiniş 2021) – much like the ethnographic training programmes many of us received (Procter and Spector 2024). The safety recommendations of dating apps may, for some, be the first encounter with direct safety advice in navigating encounters with previously unknown people. Whilst these recommendations are not universally applicable and are crafted in response to the numerous dangers app users have faced, they represent key considerations not often made clear to initiate ethnographers. Dating apps, furthermore, along with other forms of digital research, can also offer opportunities for safer and more boundaried research when needed. Consider how widely you want to interact with the wider social media ecosystems of app users and what affordances of online dating platforms may help you manage your own needs in research. As Condie and her colleagues so aptly put it, 'when the "field" is an app on your phone that is in your hand, in your home and every place else you go, the rules of research need rewriting' (Condie et al. 2018: 8).

It is worth noting that I am reflecting on the experience of conducting fieldwork in the particularly challenging environment of a region held under violent occupation, working across segregated political boundaries, and with armed and often extremist settler-occupiers. Despite these additional challenges, I do not consider it helpful to classify some field sites as inherently more 'dangerous' or 'extreme' than others; regardless of setting, fieldwork can often be dangerous, placing researchers in new and potentially risky settings, where pre-existing or known codes of conduct and safety are inapplicable or insufficient. In this article I make the case for wider theorisation on the differences between discomfort and danger and advise readers preparing for field research to consider their own understandings of the two in advance. As research by Maureen Freed, Caitlyn Procter and me shows (Freed, Procter, and Spector forthcoming), trauma-inducing violence can occur in any field site, regardless of the researcher's relation to it. The potential for discomfort and danger can emerge from seemingly mundane forms of interaction. I therefore speak to the potential of all fieldwork as necessitating rigorous and considered training, regardless of the age or career status of the researcher, and call for basic safety training that considers the distinction between discomfort and danger to be integrated into ethnographic training programmes.

It is unlikely that Tinder will be the solution for all anthropologists seeking to conduct research at a distance or expand their pool of contacts. In many cases it may be inappropriate or inadvisable or, if adopted, result in inconclusive results. What the arguments I make here show, however, is that anthropological research often requires creativity, and this creativity ought to be accompanied by considerations of how it impacts us as researchers and our research participants. Often anthropological research emphasises its location in some ethical and practical grey areas; the method is intangible and

relies on simply 'being there' and 'finding out things' through 'talking to people'. The different technologies and ways in which we can talk to people, however, allow us to think more holistically about the ethical implications of our work and, in turn, how we might incorporate learnings from app developers and users into our own practices as anthropologists. Finally, a foray into dating apps draws vital attention to the varied forms of discomfort anthropologists and our interlocutors may face, inviting a reconsideration of what is deemed permissible and impermissible in anthropology and to whom.

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Feeling Failure: Appnography and Its Affective Ties to the Ethnographer's Life

Paul Michael Leonardo Atienza

Mobile digital technologies are transforming how people communicate with one another. Many promise quick and easy platonic, romantic, and/or sexual connections. With the intensification of people's reliance on and everyday engagement with mobile digital media platforms, the study of mediated intimacies is relevant and needed more than ever before. If the former CEO of Grindr, Joel Simkhai, assumed that its users all share a similar drive, stating, 'We visualize. We see before we hear before we think before we do anything else. That's how we are' (Signorile 2013), then how do app users react and respond to failure in connecting with other users on mobile digital media platforms? By mobile digital media, I mean the range of apps from messaging platforms on mobile phones (which include WeChat, WhatsApp, and Viber), social media (such as Facebook and Instagram), and socio-sexual apps (like Grindr and Tinder).[1] I group them as such because communication and connection amongst research participants often move from one platform to another. Although conversations and engagements may begin on socio-sexual apps, participants often employ multimodal communicative strategies, which they explained during informal interviews. These platforms are portals to an expanse of people similarly seeking connection. Yet achieving a match, a like, or a bond is hardly quick and easy. Ubiquity and access to more information do not correlate with quick or easy connections.

During my field research in Manila, the Philippines, and Los Angeles, United States of America, queer Filipinx/o men complained that it was difficult to find meaningful connections through socio-sexual apps.[2] My study

1 According to Andrew D J Shield (2018: 151), '"socio-sexual networking" … refers to the process of interpersonal communication among those open to forming erotic, platonic, and practical connections, sometimes simultaneously'. These platforms have been described in research and by study participants as 'dating apps', 'hook-up apps', 'sex apps', and by other similar terms. I deliberately use the descriptor 'socio-sexual', as suggested by Shield, in this article. If a study participant or another author uses a different term, I retain their term for accuracy of the quotation.

2 *Queer* is used as an umbrella term to designate both people who identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community and those who seek same-sex intimacies but may not use *queer* as an identity designation. When referring to the study participants, I use their preferred identities at the time of our interview. Some identify as gay or bisexual or prefer not to identify their sexual orientation. Others do not equate queer identity with same-sex physical or romantic attraction.

seeks to understand the digital lives of queer Filipinx/o men and how experiences of failure inform complex negotiations online and offline in the search for connection, especially when feelings are amplified and complicated by social categories of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. My original goal for this project was to find connections between queer Filipinx/o men in Manila and Los Angeles through an imagined and shared digital world, but my unsuccessful recruitment of study participants during my research time in Los Angeles motivated me to think through failures of connection, not merely the experiences of my study participants but also my own.

My field research draws from interviews and ethnographic fieldwork I completed in Manila from January to June 2017 and December 2017 to January 2018 and in Greater Los Angeles between June and November 2017. It consists of twenty-one individuals, with fourteen based in Manila and seven in Los Angeles. They were either currently enrolled in public, private, technical, or vocational institutions or had completed a college education. Many of the men in this study identified as gay, two participants as bisexual, and one did not want to categorise their sexual orientation. I honour these identities when writing specifically about their experiences but use the term 'queer Filipinx/o men' when discussing them as a group. I found these numbers to be small at first, but the stories of these men were so rich that they became the foundation of my dissertation that I defended in April of 2022.

I recruited the study participants directly through one-on-one communication on several socio-sexual app platforms. Platform-switching practices were integral for my research participants so that I conducted semi-structured interviews with them not only in person but also on several digital media applications. I made an effort to continue remote follow-up interviews with participants. Many of the participants shared their social media accounts with me and we followed each other through Facebook and/or Instagram. This became another form of communication between us.

In their pursuit of intimacies, as queer Filipinx/o men in my study shared with me, they experienced frequent forms of failure, generating various affective responses that shape their actions and beliefs. In their accounts, failure is not a totalising experience, nor do these experiences necessarily lead to definite endpoints. Such possibilities still create many forms of exclusions to intimacy, yet the queer Filipinx/o men who shared parts of their lives with me continued to aspire and hope for an experience of intimacy. Some openings and possibilities inspire responses and alternative paths towards the realisation of brief moments of connection and small moments of pleasure.

By thinking through my failures to establish rapport and gain access to the various groups I write about, my aim with this piece is to lean into moments of disappointment that continue to inspire feelings and spark ethnographic memories towards the potential completion of our research goals.

As Jessica Greenberg and Sarah Muir (2022: 317) write in a collection of anthropological work thinking through disappointment,

> *anthropologists inhabit an ethos of disappointment that we share with our interlocutors. For anthropologists and interlocutors alike, disappointment unfolds in open-ended fashion, allowing us to learn from inhabiting unresolvable contradictions, from managing the frustration and slow pace of change, and from reckoning with our continued attachments to unattainable and even harmful myths and ideals. In this way, disappointment affords the possibility of generating new genres of critique not to perfect the discipline but to understand its limits and conditions of possibility.*

From these moments, I seek to forge affective bonds with you, the reader, by sharing my experiences of failure (Dasgupta and Dasgupta 2018). The situated failures we experience in our research moves us towards another possibility of ethnographic method and intimacy.

Even as virtual sites allow for more ways of imagining queer worlds, digital spaces are rife with the same offline social stigmas that (re)create hierarchies of difference such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. I ask how these hierarchies, or what a study participant described as 'being judgy', are experienced differently by people using the same platforms in different places (see Atienza 2021). Many of the affective registers of gay Filipinx/o digital sociality often led to failure. A few of my study participants demonstrated how their experiences of failure gave rise to practices that both generate new exclusions and contest prominent ways of ostracism (see Atienza 2023b). These practices were invested with the aim of attaining an imagined form of romantic coupledom, yet different forms of intimate connections were not shunned in this process. As I focus this piece on the experience of failure, I acknowledge that my study was successful enough to generate sufficient information that was transformed into several peer-reviewed publications. I also continue to invite new participants as I work towards different writing projects.

My work extends scholarship from Filipino scholars who share important insights about dating apps amongst queer men in the Philippines and the diaspora. Recent work from Randy Solis (2020) provides a history of cruising practices or the active search for sexual encounters in public spaces that have become mediatised in the Philippines. Solis emphasises the dialectic relationship between physical space and communication technologies in the shaping of social meanings and strategies of cruising. As various queer Filipinx/o men explained during my field research, mobile media technologies both enhanced and expanded such tactics, but many also felt that it complicated the experience with added expectations of disclosure that took away from what may be considered more simple forms of consent and inter-

action. Jonalou Labor's (2020, 2021) key studies on self-presentation on mobile apps amongst young gay men in Manila document beliefs and practices on how digital representations demonstrate intent and motives for pursuing romantic and sexual matches on these platforms. Labor's research participants elaborate how mobile app users create idealised, refined versions of sought-after selves they believe would generate immediate connections, whilst a limited, formulaic self for specific audiences serves best in pursuit of romantic relationships. My study participants demonstrated such practices, and my ethnographic work describes how these viewpoints are applied to their assessment of writing, photos, and interactions on dating apps.

Mobile media platforms are sites to learn more about each other, test possible intimate connections, recruit new members, and affirm belonging. These formations do not escape failures of communication and connection. Each group sets up its forms and practices of exclusion and inclusion. The stories of my study participants also reflect my failures to attain rapport and intimate closeness during research. They reminded me of my failures of belonging based on class, body image, and age, in my ethnographic work but also in my personal life. Such failures affected how I was able to communicate with participants, conform to them, and access spaces amongst them, just as it shaped my confidence to be able to share with you a situated perspective of queer Filipinx/o digital sociality. As Martin Manalansan (2016: 2) writes, 'Filipino bodily energies from affect and feelings are conditioned not by idiosyncratic personal quirks but by the forces of history, culture, and social hierarchies. Therefore, these bodily energies are part and parcel of world making and world imaginings.' These feelings persist even as I write towards completing this piece. It bubbles up from histories of personal insecurity about my scholarly abilities. It recruits other emotions circulating around my atmosphere including the unyielding genocidal murder of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, the escalating legislative attacks on trans and non-binary people in the United States, and so much more. As I try to finish the edits to this piece, I am overwhelmed by the brutal response of my institution's administration to a week-long peaceful occupation of an administrative building. The California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt, is the first public state university in the United States that is part of many worldwide student-led protests that demand divestment of tuition money, investment funds, and research projects from support for the state of Israel. Over 300 police officers in riot gear were sent to arrest protesters in the vicinity of what the students had renamed the Intifada Hall during the early hours of 30 April 2024. As I think and write about failure in my research, I cannot detach it from this moment – one in which failures of humanity disproportionately affect so many in our shared world.

For this piece, I share the accumulative force of disappointment through a reflection of my ethnographic experience researching socio-sexual apps. I

first outline how I think about failure through affect theory and queer studies. In the subsequent two sections I share both the methodological obstacles I experienced during the fieldwork and my personal experiences of disappointment during field research with a focus on inadequacy. As Greenberg and Muir (2022: 317) suggest, the analysis of disappointment 'demands that we attend to ways of being in the world that are saturated with undecidability, irresolution, uncertainty, and dissatisfaction'.

Affective frameworks and worlds of failure

I choose an affective framework to bind the diverse practices of my study participants to demonstrate their vital queer world-making projects between online and offline sites of intimacy. Cultural critics Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (2010) write that affect is synonymous with a 'force' that has the potential to drive humans to move and be moved. In addition, I find the following explanation from the coauthors Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth useful:

> *At once intimate and impersonal, affect* accumulates *across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between 'bodies' (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect). Bindings and unbindings, becomings and un-becomings, jarring disorientations and rhythmic attunements. Affect marks a body's* belonging *to a world of encounters or; a world's belonging to a body of encounters but also, in* non-belonging*, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities. (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 2, emphasis in original)*

Furthermore, Kathleen Stewart (2007) posits that everyday experiences connect people and form commonalities that shape public feeling. Through these everyday and ordinary attachments, we can examine the role of emotions, feelings, and senses in maintaining and generating sociopolitical structures.

According to media scholar Shaka McGlotten (2013: 124), Grindr and 'programs like it have become part of the texture of gay life, part of the media ecologies that shape our daily practices and desires, that transform how we think of ourselves and how we move through the world'. They add that although these technologies offer quick and easy modes of forming virtual intimacies, the limits of materiality persist. These limits refer to access to these technologies like the monetary cost of obtaining a phone or paying for phone service plans with data transmission constraints. Amongst my study participants in Manila, many shared the practice of frequently deleting socio-sex-

ual apps on their mobile phones. One particular user mentioned that they share their mobile device with other members of their family. Users have to consider phone battery power as well. These apps drain energy much more quickly because the phone processes more data information as it tries to load images onto the device interface. As another study participant explained, deleting Grindr from their device also freed up storage, allowing more access to other platforms throughout their day. In addition, social structures that place hierarchical value on particular ethnic, class, and gender identities stick on the surface of these digital frames.

McGlotten argues that investments in keeping up connections on these digital platforms require immense conversational and emotional labour. Users may spend large amounts of time creating and updating their user profiles as they hope to make the optimal digital avatar that would garner plenty of attention from other users. He refers to this labour as the importance of staying fresh (McGlotten 2013: 128). He writes: 'What you choose to disclose, and how, matters; you have to change a profile to stay interesting and relevant, to matter … Showing too much or not enough or never updating anything can all risk failure.' Queer studies scholar Senthorun Raj (2011: 5) elaborates on how bodies and desires are negotiated on the online digital platform: 'The constant (re)writing of profile statements and the various exchanges of photographs represents the differential points that bodies use to "connect". Connection, however, involves conversational and emotional labour to articulate a response to generic questions such as "So what are you looking for?"' Reflecting on his own experiences on the platform, Raj (2011: 5) adds that his online identity 'is rendered intelligible through how [his] pictures, conversation and captions are negotiated through norms surrounding physical aesthetics, muscularity (masculinity) and intellectual wit online'. With so much time and effort placed on maintaining digital aesthetics of freshness, negative feedback on such personal representations has inspired responses for how to deal with the bad feelings that come up from these communication misfires. One specific practice from a study participant in Manila was catfishing, the use of images not their own or lying on their profiles. Many in the city referred to people who catfish as 'posers'. This participant shared with me that the choice to catfish was motivated by the wish to increase their chances of finding connections with other app users also desperate to connect with someone.

My experience showed me that I had to be prepared to make adjustments to the image I chose to use on my profile when recruiting study participants. I started my field research in Manila with a clear facial photo on Grindr. After two weeks of minimal engagement, I changed it to a cropped image that focused on my shoulder. The change increased the messages I received from others wanting to start a conversation. Many had not read my profile information, which provided key information about my research pur-

pose and my motivation for being on the app. Although it felt good to start receiving messages, it made me doubt the quality of my initial photo with a clear view of my face. I began to wonder whether I was unattractive, which raised feelings of insecurity. In Los Angeles, I used a similarly cropped image of my shoulder when recruiting study participants. I remember one specific reply from a random Grindr user which started out well but quickly degenerated once we shared facial photos with each other. After seeing my picture, the user cursed at me, accusing me of pretending to be White. I did not have an ethnicity designated on my profile. Since many queer Filipinx/os use various ethnic categories, I chose to leave the ethnicity blank on my profile to avoid being filtered out because of that category (Hern 2020).

Jack Halberstam (2011: 3) argues that to live a queer life is to accept failure because of its role in queer community formation against heteronormative standards of success and production. For queer people, failure has been a way of life, a style, and an alternative to the punishing 'trying and trying again' logics or meaningless and obsessive competition of trying to fit into heteronormative assumptions. Halberstam (2011: 3) adds that 'while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life'. Here we encounter the push and pull between optimism and pessimism in which queer people negotiate everyday life – negotiations between resistance against and collusion with neoliberal ideologies. Working through Barbara Ehrenreich's (2009) scholarship that complicates positive thinking, Halberstam calls out the source of optimism as coming from US American exceptionalism and a delusional view that success only happens to people who work hard enough to reach their goals. What is lacking from this construction is the recognition of structural oppression that conditions people and their everyday lives.

Legibility to be intelligible to the state becomes a mechanism of complicity for white supremacy. Drawing on James C. Scott's 1998 book *Seeing Like a State*, Halberstam explains that the ordering of undisciplined and fluid ways of being or knowing has resulted in making such forms esoteric against the state's perceived simplification of such facts. Halberstam clarifies that

> *for Scott, to 'see like a state' means to accept the order of things and to internalise them; it means that we begin to deploy and think with the logic of the superiority of orderliness and that we erase and indeed sacrifice other, more local practices of knowledge, practices moreover that may be less efficient, may yield less marketable results, but may also, in the long term, be more sustaining. (Halberstam 2011: 9)*

If Halberstam claims that to fail is a way of queer life, then these queer subjects generate practices on mobile digital media to reduce the effects of failure. Halberstam interprets failure

> *as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognises that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities. (Halberstam 2011: 88)*

Failure is, therefore, subversive and productive.

This raises the question of why queer subjects continue to stay complacent with ordering strategies within their online app communities. Here I invoke the work of Tara McPherson (2012) and her historicisation of modularity within the digital culture of the United States. McPherson writes that convergence with developments of computational technology and the struggle of racial formation movements in the United States in the 1960s coincides with the use and prevalence of disciplining structures embedded in software applications and computer operational systems. She explains that the design of digital computational frameworks influenced the partitioning of identities, specifically of race, during the formative years of the internet in the mid-twentieth century. McPherson offers lenticular logics, a term based on the coating of 3-D postcards, as a way to describe how modular mechanisms obscure the deciphering of simultaneous and multiple images, suppressing relation and context whilst privileging a clear construction of the whole (McPherson 2012: 144). Such vantages allow a certain coherence to an otherwise messy configuration. Here we can examine how queer socio-sexual apps are designed to simplify user management and sort information into organised sequences. User profiles are structured as symmetrical squares along gridlines where demographic information is partitioned within designated boxes within a visual window. Demographic options of race, weight, height, and age are pre-programmed for users; therefore, any information that deviates from these categories would need to be provided in additional textual explanations in the body of the user profile. Through form and design, mobile digital media platforms are structured and programmed to be complicit with the modulatory frameworks that parse difference into recognisable boxes. The privileging of an ordered wholeness, where gross differences between users work against the apps' strategies to connect users with each other, constitutes the playing field on this digital platform.

Thinking through the concept of failure in queer lives, I suggest that anticipating the possibility of failure and one's various affective responses is part of the negotiation digital users must navigate in their everyday interactions on the virtual playground. From self-regulatory methods users draw

on to conform to dominant norms of desirability amongst queer men to the internal structures that frame the mobile software application as divisive modulations, playing the social app game of making connections is not easily won.

Failure can be generative. As Rohit K Dasgupta and Debanuj Dasgupta (2018) suggest, whether to prescribe with optimism, pessimism, or a mixture of both, people choose to participate in seeking connection online. They also have the choice to adhere to disciplining guidelines. In their study of public chat threads on digitally mediated social media platforms in India like Planet Romeo, Dasgupta and Dasgupta point to affective bonds shared in these virtual sites as a potential for different futures away from homonormative aspirations of a productive subject. One option for people to navigate the failures of digital life is to imagine ways to undo systems of oppression through understanding and deploying tactics and strategies of marginalised voices and perspectives. My study demonstrates how queer Filipinx/o men negotiate different layers of sociotechnical infrastructures to experience the possibility of an intimate connection even if they must go through many forms of failure.[3] One of my study participants explained to me that they intentionally used false photos in their profile, what others in Manila called being a 'poser' or what in Los Angeles was termed 'catfishing', in the hope of finding a hook-up. Gordon, a professional in their mid-twenties from Manila, shared with me how they used a photo of a friend on his Grindr profile to lure potential hook-ups.[4] They would ask the matches from Grindr to meet them in a public place. Often the fact that they looked different from their Grindr profile would result in a quick exit from the potential hook-up. But in a few instances, though the men would be upset, they would still allow Gordon to perform oral sex on them. These failures produce various types of affects that influence (in)actions both to move (in a physical sense) and to be moved (in an emotional sense). Despite facing extreme limitations, the Filipinx/o men in my study continue to move towards the possibility of an intimate connection.

Despite the failures of the here and now for the gay Filipinx/o men in this study, I interpret their practices and beliefs of mobile digital media as hopeful stances. José Esteban Muñoz (2009) argues in *Cruising Utopia* for an approach to hope as a critical method that acknowledges the importance of reflecting and learning about the past to imagine a potential utopic future. He proposes that we see queerness as a horizon to think beyond the anti-re-

3 I use the concept of sociotechnical infrastructures as an analytical lens to study unequal arrangements and access to complex systems that shape quality of social interaction and definitions of attractiveness. These complex systems include transportation infrastructures and access to technological hardware and data storage along with social differences such as class and gender as forms of power that inform different ideas of aesthetic beauty (see Atienza 2023a).

4 All personal names used in this article are pseudonyms.

lational, antisocial, anti-utopian critique in queer studies. Muñoz gestures towards moving past the presentness and negativity that advocates and celebrates no future. He suggests that we become attuned to the potentialities found in aesthetic representation that moves beyond the here and now.

Failing to be Filipinx/o: frustrations in method from a 'native' ethnographer

I am Filipinx/o. I was born in Quezon City in the Philippines. I emigrated to the United States at the age of nine and became a US citizen. I worked hard to keep ties and connections with family members in the Philippines. Part of my interest in the study of mobile digital media is through these initial shifts in communication during the 1990s when technologies rapidly became more available to consumers. I am also a queer cisgender man. These incomplete explanations of my subjectivity serve to constitute me as a 'native' researcher. Although the concept of 'native-ness' has been critiqued (Appadurai 1988; Ferguson 2018), we cannot control the stereotypes others may have over the social identities we inhabit. This section focuses on how digital platforms hide and obscure social identities – both of the researcher and of our potential interlocutors – and how interactions towards recruitment of study participants can lead to many frustrations. Reflecting briefly on the methods I used, I advocate for the prominent role of failure in sharing our ethnographic processes.

I arrived in Manila to start a five-month research period in January 2017. Three weeks later, I was frustrated with my failure at enrolling participants. I had come prepared with multiple mobile phones and tablets. I had printed multiple paper copies of my consent form. I had assumed that it would be relatively easy to find a group of people willing to participate in my study since many I encountered during preliminary work the previous two summers were already sharing with me their experiences with and opinions on trying to find relationships, friendships, and sex on digital platforms. I reached out to the individuals from my preliminary research trips and to local scholars and university groups. I finally began engaging directly with users on various socio-sexual applications frequently used by queer men in Manila, like Grindr, Scruff, Growlr, and Blued. But many of the contacts I made were apprehensive to share their stories. I was often asked, 'Don't you know what this app is for?' These methodological failures led me to adjust my recruitment practices, which eventually resulted in a modest response rate.

Questions about methodology in the analysis of technology in everyday use constantly evolve. Research about technology must deal with the medium's rapid updates and reboots. My initial reading of Sarah Pink and Jennie Morgan's concept of 'short-term ethnography' drew me to their formulation of visual ethics. It includes

> *an ongoing process of informed consent, which is particularly important for building trust in participants … [This process] moreover establish[es] channels of communication beyond the fieldwork setting with participants from the outset and continues [these channels] after [the research] … expanding the ethnographic place by enabling participants to enter into our post-fieldwork temporality in decisive ways. (Pink and Morgan 2013: 358-359)*

Far from being 'quick and dirty' qualitative research, short-term ethnography celebrates the intense relationships between researcher, local people, places, and theories as alternative ways of knowing and is not a short cut. Though a careful reading of their work showed that short-term ethnography does not speak to my multisite research, Pink and Morgan's thoughts about informed consent as captured in the quote previous is a model I actively deploy in my study.

As I have written before (Atienza 2023b: 2503), I find the concept of appnography or appnographic methods compelling in thinking through my methodological journey. What the scholars of leisure studies Luc Cousineau, Harrison Oakes, and Corey Johnson (2019) call capacious affordances for the study of digital lives, appnography is an analysis of the many practices of connection, use, and meaning-making through mobile digital media platforms that is intensely aware of the perceived binary between the real and virtual. This binary flattens the digital self's intersubjective constitution with technology and space. Appnography must be reflexive and transparent in the various power relationships not just between researcher and participant but also in the unpacking of what it means to be a user, their temporalities, and their place-making. Feminist and queer theories must also serve as foundational lenses of appnography in the examination of digital cultures. This framework teases out experiences of the silenced, the othered. It provides nuanced perspectives on human interactions concerning various platform software on mobile technologies.

In the multiple non-responses or the gentler 'not interested' or 'no thank you' messages that I received from potential study participants, it is the accumulated minutes of initiating conversations that compound the disappointment of not being able to secure participation. I kindly thanked each person who responded for their consideration and moved forward to the next potential recruit. Some of these conversations did lead to in-person meetings. For one promising interaction it took us several days before we found a time and place convenient for both of us to meet. The prospective interlocutor suggested a nearby outdoor food hall constructed from stacks of makeshift shipping containers. It was a lively spot, and the space led to a pointed conversation in which the interlocutor questioned my 'Filipino-ness' seeing that I had left the Philippines at the age of nine. The potential participant started to ask

me about historical events during the Philippine-American War of 1898 and then professed his loyalty to the Philippines' then current president, Rodrigo Duterte. He backed his position with examples of how Duterte was 'correcting' the miseducation of Filipinos around the world by placing online a proliferation of information about truths that previous administrations had withheld from the public. I held back and agreed with many of his assertions. But the shock from his questioning of my cultural and ethnic identity as a Filipinx/o reverberated in my mind, heart, and soul. Growing up an immigrant Tagalog Filipinx/o in southern California, I had worked hard to keep my language proficiency so that I could continue to communicate with my cousins and wider family who were still living in the Philippines. In my new community in the US, this language – to me a privilege and blessing – was the source of ridicule, mostly from my Filipino American classmates who teased me about it. But in the Philippines it was the lack of an accent whilst speaking English that became the source for questions about my ethnic origins: 'You were born in the Philippines? Your English is so good,' to which I would reply that English and Language Arts were my favourite subjects in primary school. The questioning on the US side also makes clear that many US citizens of all ethnic backgrounds do not know the imperial history of their settler state in the Philippines.

During my recruitment drive in Los Angeles, I thought that the race and ethnicity filters that were still available on socio-sexual app platforms at that time would help me focus on Filipinx/o-identified profiles. But I now learnt that the choice to include race and ethnicity on profile demographics varied. Filipinx/o Americans chose a range of ethnic identifiers, including Asian, Pacific Islander, and even South Asian on their Grindr profiles. A few chose Latino but many more declined to add this information. Others wrote combinations of ethnic identities such as Spanish and Pacific Islander to avoid the often-limiting category of 'Asian'. In brief chats, many of these potential participants confirmed the avoidance of the term 'Asian' on their profiles. Some shared that their darker skin often does not match the US-centric imagination of light-skinned East Asian men. This produces confusion during app communications with potential connections. The limited understanding of the 'Asian' racial category comes with gendered stereotypes, namely that these men have slender bodies and are on the receiving end of penetrative sex. Deviation from these expected roles in how one presents oneself on the app leads to a lack of engagement from others. To increase the chance for connection, some of the men I spoke to chose different features they believed would garner interest. For the physically fit men, it was the headless torso photo that would attract initial hits from potential partners. But some reported that once they shared a clear photo of their face, these potential partners would often drop out of the engagement.

These app practices are familiar to me. During personal use of these apps, I would crop images of myself to display what I thought were my most desirable body features. Often I would choose my defined shoulder and top of the arm. I also decided not to disclose my ethnic and racial identity. I remember engaging with a potential connection, a conventionally attractive White man in his late twenties. But as soon as I shared a clear face photo, there was a pause in what had been a series of quick responses to each other. After a few minutes, he replied: 'You're not White. Why are you fucking lying on your profile.' Then his profile disappeared from the grid, signalling that I was blocked from his view and would no longer have access to him again. But contrary to his claim, I did not lie. I just did not share that information. And indeed, his assumption about my racial and ethnic identity based on a bare shoulder and arm was odd to me since I have dark brown skin. Several of my study participants and potential interlocutors shared similar experiences. The intense evaluations that queer men practice on socio-sexual apps generate multiple exclusions in a virtual plane that promises quick and easy connections.

Social categories are operationalised on digital media platforms, creating disidentifications and misplaced expectations. This section focused on interactions amongst potential study participants through categories of race and ethnicity, but other parts of our subjectivities are reduced to boxes to check or lines to select on prefigured digital interfaces. Perceived gender expression and socio-economic class were highly scrutinised. These are not new provocations in the study of human interactions in general. In the sharing of these frustrations, I hope that connection and intimacy may form through an affective solidarity, a shared intimate subjectivity.

Personal failings

The litany of failures in connecting with queer Filipinx/o men during this study led to uneven coverage of participants in the two cities. As I mentioned earlier, these digital groups have been a big part of my personal life as a queer Filipinx/o man. I experience the sense of intimate and erotic possibilities my participants share. I close with the most influential moment for this imbalance: the sudden break-up with an intimate partner in Manila just as I was beginning my field research in Los Angeles. This partner was another immigrant Filipino scholar I met at my college nearly a year before departing for research in Manila. We met through mutual friends and a tiny Filipino community tied to the university. Neither of us expected an intimate closeness to develop since he did not identify as gay and I had been very honest about my sexuality and current relationship. We enjoyed an energising intimate bond for several months and planned to support each other through the completion of our degree programmes. Despite being clear with each other that we

wanted an open relationship, I was deeply affected when his romance with a new lover developed rapidly and was documented in real time on social media platforms. I saw them grow closer and become intensely enamoured in shared Instagram and Snapchat videos. That moment made the failures and anxieties of my research participants more vivid as I experienced the inevitable loss of this lover. Mobile digital media were streaming my failure in intimate connection as a queer Filipinx/o man. I became depressed, and jealousy quickly emerged, resulting in an obsessive attachment to my ex-lover.

During the last six months of my field research, my mind was preoccupied with questions of what went wrong in that relationship. It was difficult to sustain focus and energy, which compromised my recruitment of study participants in Los Angeles. Deep feelings of depression, insecurity, and lack of self-worth lasted nearly a year and a half. I credit Ariana Grande's song 'Thank U, Next' for helping me find a different vantage to the loss of this relationship, but the sense of a lack of self-worth continues today. The focus on failure amongst my study participants reflects both on my long history of similar experiences on mobile digital media and the execution of my research plans for this study. The feeling of failure towards personal intimate connections seeped into other parts of my life – my writing, my thinking, my belief in myself. Related insecurities persist today. This fragmented experience of time and space during my field research resulted in the writing of brief responses and the inclusion of a small participant pool that composed the sections of my study focused on Los Angeles.

With this reflection on my experiences of failure during and after appnographic research, I want to highlight the affective turns that simultaneously animate research participants and researchers. The publication of research results often focuses on the successes of the research process. The emphasis on success in sharing research output minimises the role of failure and its related feelings in complex world-making amongst human relations. With this reflection I wish to remind fellow researchers to acknowledge the role of our failures in the process. As scholars of human experiences, we must include the way in which our humanity is intertwined with that of the people in our work. We must not forget how our biases, our relations, and our investments shape our work. Perhaps it will allow us to see the spectrum of engagement that informs the small slice of human experience we construct from the shared lives of our research participants.

Let me close with what a wonderful friend and colleague described as a shared difficulty in the writing of this type of research – one that is closely tied to our personal histories. He said that, as queer Filipinx/o immigrants, we yearn to feel a connection with and a history embedded in the Philippines – a youth that could have been. There is visceral pain through the imagined loss of a certain gendered, classed, sexual life in the Philippines. It reverberates with the intimacies that we never experienced. It is yet another failure,

an emotional and mental block, that comes from intimacies of a particular kind. Writing this is painful in many ways. It is a feeling that endures.

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Grindr Wars: Race, Caste, and Class Inequalities on Dating Apps in India and South Africa

Shannon Philip

Introduction

On a cold winter's day in 2022 I met Jacob, one of my research participants in Johannesburg. Jacob was twenty-seven, worked in a bank in the city, and belonged to the emerging Black middle classes of South Africa. His parents had grown up in a former apartheid-era township of Johannesburg, but through securing an education and a high-status white-collar job, Jacob had managed to 'escape' the township, as he often put it, and now lived in one of the city's wealthy suburbs. We met at a restaurant in his upmarket neighbourhood, which we regularly frequented as it was in between both of our houses, and spent a long time catching up and chatting. On that day, Jacob pulled out his phone to open Grindr, a gay dating application, and scanned the various profiles that popped up around him. One of the profiles that came up close to Jacob was another Black young man, looking stylish and well dressed, holding a glass of wine and smiling at the camera. On seeing this photo, Jacob exclaimed excitedly:

> *He is cute! This is the kind of profile I like. You can tell just from his profile photo that he is relationship material – not too slutty and not too boring. Something classy and stylish about him. I like him. He is potentially husband material!*

In a related but different context, in New Delhi, India, in March 2022 on a follow-up fieldwork visit, I met up with Suraj, a research participant with whom I had long worked together. Suraj too belonged to the middle class and was employed at a multinational company. Hanging out in Connaught Place in Delhi, Suraj and I chatted about Grindr and online dating in Delhi. Suraj remarked:

> *Grindr is really the best way to show your gay side and meet other gay people who are like-minded and close by. If you are straight, life is so easy; you can meet girls all the time and you can see them. Everywhere is a straight meeting ground! But as a gay man, it is so hard. You don't just randomly meet other gay men, right? On the streets you can't tell which man is gay and*

> *which one is not. So that is why Grindr is very helpful. You can check and chat with like-minded people.*

For Suraj, the profiles he liked were men who 'showed faces', were not 'too old', and were from a 'similar background'. He expressed it like this:

> *If you are using Grindr for dating, like me, then you want someone who is from the same background, someone who is educated and can hold a conversation, right? Someone who is not just looking for sex but actually has a face and a personality, but also someone you won't be embarrassed about being seen in public with!*

These brief narratives of young men in the contexts of post-apartheid South Africa and postcolonial India hint at the ways in which their everyday social interactions and intimacies are mediated through queer dating apps like Grindr. There are several themes to be critically unpacked in these narratives. These narratives hint at both the need and uses of Grindr within the heteropatriarchal contexts of India and South Africa where queer visibility is limited and these digital spaces provide important spaces for queer friendships, desire, and relationships and for demonstrating one's 'gay side' or sexuality. Yet at the same time, young men like Jacob and Suraj, living in contexts of the Global South defined by high inequality, poverty, and unemployment, seek profiles and men who are 'classy' and from the 'same background'. These narratives open up many questions around who is framed as attractive and desirable on the basis of their Grindr profiles and who as undesirable. It gives us an insight into changing gay cultures, identities, and desires in relation to emerging consumer cultures, neoliberalism, and digital changes in the Global South.

In this article, I explore some of these themes around the ways in which Grindr as a dating platform offers new forms of gay visibility to young gay men in India and South Africa, but also how already existing social, cultural, and economic inequalities interplay with this gay visibility on the dating app. In so doing, I demonstrate and trace the commodification of gay cultures and gay identities in India and South Africa, as both countries are undergoing intense and rapid neoliberal expansion, and how these changes are manifested online. I argue that social and symbolic 'Grindr Wars' take place on the platform, reproducing the already existing social and cultural inequalities of race, class, and caste in complex ways amongst gay men and producing hierarchies within commodified gay cultures. Building on the existing literature on Grindr and inequalities (Conner 2019, 2023; Shield 2017, 2019), I expand the analysis to think about these inequalities in the contexts of the Global South where digitalisation and neoliberalism are emerging phenomena, operating in contexts with different sexual and gendered histories and ine-

qualities. In this way, I show that the digital app provides an important site for gay connectivity and identity in the Global South but also becomes a site where inequalities, hierarchies, and social and cultural clashes get amplified and reproduced online in complex and novel ways. By taking a comparative ethnographic perspective, this article emphasises the shared commodified sexuality and classed anxieties that are emerging for middle-class gay men in both India and South Africa and their various online mediations.

Cities and their spatial inequalities are central to the ways in which desire is mediated online and shape the narratives, assessments, and dating patterns of the young men. Grindr as a geolocation-based app becomes a tool through which the wider sexual and gendered politics of gay men in their city spaces are articulated, revealing various socio-spatial inequalities and how these shape desire and interactions and create both intimacies and exclusions. The platform design and usability of Grindr is important to highlight in this context as it interplays powerfully with the urban inequality within India and South Africa. Grindr operates through a spatial logic which facilitates connections and conversations with other people spatially placed close to each other. The profiles of other people appear in a grid pattern made up of various squares, each of which is filled with one user profile. Profiles can display a photo and 10 characters of text and the squares are arranged according to geolocation so that profiles of people who are located closest to the user appear uppermost. In context of apartheid-era spatial inequalities in Johannesburg or the high levels of urban poverty in New Delhi, this geolocating logic of Grindr becomes important for the production of tensions between 'classy gays' and 'poor gays'. I conceptualise this tension as 'Grindr Wars', following Andrew Hartman's (2019) concept of 'cultural wars' which have profound social and cultural impact on the everyday lives of marginalised people.

The literature on mediated intimacies and dating apps has largely focused on Global North communities and the changing intimate lives and identities of dating app users (Andreassen et al. 2017; Broeker 2023; McGlotten 2013; Attwood et al. 2017; Jamieson 2013; Hakim 2019). This work has importantly shed light on the design and platform interface of dating apps, on the ways in which inequalities of race, class, and gender operate on apps, and on the changing nature of the self. However, little research has explored how these dynamics appear in context of the Global South, particularly in postcolonial countries like India, South Africa, Brazil, or Egypt where rapid digitisation has a significant impact on the gendered and sexual lives of young people through dating apps (for some exceptions, see Das 2019; Jha 2022; Dasgupta 2022). Within this limited literature on dating apps in the Global South, little attention is paid to non-heterosexual desires and the use of dating apps in empirically grounded studies. In this context, thinking ethnographically about gay sexualities and masculinities from the Global South

makes an important contribution to the scholarship on dating apps and mediated intimacies: relatively marginal gay masculinities become a lens to critically reflect on sexual politics, masculinities, and neoliberalism and on the changing nature of mediated intimacies within gay cultures.

In order to make these arguments, I build analytically on the comparative ethnographic perspectives on masculinities (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 2003; Cornwall et al. 2016) and the digital anthropology and digital sociology literatures around the self, sexuality, and mediated intimacies (Horst and Miller 2020; boyd 2015; McGlotten 2013; Conner 2023; Shield 2019). Over the last years, I spent time ethnographically hanging out with thirty-five young men in Delhi and Johannesburg and carrying out a range of life history conversations and semi-structured interviews as well as collecting observational data. The young gay men I worked with were primarily 'middle-class' men and I was seeking to understand the ways in which these men perform and embody 'middle classness' (Philip 2022). I was specifically looking at the everyday lives of young men to understand their masculinities in relation to questions of class, gender, sexuality, race, and urban space and violence. The digital was an important part of these everyday lives, and discussions about dating apps kept recurring with the young men who identified as gay.

In Johannesburg the young men largely came from white-collar middle-class and upper middle-class backgrounds and worked in banks, financial organisations, and various multinational corporations. They lived in the wealthy northern suburbs of Johannesburg, especially Sandton, Rosebank, and Waterfall Estate. I met them through mutual friends and colleagues whilst doing ethnographic fieldwork on the Black middle classes as part of my postdoctoral research for the University of Cambridge-based project entitled 'Gendered Violence and Urban Transformations in India and South Africa', funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, United Kingdom. As a queer-feminist male researcher, I was able to form meaningful relationships with my research participants who felt comfortable talking to me about their sexuality and, in turn, asking many questions about queer life in the Great Britain and in India. Similarly, the young men in Delhi were middle-class and upper middle-class men who worked in corporate offices, banks, and multinational companies and lived in relatively affluent parts of South Delhi. I knew some of these young men from my doctoral fieldwork in the city, and these long-term research participants introduced me to more young gay men from within their social circles. All the men in the sample across the two countries identified publicly as 'gay' with various degrees of 'outness' to families, friends, colleagues, and other people in their social circles. Hence, rather than using the more politically and intellectually useful term 'queer', I use the term 'gay' as this was how the men described themselves. All the young men were active users of Grindr and had varied experiences of the application.

The article is structured as follows: I first consider the wider social and cultural context of India and South Africa where heteropatriarchies make queer and gay visibility and masculinities marginal and invisible. Within this context, dating apps like Grindr become important to create gay visibility. The second section looks at the digitised commodification of gay men's bodies, identities, and masculinities on Grindr, which is important for their performance of middle-class gay respectability and class status in the neoliberalising contexts of India and South Africa. The third section examines how, through these commodified bodies and masculinities, desire itself is located in specific spaces, which is further enabled by the geolocation feature of apps like Grindr. In the final section of the article I analyse how these dynamics operating in and through Grindr reproduce inequalities of class, caste, and race in both contexts and create hierarchies and exclusions but also belonging in complex ways.

Gay visibility and dating apps in heteropatriarchal contexts

India and South Africa are two countries that have been infamously labelled as 'rape capitals of the world' with high levels of reported violence towards women and queer people (Matebeni et al. 2018; A Roy 2020). In this context, although these histories of sexual and queer politics remain outside the scope of this article, what is important to highlight is the continued shared sense of insecurity and social invisibility and the broader social and cultural marginalisation that gay men experience on an everyday level in both contexts (H Roy 2021; Reddy 2009; S Roy 2022). Both India and South Africa are 'middle income' countries with rapid neoliberal and technological expansion taking place and in both homosexuality is no longer formally criminalised, unlike other 'middle income' formerly colonised countries such as Pakistan or Nigeria. The shared neoliberal transformations, technological change, and legal recognition of homosexuality in both countries make this an interesting and important comparative context to think about changing social and cultural forms of sexuality that shape the everyday lives of gay men and their masculinities.

For young gay men in India and South Africa, Grindr was an important social platform for creating their sense of self and a sense of community. For example, Sanjay (29) in Delhi observed:

> *Growing up I used to think I was abnormal because I did not like girls or want to spend time with them. There were no gay role models on TV, and I didn't personally know any gay people. So I was very lonely growing up. Grindr really changed all of that for me, because I remember when I downloaded the app for the first time and started using it, I suddenly realised that there were other 'abnormal' people like me less than a kilometre away*

> *from home! I felt so good … that I was not alone … that I was not that abnormal, you know.*

For young men like Sanjay digital apps like Grindr provide an important platform for sexual, romantic, and social encounters within the deeply patriarchal social context of contemporary India, which privileges heterosexual and heteronormative masculinities (H Roy 2021; Philip 2022; Srivastava 2010). In this largely heteronormative environment, Grindr opens up a queer digital space where Sanjay can feel visible and enact his sexuality. It is a social space which allows him to be gay and represent his sexuality. Rather than just a digital platform which enables connections, the app serves as an important tool for the creation and management of his queer self. The self then, as scholars of digital media have argued, is for young people something that cannot be divided neatly into 'online' and 'offline' selves (Attwood et al. 2017). Indeed, this false dichotomy between real and virtual is challenged by queer digital selves: the digital is where so much of queer identity for middle-class youth is structured, created, and maintained. Hence for young men like Sanjay, Grindr as a digital sociality serves as a platform to perform his sexual self across spaces and times.

In the South African context too, Grindr is a 'lifeline', as a young man called Kagiso put it. It helped him balance his sense of being 'African' and being a 'man' with his sexuality. Kagiso explained:

> *As a gay Zulu guy I never thought I would be happy because, for my family and culture, I'm like a lost man, a failed man, you know, who cannot have a wife or start a home. But I've now met lots of other Zulu guys who are gay through Grindr and I'm feeling that no, it is not wrong to be Zulu and gay! I can be both and my family is also slowly understanding because I'm not shy of being Zulu and gay. I'm proud of both. So slowly they are being proud of it too. Honestly Grindr really helped me. It was a lifeline, because otherwise I didn't think you could be both. It's so hush-hush. But at least online there is openness and honesty.*

In Kagiso's narrative, Zulu masculinity is characterised by various social obligations that are linked to the reproduction of a heteronormative family. As scholars have argued, this becomes an important disciplining and structuring idea for African masculinities (Langa 2020; Hunter 2004; Matebeni et al. 2018; Reddy 2009). In this context, Grindr allows Kagiso to create a sense of balance between his identities of being 'African' and 'gay'.

Within the heteropatriarchal social contexts of India and South Africa, the need to conform and perform heterosexual masculinity is an important aspect of constructing an appropriate and socially acceptable masculinity (Hunter 2010; Srivastava 2004; Philip 2022; Vetten and Ratele 2013; Chow-

dhury 2023; Dasgupta 2017; Gqola 2007; Hassim 2014; Gouws 2021). This dynamic creates a social context wherein queer and gay masculinities take on a subordinate position, often hidden and invisible, or socially marginalised. Judith Butler (2002) would argue that within the heterosexual matrix that shapes social contexts, Kagiso and Sanjay become bodies, masculinities, and identities that cause 'gender trouble' for not conforming to heteronormative masculine expectations. However, the digital space that Grindr creates and its accessibility to and wide reach amongst the wealthier middle-class men in India and South Africa becomes an important counter-public wherein sexualities and non-normative masculinities can be demonstrated and visualised. For danah boyd (2010, 2015), this idea of digital publics and their productive roles becomes important when thinking about intimacy, sexuality, and identity from the margins of heteronormative society.

Digitised commodification of desires, bodies, and masculinities

Beyond offering visibility to queer selves and bodies in the Global South, dating apps such as Grindr also reveal the ways in which the queer self is socially produced in and through the wider social, economic, and cultural politics at play. Particularly in the context of neoliberal expansion, scholars in India and South Africa argue, the rise of a consumptive middle class which valorises and encourages consumer goods, brands, and globalised tastes and aesthetics produces commodified middle-class masculinities and commodified desires, bodies, and identities (Posel 2010; Philip 2022; Mbembe and Nuttall 2008; Iqani 2022). Interestingly these dynamics are mirrored and take on new and novel forms within the context of Grindr and the construction and representations of gay masculinities in these digital spaces.

The digitised commodification of the gay self, of desire, and of masculinity itself was visible in the aspirations and anxieties of several of my middle-class gay research participants in both Johannesburg and Delhi. Suraj and Taj, two young gay men, are long-term interlocutors from my fieldwork in Delhi since 2016. We still keep in regular contact via social media, and they often update me with their 'Grindr tales', heartbreaks, and romantic adventures. At a recent meeting in Delhi in 2022, we discussed how their online dating lives have evolved over the years. Interestingly, both still considered Grindr the best dating application as they regard it as having the greatest number of young men in Delhi. Suraj, for example, had tried other apps like Tinder and Hinge but continued to prefer Grindr because it allows for maximum reach. One of the challenges, he contended, was that in contemporary contexts Grindr was seen as a casual sexual hook-up app rather than a serious dating application:

> *Now a lot of guys think that Grindr is just for hook-ups, so they don't meet you with the right intention. But actually that is not*

true. Even on Grindr you can meet some really nice and genuine people who are looking for connections. So I prefer Grindr, really.

In this way Grindr was still an important app for both young men. For them 'casual hook-ups' were not desirable or respectable articulations of sexuality; rather, a monogamous and normative idea of 'coupledom', 'love', and 'relationships' provided the idealised form of gay sexuality which they sought on Grindr.

For both Suraj and Taj, having the 'correct' profile photo and text on their profiles was critically important. They and other young men spent lots of time taking appropriate photos that were dateable, and much discussion took place amongst them about what 'messages' a certain profile picture or particular text would give a viewer. For example, whenever I would hang out with Suraj and Taj, we would spend several hours walking around malls and shopping centres taking photos in a variety of stylised poses. Suraj would often instruct Taj on how to take a photo and commented on which angles and poses suited him best, to guide Taj to take 'correct' photos. For several photos, Suraj was explicit about cutting out 'crowds' from the background or stray dogs that might have accidentally entered the frame, because these were not desirable traits of marking his belonging to an appropriately commodified space and aesthetic. For him, this was one of luxury, surrounded by western consumer goods and brands. The images had to 'cleaned', as he would put it, from the 'mess' of urban India and its various inequalities, to create a 'classy' image. Taj, in turn, required a series of photos which highlighted his shoes, when he had bought a new pair. Taj felt that the new shoes added to his image and were important to feature on his profile page to represent an appropriately classed and commodified masculinity. For the young men, getting these profile image 'correctly', as they spoke about it, was an important task in creating and representing their classed masculinity digitally.

This curation and presentation of a desirable and commodified masculinity also became the criteria through which the profiles of other gay men were assessed for their 'suitability'. When Suraj and Taj considered what makes a photo or a profile attractive, it became evident that, for them, similarly classed and stylised images of the body, face, and background were critical for an attractive and desirable online profile. Interestingly, when we scrolled through profile pictures of gay men who were suggested as suitable on Grindr, Taj commented that he looked for things like watches, shoes, hats, and other consumer goods because these demonstrate the ability to consume. Suraj, in turn, liked photos taken in 'classy' venues like cafes or parties or in other social spaces, rather than photos taken in bed or showing 'unclassy' settings. Hence the association and proximity to wealth, consumption, shopping, and western brands becomes an important way in which masculinities are commodified and embodied, but also desired.

In the South African context, a young Black gay man called Thabo similarly remarked that he liked profiles where men had an 'expensive' look:

> *You need to be attracted to the profile. He has got to have something extra, you know. Someone well dressed, looking sharp, looking expensive, classy, that's the kind of guy I like. Someone who takes care of themselves and is serious about themselves.*

What is interesting here is that Thabo, mirroring the narrative of Jacob, the Black middle-class gay young man whom we met in the introduction, is also explaining a desire along specifically classed lines by which the profiles that are desirable are 'classy' and 'bougie' in their digital representation. In his narrative there is an idea that the men who are well dressed and appear to be so take themselves 'seriously' and are, by extension, 'serious' about dating and other aspects of life too. What is also striking in Thabo's narrative is that the characteristics of being well dressed and 'looking sharp' are valued as positive traits that make a profile and person stand out and be 'extra'. In a context of high economic and social as well as racialised inequality, such commodified ideas of 'standing out' take place within a wider context of neoliberalisation and its consumer cultures of gender and sexuality that shape the Black middle classes in South Africa whilst most citizens continue to live in poverty (Iqani 2022; Nuttall 2004; Tucker 2009).

Interestingly, the practice of removing hair was mentioned by young men in both India and South Africa as important for a 'desirable' masculinity. Thabo, for example, declared: 'You know the expensive gays from the poorer ones just by looking at their grooming. The classier boys are always better groomed, they have a clean, hairless look. And that is quite important. You don't want a cave man!' Similarly, in Delhi Suraj pronounced: 'I don't like hairy guys. it just seems a bit unhygienic and unkempt to me. I think if you are a decent guy that takes care of yourself, then you would at least shave your body and keep it clean and hygienic.' The practice of body hair removal and grooming is framed in terms of 'cleanliness' and 'hygiene'. These tropes have much longer histories and etymologies in both India and South Africa through caste and racialised narratives of bodies that are clean and bodies that are 'polluted' and 'dirty' (Kang 2023; McClintock 2013; Pandhi 2022).

Indeed, it has long been that in the Indian context lower caste bodies are considered to be 'dark' and 'hairy' and Black men's bodies in South Africa have been often thought about as wild and animalistic, as part of the attempt to justify colonial control and domination (McClintock 2013; Kukreja 2021; Krishnan 2016). Although it is not analytically possible to draw linkages between these colonial tropes and the contemporary moment, what is interesting is to explore how tropes of 'body hair' and masculinity shape notions of what is a desirable and what an undesirable masculinity (Frank 2014). Furthermore, the literature on masculinities suggests that men and their

consumer practices are one of the most lucrative markets for cosmetic and grooming products. Hence there is a global push for 'hairless bodies' of men within the wider neoliberal discourse of masculinities (Philip 2022; Frank 2014). Interestingly, when Taj did upload topless photos of himself, it was quite important to him to make sure that his body was completely hairless and smooth. He explained:

> *The guys like a smooth look because it shows that you take care of your body and yourself. So, if I'm taking topless photos or going out on a date, I make sure I shave everything very nicely and clean. The barber shop can also wax your hair, so if I'm going on holiday or something special like that, I go for a professional wax so that my body is really clean and smooth.*

These commodified practices of the body, which involve the use of consumer products and thus turn men's identities into commodities, must also be represented appropriately on digital platforms. Thabo stated that he blocks people immediately if they have 'out of focus' face photos on Grindr or if they do not know how to take a stylised photo of themselves. He said:

> *If I see someone has taken a selfie and they've not done it properly, like shoved their camera into their face or something like that, then that is a no, I'm not going to be messaging, I'm going to be blocking!! If they don't know the basics of how to take a photo and present themselves, then what is even the point?!*

Some awareness and digital literacy around aesthetics, representation, and presentation were important for such young men and became yet another aspect of what they 'assessed' in other men's profiles. Hence what emerges is not just a specific classed aesthetic of gay masculinities for middle-class gay men but also the production of a commodified queer identity and a broader commodified gay culture which takes on digital forms. As various queer scholars have argued, these commodified queer cultures produce disciplining effects on bodies: they reproduce ideas of heteropatriarchal and capitalist respectability on queer selves and create normative ways of doing, being, and performing sexuality (Duggan 2002; Connell 1992; Dasgupta 2022; H Roy 2021; Rao 2020). Interestingly, these socio-economic and cultural inequalities interact with spatial logics and inequalities afforded by geolocation-based apps like Grindr and its technology, as I seek to develop next.

Geolocating desire

Going back to the vignette with Jacob that opened this article, where he checked his Grindr profile as we were sitting in an upmarket mall in Sandton, the classed position of the mall made it a particularly desirable place to

meet 'like-minded' men. As Jacob commented: 'This is where the real deal is! All the fancy boys come to the mall at the weekend, so this is where I usually meet the guys I like.' For Jacob and several young men like him whom I met and worked with, the urban context was marked by spaces that were desirable and undesirable. These spaces also marked out which queer men and masculinities were associated with them and hence were also desirable. As Jacob declared:

> *I only want to hook up or meet up with guys from a similar background and the Sandton City Mall is a good place to meet such guys … I avoid using Grindr outside the mall because you never know what these other boys want … particularly the poorer township boys … They want you to pick them up, pay for taxis, buy them food or clothes, and all of that nonsense … I don't want to be anyone's sugar daddy or sponsor, you know … They have to pay for their own stuff, and they have to come to my place or meet me in the mall using their own transport, otherwise don't bother meeting me, we won't match.*

For Jacob it is very clear that the only men he seeks to meet or associate with are other men from a similar class position who can afford to travel, consume, and belong in a space like the shopping mall. These are men who are from a similar economic and social background; but, importantly, these are men who are also spatially marked. The mall in the wealthy suburb of Sandton becomes a site that is marked as 'developed', wealthy and desirable in a context of high inequality in South Africa. As various scholars of class and consumption have argued, because of the high levels of poverty and unemployment, consumption and consumer spaces like the mall become important sites to demonstrate class status as upwardly mobile South African citizens (Iqani 2018; Southall 2023). At the same time, the 'township' and 'township boys' become queer masculinities that are not desirable, as the space of the township is marked by poverty and the perpetuation of racialised apartheid-era inequalities (A Desai 2003; Harrison et al. 2014).

For Jacob, then, seeking Grindr profiles of men who are inside the expensive malls of wealthy suburbs like Sandton becomes a good way to filter out men who do not shop or belong there and, thus, do not match his classed and social position. As ethnographic literature on the middle class from the Global South has demonstrated, it is more important to be and belong in the mall than to shop there in order to create a sense of middle classness (Fernandes 2015; Chevalier 2015; Brosius 2012; Gooptu 2013; M Desai 2016). Hence, belonging is not understood in an exclusively economic sense; rather, it is the social and cultural performance of being middle class that is important for creating belonging within these consumer spaces. As a result, a classed hierarchy of masculinities emerges in which men who are seen to

legitimately belong in the mall are framed as desirable. This classed logic works in and through the intersecting inequalities of race to mark out 'township boys' and their masculinities as undesirable. For upwardly mobile Black middle-class young gay men like Jacob and many others like him, the mall then becomes an important space where they can meet other like-minded gay men and create a classed and racialised queer visibility for themselves. Within this relational dynamic, poorer and working class Black gay men are not desirable as they are imagined as embodying poverty, unemployment, and hardship. Gay men and masculinities from the township are deemed as not desirable within this classed and racialised hierarchy of masculinities and desirability.

For several young men in both India and South Africa who end up meeting other gay men in malls and other middle-class spaces, ascertaining their classed belonging was also an important social process facilitated through Grindr. As Thabo discussed for the South African context:

> *I ask people to send me their location as we are chatting on Grindr, right then and there, to show me exactly where they are chatting from. If they are in the township, you know that these are poor guys and that they won't be a match. And if they refuse to send you their location pin that instant, you can also know that they are being suspicious. If you have nothing to hide, then why are they not sharing their location pin?*

This form of digital surveillance, which is facilitated by the inbuilt geolocating features of Grindr, becomes another way of ensuring the classed policing of poor gay men and is an attempt to verify that you are not interacting with a 'township' boy. Another strategy is to ask for WhatsApp numbers and engage in a videocall before meeting. As James reflected:

> *I have written it on my profile, that we have to videocall before meeting, otherwise we are not meeting and in the video call it's fairly easy to see if this guy is decent or not – the way he speaks, looks, acts, etc.*

So, a video call which allows young men to scan the surroundings, accents, and other status markers becomes the way of ensuring that a profile is of a 'genuine' 'classy' guy. This classed policing is enabled by the wider digital infrastructure of communication.

In the Indian context, classed geolocations of desire and desirability were further mirrored in what several participants considered to be 'ideal places' to date, as well as 'ideal suburbs' for young men to come from. In making this argument, a young man called Pradeep observed:

> *When you ask someone where they are on Grindr, they tell you the name of a posh South Delhi colony, but you have to check that they are actually in the colony and not in the urban village next to it! Most of these guys live in these urban villages because they are cheaper to live [in], but they lie about it, they say that they live in the colony … which of course is much more expensive.*

What emerges for Pradeep is a similarly spatially demarcated idea of who is desirable and not along extremely classed and socio-spatial lines. There is an assumption that poorer gay men in India 'lie' about where they live on Grindr and that wealthier middle-class gay Indian men like Pradeep have to 'check' these details before meeting them. In so doing, gay desire, desirability, and respectability take on social and spatial dimensions, facilitated by Grindr and its various technological features. These affordances not just shape and mediate gay intimacies and masculinities but have a quite significant impact on the politics of race, caste, and class inequalities, as I seek to argue next.

Emerging Grindr wars: digitally reproducing race, caste, and class inequalities

Building on Bourdieu's (2010) ideas of symbolic and cultural capital producing hierarchies of 'taste' and distinction, we see a similar social and cultural hierarchy that is emerging within gay digital spaces, working in and through already existing inequalities of race, class, and caste. As I have argued, on the one hand Grindr and dating apps provide gay men a much-needed queer visibility in an oppressive and heteropatriarchal social context. On the other hand, however, this queer visibility operates in relation to wider social, political, and cultural dynamics of contexts which are undergoing rapid neoliberal expansion. As scholars have argued, neoliberalism is causing the inequalities of class, gender, and race to transform in both contexts, with the emergence of a middle class and the development of consumerism, globalised capitalism, and class anxiety (Iqani 2022; Philip 2022; Chevalier 2015; Brosius 2012; Islam 2021; Jaju 2023; Dawson 2014).

Within this broader context of the formation of a 'middle-class' identity in India and South Africa, gay middle-class men embody and imbibe several of these social and cultural anxieties and hierarchies. Indeed, as Andrew Tucker (2009) has argued, the ways in which young middle-class gay men seek to visualise themselves and their sexualities and desires reveals the politics of sexuality and political exchange within specific social, cultural, and political contexts, rather than merely representation or aesthetics. For Tucker 'queer visibility' reveals the ways in which the queer self is constructed and presented in keeping with the wider context of sexual and classed inequality of their contexts. Particularly in countries with already existing high levels of inequality within the Global South, like in India and South Africa, these

inequalities are mirrored by and further shape the forms 'queer visibility' takes on. Hence, in many ways middle-class young men in India and South Africa reproduce various class, caste, and racialised inequalities through their 'queer self' and its 'visibility' as well as its digital representation and embodiment in the form of Grindr profiles and interactions.

For young men like Suraj or Jacob, whom we have met in this article, sexuality intersects and operates with the politics of neoliberal expansion and inequality and takes on digital forms. As we have seen, their commodified selves and identities create sexual and social desire only for other similarly classed bodies on Grindr, reproducing class hierarchies in their respective countries. Narratives of avoiding 'cheap' boys or 'local' boys are often explicitly marked by classed differences in style, aesthetics, lifestyles, and status symbols. The men seek to become 'classy gays' and avoid the 'poor gays'. In this way social and symbolic wars emerge on Grindr wherein these queer visibilities and their inequalities come to the fore to produce tensions, clashes, and anxieties. These 'Grindr wars' do not take on explicitly violent forms but rather demonstrate the profound tensions, clashes, and symbolic violence produced in and through the inequalities of race, class, and caste on dating applications that digitally mediate intimacies and desires.

I also want to emphasise how young men reproduce colonial and racialised apartheid-era tropes about 'townships' on Grindr. For example, as we see in many narratives that my research participants would only meet men from wealthy areas and were avoiding men from the township on account of their being potentially 'dangerous' and 'poor', there is a reproduction of long-established tropes on the criminalisation of Black masculinities in the South African context (Vetten and Ratele 2013). The legacies of colonial and apartheid social relations, as various South African scholars have argued, continue to shape the perception and stereotypes about townships and life within them (Sidloyi 2023; A Desai 2003; Harrison et al. 2014). For Jacob and other young men whom we encounter in this article, these tropes about the township and its racialised imaginaries of danger and violence find new avenues of reproduction through the geolocating affordances of Grindr. As we saw in the previous section, by asking for 'location pins' and rejecting profiles if they are seen to be located in townships, these men and their masculinities become framed as potentially dangerous and hence to be avoided. An exclusionary politics emerges amongst upwardly mobile middle class Black gay men that is directed against poorer Black gay men who live in townships. These poorer Black township men become bodies and identities to be avoided. This exclusionary politics becomes digitally reproduced and enabled through Grindr, especially its application design and its various geolocating features and affordances.

Grindr also allows young Black middle-class men to verify, authenticate, and demonstrate a classed belonging in poorer Black gay men from the town-

ships. As Thabo's narrative demonstrates, for several Black middle-class gay men I worked with, you could not 'trust' anyone on Grindr so that you were required to 'verify' their classed and spatial claims. For Thabo, seeing how people speak, making sure that they are not simply hanging out in the mall but somehow belong there in social and symbolic ways, became a test that other poorer gay men were forced to engage with. Hence through Grindr and its affordances, gay men and profiles that match neoliberal masculinities in 'correct' or 'homonormative' ways (Duggan 2002) of being and presenting are privileged over other bodies and profiles. This, as Rahul Rao (2020) would argue further, is part of the wider social process in emerging postcolonial contexts where an idealised 'homocapitalist' queer subject is emerging. Dating apps such as Grindr privilege these idealised and commodified gay men and masculinities, further entrenching colonial and postcolonial inequalities along racialised, gendered, and classed lines.

A further dimension of racial inequality being reproduced on Grindr and other dating apps is around the role of whiteness. Several young men like Thabo and Kagiso mentioned several times how they regularly came across white South African men on Grindr who explicitly mentioned phrases like 'whites only' or 'preference for whites' on their profiles. Such profiles tend to be visible in the wealthy areas that the Black middle classes inhabit as during apartheid these were formally white-only areas. So, the upwardly mobile middle-class Black gay South African men who inhabit formerly all-white neighbourhoods also face forms of sexualised racism in new and complex ways. In townships where the majority of the population is Black, there are no or very few 'white' profiles that emerge on Grindr, because of its location-based grid system. However, as soon as Thabo or Kagiso are in the malls in Sandton or other wealthy neighbourhoods, which are now becoming more racially mixed, they encounter many more profiles which explicitly seek connections with other white men only.

In this context of increased racial contact between Black and non-Black South Africans, apps like Grindr become a digital space through which racialised inequality and discrimination are reproduced. What is also interesting about these profiles with whites-only preferences was that there is no visible or explicit racial discrimination; the racial undesirability is stated and presented as racial preference which is framed as apolitical and somehow 'natural'. When I discussed such profiles with explicitly racialised sexual preferences with my research participants, they remarked that they would never report or even be able to report such profiles to the Grindr community platforms because of the way the app was structured. As Kagiso stated:

> *Technically these profiles are not doing anything wrong; they are just stating their preference. So it's not a breach of any Grindr community rules. Yeah, it's not a nice thing. But [I am] not*

sure we can do anything about it. I just block such profiles, really.

Similarly, in the Indian context caste-based discrimination and inequality was rampant but not technically in breach of 'community rules', according to my research participants. Suraj and several other young men showed me the multiple profiles that mentioned phrases like 'Jaat man' or 'Gujjar top' to indicate the dominant caste status of these men and framing it as a desirable trait freely marketed on Grindr. Several profiles turned their dominant caste status into desirable qualities that would allegedly make them more appealing. Interestingly several of these dominant caste profiles used language of being 'top' or active and penetrating partners within penetrative sex to further build on these caste groups as 'superior' and 'macho' masculinities. They play on the idea of Jaat and Gujjar men as being more macho masculine, hence further framing their masculinity as desirable because it was seen as manly and virile. In contrast, several profiles also explicitly mentioned desire for 'white skin' or 'light skin'. This reproduces caste-centred tropes of lower castes being associated with darker skin that feminists and queer scholars have written (Subramanian 2015). What is also important in these contexts is that there is no 'official or legal' crime of caste discrimination that takes place, yet deeply powerful social and cultural wars are taking place on Grindr that create caste-based exclusions and hurt. Hence a complex dynamic emerges where inequalities of race, class, and caste are reproduced and arguably amplified and manifested in novel ways, raising important questions which require further probing and analytical attention.

Conclusion

This article explores how young middle-class gay men in urban India and South Africa use Grindr to create and present their digital queer selves, whilst also constructing exclusions and hierarchies. It critically unpacks the digitised commodification of gay cultures and gay identities in India and South Africa, which are both undergoing intense and rapid neoliberal expansion, and examines how these changes are manifest online within dating applications like Grindr. It demonstrates that several social and symbolic 'Grindr Wars' take place on Grindr, reproducing the already existing inequalities of race, class, and caste in complex ways within commodified gay cultures. Hence dating apps like Grindr provide an important site for gay connectivity and identity but also amplify and reproduce hierarchies, clashes, and inequalities in the online sphere in complex and novel ways. This comparative ethnographic perspective demonstrates that the increasing commodification and digitisation of gay and queer cultures in the Global South requires further probing and research to unpack the changing nature of everyday social life, intimacies, and sexualities in these postcolonial contexts.

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Gradual Realities: Making Authentically Strange Connections via Tinder in Cape Town

Leah Junck

Introduction

'What makes Tinder dating different is that you have to tolerate ambiguity,' Emily[1] explained on one of our coffee dates in a quiet part of the city centre in Cape Town, South Africa. Expounding on her understanding of ambiguity and determining attraction via Tinder profiles, she added: 'Meeting organically is like a shop where everything is laid out nice and clear as opposed to everything being on one rail and you have to look at everything.' The remote English teacher and psychology student in her early thirties was one of the twenty-five research participants I had met during my two-year research on Tinder, most of whom via a research profile on the app itself. I had become curious about how people use the application in a city of immense inequalities, which continue to run parallel to the geographic boundaries drawn across it during the White minority-led apartheid regime. Within this prevalent atmosphere of distrust (Junck 2019), I set out to enquire how people establish connections with relative strangers. In the process, I became particularly intrigued by the question of how ambiguities and Tinder's neatly structured profiles and selection processes take on meanings in this setting of resolute divisions.

Emily's differentiation between two seemingly distinct scenarios was a common thread throughout my research. One would be referred to as organic, authentic, and intuitively navigable (meeting individuals off Tinder) and the other as inherently lacking a quality of realness (trying to connect on Tinder). On Tinder, selection criteria must be established which, no matter how often they are tinkered with, would never quite gain any meaning. In Emily's analogy, this is likened to the process of going through a cluttered rail and establishing patterns in the hopes of finding a few things that actually suit. As a result of these often-frustrating efforts, the app would be frequently deleted – just to be eventually re-downloaded again. This prompts the question of what the understandings and experiences are that underpin this on-and-off pattern.

Tinder has a clean appearance with a neat interface and easy set-up – a simplicity that is reinforced by the company's match.chat.meet mantra.[2] Yet, the different stages of choice-making involved in tindering require far more

1 All names in this article are pseudonyms.

2 As captured on the Tinder website (accessed: 9 August 2024).

reflection, stock-taking, and time than they initially appear to. Emily's analogy alludes to the for the most part tiring, uninspiring, and overwhelming nature of swiping 'yes' or 'no' on a large number of profiles that look fairly similar.[3] But it also speaks to the aspect of Tinder that follows a match and during which visions of what might be are peered into further – via in-app messages and, once basic trust is established, via WhatsApp.[4]

According to Tanja Bosch's (2020) mixed-method study in South Africa, the main appeal of Tinder is the idea of meeting people one would otherwise not meet. My research echoes this curiosity about that which is other or somewhat strange. It also shows that welcoming strangeness is neither easy nor instant. Tinder's ambiguity lies in the tension that builds between the promise of simple access to vast amounts of different options and the fear that sincere try-ons might be revealing in unexpected ways. I draw attention to these through the lens of Katrien Pype's (2018) heuristic concept of the *technology contract*.

In her work, Pype foregrounds the societal dynamics related to technological inventions (broadly speaking). For this she draws on the concept of the 'computer contract' as developed by ethnographer Bennetta Jules-Rosette (1990) in what was one of the earliest socio-technological works on the African continent, discussing computer education in Ivory Coast and Kenya. Technology development and everyday use are typically discussed in isolation from one another. Given the significant influence corporations and their technology developments have on how people interact through these technologies, it is particularly important to look at the discursive paradigms around technologies and practices embedded in them as a form of active engagement. This perspective also allows for a focus on actors, moving beyond utopian and dystopian representations of technologies. For technology contracts to be considered successful, Jules-Rosette and Pype argue, they must align with the public discourse. Rather than focusing on the mere end product, the concept foregrounds processes of negotiation.

The day-to-day use of Tinder reveals insights into all kinds of negotiations around strangeness in Cape Town, extending far beyond a discourse that focuses on how Tinder dating differs from traditional methods of meeting potential partners. Intrigued by how Tinder users in Cape Town managed to regain hope despite regular disillusionment in their cyclical use of the app, and by exploring participants' repeated expressions that Tinder lacks a certain realness, I came to realise how much ambiguities matter as realities are gradually constructed through interactions with past experiences and a sense of a different future. Therefore, the following pages aim to both broaden and complicate conversations about connecting via dating apps like Tinder.

3 Thompson (2017) humorously summarises the different 'types' of dating app profiles in South Africa.

4 See Broeker (2021) for a more detailed account of these rituals of transition.

About Tinder

From its launch in 2012, Tinder has been an avenue of looking for new connections. One of the app's appeals is its quick and easy set-up, completed within mere minutes. Early on, this had to be done via a linked Facebook profile; today a phone number is sufficient. Once a profile opens, a gender identity and preference can be chosen (either man or woman),[5] a maximum radius, and an age bracket. Once the user selects a few pictures and, perhaps, substantiates these with a few sentences in the form of a 'mini biography', the search for a mutual selection – a 'match' – can begin. This is done by swiping a finger across the screen to accept or reject the next profile that appears at the top of a stack of profiles – a visually driven process. The type of connection or date that a user may be looking for is only explored afterwards in conversations that follow when a match is established. Even though profiles on the platform are pre-sorted according to some opaque logic, Tinder emphasises the role of the individual in making choices, unlike other web services that claim to have the algorithmic recipe to find one's 'soulmate' (Finkel 2015). At Tinder's launch, the concept of a mutual selection was novel and promised to reduce unwanted attention as well as the embarrassment of rejection. As co-founder Sean Rad put it, 'no matter who you are, you feel more comfortable approaching somebody if you know they want you to approach them' (Witt 2014).

The overall popularity of the brand has remained relatively steady over the years, perhaps partially because of the sense of comfort that Rad refers to. Tinder's image has, however, shifted over the years: from a hook-up app to a legitimate tool to seek a variety of connections (see, for example, Bosch 2020). Apart from that, broader developments, such as the Covid-19 lockdowns, have left their imprints on users' approaches to the app (Chisom 2021; Portolan and McAlister 2022). Creating comfortable access to 'options', however, does not equal connections. Tinder claims to have produced a total of 55 billion matches to date,[6] but few of them end up being encounters beyond the realm of the app. As such, Tinder is a sphere in which tensions between the technology's purpose-driven design and everyday practice become evident.[7] Tinder, downloaded and deleted in infrequent rhythms by all of my research participants, also formed part of a broader landscape of repertoires in which digital technologies (including other social platforms like Meetup or sexual

5 This was drastically expanded for some markets in 2016 but not for South Africa.

6 As captured on the Tinder website (accessed: 12 December 2023).

7 Also see Broeker (2021), who describes how people in Berlin embed logics around the appropriateness of particular platforms for particular effects (like romance) into new rituals, such as that of switching from a dating app to the encrypted messaging app WhatsApp, as a more significant step in establishing interest than the initial match.

computer games) were merely an element, whilst activities that prioritise the 'face-to-face' element, like dinner parties, dance classes, and 'authentic relating games', were also explored.[8]

With time, terms like 'tindering', 'tinderella', and 'tinderitis' have become integrated into everyday language. They often decorate the titles of Tinder commentaries, with particular reference to negative psychological implications and the addictive nature of Tinder (featured, for instance, on UrbanDictionary.com). To help keep up with the ever-evolving language around app dating, Tinder released its first dictionary in Australia, explaining new dating jargon such as *kittenfishing* (changing aspects of yourself to appear more attractive to others), *affordating* (going on cheap dates), *daterviews* (dates that feel like interviews), *cushioning* (keeping backup relationships), and *beige flags* (warning signs that someone is boring).

Connecting in Cape Town

In order to talk about Tinder in Cape Town, the co-presence between frameworks of the past, the present, and visions of the future are crucial in setting the scene. Tinder's promise of access has distinct connotations in the context of South Africa, one of the most unequal societies in the world. The state laws during the system of apartheid had been designed to disenfranchise people categorised as Black and Coloured. Passes had to be carried in particular by people considered non-white, which only allowed them access to White areas to work at particular hours. As these laws were officially abolished in 1994, aspirational ideas of a 'project freedom' commenced. These were rooted in the idea that a peaceful transition from a brutal minority regime, built on ideas of White superiority, to a society that is not only democratic but that internalises equality as a principle is enough for people with different cultural backgrounds to now coexist in the same spaces and on the same terms. Parting from the painstakingly maintained puritarianism of the apartheid regime in South Africa, during which interracial relationships were penalised, also coincided with a moment in time when access to technologies increased in the late 1990s and, with it, access to a variety of conceptions of possible relationships and sexual experiences. New ideals were enshrined in a constitution that, in many ways, reflected the 'rainbow nation' ideals, capturing the aspiration of a harmonious future in cultural diversity and unity, much like the colours of a rainbow coexist next to each other.

The brutalisation and sexualisation of black bodies, which had long been treated as disposable, were hoped to become a thing of the past with the system change, but time has proven that the violence of racialising bodies is not as easily disrupted. Instead, it finds stimulation in the structural violence

8 Authentic relating games are interactive games designed to cultivate self-aware, deep, and anxiety-free connections with others, often facilitated via Zoom and similar online platforms.

of a capitalist economy that is all but supportive of a levelled playing field. Whilst South Africa is considered an economic powerhouse in sub-Saharan Africa, it remains a society still riddled with socio-economic discrepancies, manifested through drastic gaps in education quality, employment,[9] living conditions, and service delivery, which is contingent on living in the 'right' area. In addition, an ongoing challenge to supply people in South Africa with electricity means that consistent technological connectivity is a privilege reserved for those with access to backup sources and living in affluent areas, which are less affected by power outages.

Differences are stark between those who live their day-to-day lives in suburbs close to the city centre with lifestyle supermarkets, door-opening schools, and access to all kinds of amenities and those in makeshift houses in informal settings where goods and services are provided in a bricolage manner. There are also formal (though under-serviced) areas into which people who used to live within the (official) economic hub of central Cape Town and were classified as Coloured or Black were forcefully moved to. These areas have been growing in the last two decades and are often thought of as 'other' and an origin of social ills, including violent crime and gender-based violence. Although the apartheid rhetoric may no longer be systematically and publicly utilised, affluent areas continue to be shielded from an invasion of what used to be referred to as the 'swaart gevaar' (Afrikaans for black danger) through considerable investments in alarm systems, private security, and neighbourhood watch groups (Junck 2019).

Unlike many of the people who live in Cape Town, my research participants were at home in areas with comfortable infrastructures, even if rendered somewhat unreliable through regular electricity cuts and insecurity produced by high crime levels. These well-serviced and surveilled areas could themselves be interpreted as algorithms or step-by-step recipes for authentication, determining who belongs and who does not. Most of these Tinderers had access to 'better education', the quality of which varies drastically between private and public schools (the latter also depending on the school's location). They also had reliable access to broader connections using various technologies. It stands to question what kinds of stories unfold in a dating environment that has become, at least in theory, open to more exploratory regimes of connecting through such technologies but that is also characterised by thick, inflexible identity categories.

Against this backdrop, Bosch (2017) found social networking platforms to be alluring sites for potential new biographies of citizenship, characterised by more individualised forms of activism. Enthusiasm around the capacities of social media as a 'prosthesis of human agency' (Mitchell and Hansen 2010) has subsided amongst scholars in recent years with the focus shifting to the

9 Unemployment is sitting just below 40% and unskilled workers making up a third of the labour force.

inequalities facilitated through their operationality (see, for example, Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018; York 2022). Notwithstanding the increasing awareness of their negative social repercussions, social media, including dating apps in their capacity to connect, remain an everyday means through which to think and imagine.

Methodological approach

I began the research on the use of Tinder in pursuit of my PhD in 2018. By far the most noteworthy dating app used in Cape Town at the time, Tinder, and the vastly different types of stories surrounding its use, had entered my circles and attracted my attention. My Tinder profile briefly outlined the intention of the research, including an offer to buy coffee for people interested in a conversation about peoples' experiences. It also showed two images of me (one in my graduation gown) and included a logo of the University of Cape Town, where I was working towards my PhD.

The twenty-five research participants I ended up meeting were between twenty-one and sixty-three with almost as many women as men (the only gender categories Tinder provided). In the context, these individuals would all qualify as middle class – although on a broad spectrum ranging between parent-supported university students and homeowners. I initially considered it somewhat coincidental that many of the people I met were experimenting with their sexuality. It was expected for those matches whose profile was marked 'woman', as they would have had their profiles either open to both women and men or just women. With male participants, I was more surprised until I realised that Tinder, despite being imbued by normative sexual ideologies (Parry et al. 2023), also provides an opportunity to 'dip one's toe' into lesser-known waters as regards intimate connections – not just in respect of gender but also regarding different relationship constellations.

Even though I had used the Tinder app previously and made some momentary and some lasting connections drawing on it (including meeting one of my now closest friends), setting up a profile to recruit participants felt quite different. Fellow scholars and others frequently suggested that my positionality as a White woman,[10] at the time on the verge of thirty, must carry extra weight in this space that is not exclusively connoted to 'dating' but strongly associated with the practice. And there certainly were occasions that required careful navigation, as in any ethnographic research. Using Tinder is a research method that welcomes depth and allows for the time that it takes to cohere intimate thoughts, which makes it all but impossible to have firmly defined lines between the 'researcher' and the 'participant'. In my previous research, these blurred lines led to complicated situations. I became,

10 My having been born in Germany was not immediately evident from my profile. Seeing that I had lived in Cape Town for many years, people often assumed that I was local.

for instance, dependent on a gatekeeper of my research setting who had taken a romantic interest in me and whose sociopolitical views and exertions of power over others I found deeply revolting. On Tinder, I did find myself matching with a person I found attractive and who conveyed at one point that he also felt attracted to me. At that particular time I had just started seeing my now partner of 6 years (whom I met on Bumble), and upon clarifying that we managed to continue our conversations. Connections are not easily characterised as sexual or romantic in any context. Tinder is a space that is often thought of as profoundly sexualising. However, those who draw on the app are not any less able to distinguish between different types of connections – they may indeed be more skilled in reading interest – nor are they necessarily just after one singular kind of connection.

Something I had underestimated was the willingness of people to meet a stranger for an interview on their intimate dating experience and the power of using a tool like Tinder, developed on principles of quantification. Much like in other spaces in Cape Town in which I have conducted research to date, being considered White,[11] educated, female, and relatively young did work in my favour. Those markers suggested to those who swiped my profile that I could be their neighbour – middle class and in no economic strain and, by those indicators already, not very threatening. This middle-class status is congruent with the ideology of whiteness which remains a determining factor in establishing trust in Cape Town (Junck 2019) and, as a quiet, female-presenting person, I tend to be met in an unassuming way. What quickly became evident upon meeting was that one of the main motivators for matching with me was the hope that I might be able to advise them on making meaningful connections via Tinder. Men in particular told me that they were relieved to have an outlet to share their hopes and fears around relating, as they felt uncomfortable talking about these things with their friends.

The snowball recruitment approach I had previously used in various settings, requiring a gradual crafting of relationships, never had me exposed to the questions I was facing now: who of those willing should I select and who leave out? It was an uncomfortable notion to establish not just criteria of inclusion – to identify who was interested in my project and I should match – but criteria of exclusion. Realising that I was spoilt for choice, I began with swiping – right for 'yes', left for 'no' – in an effort to put together a diverse group of research participants. Yet, I had a sour feeling in my gut every time I swiped 'no' on someone willing to share their story for no other reason than that the person was of a certain demographic. Aware of the limited capacity I had to give each of these matches the time and attention they deserved, I realised I wanted to keep my swiping to a minimum as I figured out a formula to rely upon – one that would be justifiable later on.

11 I understand Whiteness as a social category that has different sub-categories and is fraught with tensions (Pederson 2020).

An initial tenseness around demographic choice-making and an inner resistance to swiping towards a 'good sample' slowly transitioned into a more intuitively guided swiping flow that also allowed for a paced reflection on my presence on Tinder. Amidst these reflections, I found myself waking up one day unable to access my research profile, which I had gotten into the habit of consulting multiple times a day, not necessarily to take any action on the app but to feel 'connected' to my research topic. I had been banned from the platform. Call centre staff did not provide me with any explanation or a reason and could not respond to my indication that I had not violated any of Tinder's regulations. And so it happened that I was abruptly disconnected from the platform itself, left in limbo and with a desire for clarification.

The possibility of recruiting research participants by having them choose me – by matching my research profile – felt fair and less intrusive than walking up to people in other research settings and interrupting their daily lives. I had been transparent about my intentions and only used the data I collected after I had met with my matches and explained my motivations for and approach to the study. And while social media data visible to all users is often considered public, accessibility does not equate ethics, with the latter being tied to very subjective experiences (see boyd and Crawford 2012). Regardless of the fact that I had reflected on what it means to be on Tinder as a researcher, the actual ban triggered anxiety. I simply could not know how it felt for those who did *not* match with me to come across my profile. Moreover, dealing with critical views and difficult gatekeepers is an inherent component of ethnographic fieldwork, whilst a general consensus on when and where a scientific gaze is appropriate is quite improbable. What made the situation particularly frustrating was that, after many attempts of contacting Tinder, I still could not find out why exactly I had been shunted from the app.

Ultimately, my ban from Tinder was a blessing in disguise. The experience made me reflect on the inherent problem introduced by dedicating an easily accessible space (here Tinder) to the singular practice of 'dating'. It is this unclear term, which seems to urge for privacy and isolated emotional domains, that implies that users in this space lack the ability to make an agentive choice of whether or not to be part of a research project. As I built in-person relationships with some Tinderers over the numerous coffees, foods, and walks we shared within different areas of Cape Town – whilst other matches remained one-time encounters – I came to recognise the ideational hollowness of isolating the 'dating' portion of a person's life from their larger experiential journeys. What is more, the misleading notion of privacy amongst strangers makes it easy for platforms like Tinder to sidestep accountability and transparency regarding their regulation, the logics of which have become part and parcel of connecting today.

Tindering as a process

Research on Tinder tends to focus on isolated aspects of the way the app is used, such as the motivations for using the app (see, for example, James 2015; Sumter et al. 2017; Kallis 2020; Ciocca et al. 2020), the type of people who use it (Gatter and Hodkinson 2016; Timmermans and De Caluwé 2017), or the behaviour patterns developed in its use (Rochat et al. 2019; Dai and Robbins 2021; Medina-Bravo et al. 2023; Roca-Cuberes et al. 2023; Kristy et al. 2023; Drunen 2023). This research is also drawn on to trace current social trends (March et al. 2017; Fansher and Eckinger 2021) and shifting social trajectories in broad terms (Rosenfeld 2018; Palmer 2020). Maria Stoicescu (2020: 1), for instance, argues that we are witnessing a 'McDonaldization of romance in which fast love and intimacy are pursued and consumed in an accelerated fashion, redefining socially expected scenarios for relationships'. What these conversations rarely touch on is that Tindering is a process that connects different stories and timelines.

Whilst 'McDonaldised' features of Tinder are exported across the globe, for instance in the form of standardised profiles, algorithms, and marketing strategies, what this means for day-to-day experiences remains underexplored, particularly beyond what is often referred to as the Global North. African settings are generally not foregrounded in studying technology use, with the notable exception of innovative technologies being framed as part of development efforts. When relationships in the region are considered, it is often against the backdrop of kinship and population patterns, violence, or disease. This produces a scholarly backed understanding of intimacy as contingent only on external factors rather than considering what forming relationships entails (see Spronk 2012).

Reflecting on everyday interactions between bodies and technologies, Christopher Bareither (2019: 19) stresses their emotional affordances, which 'offer specific ways of doing emotion in a process of reflecting one's own body through media'. In the form of their design, speed/repetition, materiality, and narratives, platforms do seem to have profoundly economising effects on the body. But *what* effects is not at all apparent. Gaby David and Carolina Cambre (2016: 9) argue that the extent of technology's objectifying effect depends on whether there is an acknowledgement of the self as 'non-continuous, non-unitary, with fuzzy, porous boundaries and sensitive to social context'.

Amongst the Tinderers I met in Cape Town, the self was certainly considered to some extent infringed upon by the set-up and logics of the platform. Nonetheless, the own person was situated outside of the app, not as a subject that is fully in control but one that is willing to make certain trade-offs at certain moments. I understand these trade-offs to be part of ongoing negotiations of the possibilities and challenges of technologies, akin to Pype's (2018) technology contract, determining how different knowledge systems

are configured. Embodied learnings and the ability to nourish visions that encompass that which is beyond the immediate experiential sphere play a crucial role in this process.

Knowing and unknowing

When it comes to the intersection of basic human desires of feeling connected with technologies in particular, 'modern love' is described as having an alienating trend characterised by a lack of solidarity. Eva Illouz (2018) refers to this as the end of love and Zygmunt Bauman (2013) as love being liquified. When we consider Bosch's (2020) findings, which demonstrate that Tinder users in South Africa *build on* the tech promise of creating spaces for new possibilities, attitudes, and expectations, Bauman's assertion about the erosion of traditional ideals seems to be misguided. My own research aligns with this. It shows that, grounded in the everyday – encompassing both past memories and careful visions of the future – thinking through relationality via Tinder (and other technologies) becomes a process of negotiating ways of knowing and connecting with relative strangers in Cape Town.

Lisa Portolan and Jodi McAlister (2022) speak about how, during the thick of the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions in Australia, heightened levels of uncertainty accelerated the search for certainty in the form of the dominant romantic master plot, only for people to quickly lose faith in it. In their study, realities such as loneliness interfered with the ways in which people could embody the protagonist of their romantic story, which had been internalised as typically involving two people meeting, having sex, falling in love, marrying, having children, and living happily ever after. Rather than the gradual liquification of love that Bauman described as a general social trend in 'modern societies', dating app users were more jaggedly shifting between desperately looking for stability in a partnership and being profoundly disenchanted (Portolan and McAlister 2022).

In Cape Town, similar shifts became evident in my research, and this before the global pandemic. They were informed by a more permanent sense of social instability and undergirded by universal ideas of romance. Sometimes Tinder was embraced as an opportunity to explore the unknown. In others, it was described as symptomatic of an inability to connect meaningfully in contemporary Cape Town. Nick, an English South African architect in his late twenties,[12] elaborated on the appeal of creating a connection with someone unknown to him and meeting up before learning much about them:

> *I really just want to have that experience of talking to a complete stranger that you know nothing about. My standard thing*

12 Identity politics in South Africa continue to differentiate those who are categorised as 'White' as either being English South African (generally of British ancestry) or Afrikaans South African (originally of a Dutch heritage).

> *to say is, 'Would you like to go for a drink? Let me know if you do or don't.' Some say it's very forward, but for some it's fine. I like the spontaneity. Suddenly you're in a space with this person that you know nothing about. I find this really … exciting. If it's a stranger, you can open up. Even if it's just for one night.*

During our lunch at a bustling restaurant in downtown Cape Town through his work break, Nick initially described Tinder as the perfect tool to initiate 'love without the fall', an idea he credited to the popular philosopher and sociologist Slavoj Žižek. And certainly, the theme of wanting to use Tinder as a means to avoid torment recurred in different conversations with participants, who described the rejection and pain, at least in the early stages of connecting via Tinder, to be somewhat removed from 'real life emotions'. Tom, a postgraduate biology student with a humorous Tinder profile in which he caricatured himself in a form of comic illustration, reflected as follows:

> *The fact that I can talk to multiple people at once makes it so different. If I can talk to like ten people and one person doesn't reply to my message in the middle of the conversation, I don't get this 'Why didn't you reply, did I say something stupid?' or like 'What's going on?' … It doesn't feel like that at all. It's light-hearted and there's a lot of people, right? Whereas when you're at a party and you're having this great conversation and you're like, wow, this is amazing, and then they just walk away from you [laughs], you're, like, I guess you're not obligated to talk to me because we don't know each other but that was weird, right? That can mess up your whole night.*

Phoebe, in her early thirties and working in information and communication technology after moving to the city from a small university town, thought there was something not just inherent to the app itself that allowed people to behave in a particular way but the idea of finding a 'romantic fit'. She critically assessed her own strategic dating approach: 'I think we're arseholes in the romantic context in a way that we're not allowed [to be] anywhere else. Like checking education … [and checking] this and that, thinking that we're going to have lots in common.' She added:

> *I've met a lot of brilliant people [via Tinder]. That's, like, the coolest thing. And a lot who have lots of stuff I'm interested in or other stuff that doesn't work … and that, like, gradually builds the spectrum of what works and what doesn't. The problem with Tinder is that it's so … not superficial, but so … calculating. You start with a lot of things that, if you met the person organically, wouldn't be deal-breakers, but here you're like, 'No, wait!' [grimaces].*

Whilst Phoebe did not particularly like this side of herself, she was also determined to accumulate some experiences within the fast-paced environment of Tinder to get to know herself better in connection with the relatively strange other. She had not dated any men since being sexually assaulted at the age of nineteen. Having dated her best friend for a long time and now separated from her, Phoebe was now ready to explore what she described as 'heteronormative dating' and a 'balance match', or as 'falling in love with someone on purpose'. Despite this element of control and an understanding of Tinder as an avenue for adventurous self-exploration without much risk of a fall, practices of relating were not untouched by some romanticised vision of an 'authentic encounter' – expectations Phoebe thought of as part of a Victorian hangover.[13] As for Nick, having spent the greater part of our first conversation talking about Tinder as a hedonistic tool and avoiding getting hurt, he later reported having downloaded an additional dating app, Happn. This is an app that matches users they have crossed physical paths with. He explained the app's intriguing effect on him, saying:

> *I got it recently. I like the idea, but in practice it doesn't really work that well. I love the idea … But there aren't enough people on it in Cape Town for it to work properly, so it ends up like Tinder. Oh, you crossed paths with me today! Often you cross paths once. I envisioned it, like, you cross paths with that person every day but you just never met. But it's probably [more like] we're sitting here and someone just drove past. Imagine you work together and you cross paths often, that could be something interesting. But it wasn't as exciting as I thought.*

Nick was not the only one who romanticised serendipity whilst also appreciating the notion of control that dating apps give the impression of providing. Happn is inspired by the idea of destiny and an evocative moment of crossing paths. Even though the match might happen with a delay and whilst the two individuals are no longer in the same vicinity, the app projects this as an unambiguous, world-stands-still moment, a notion portrayed as a crucial sign for compatibility through Hollywood movies. Tinder, on the other hand, is considered the calculating, ideological counterpart to this. What the concept of Happn seems to allow for is a warmth towards strangeness that is tied up with understandings of romance that have come to be recognised as traditional and authentic. Even if a 'meet-cute moment'[14] never actually happens in this serendipitous form, being able to imagine it chips away at some of the lack of realness that is assigned to the materiality of dating apps. This serves

13 Phoebe used the term 'Victorian hangover' a few times in the context of what she considered to be archaic social practices, including gender roles.

14 A 'meet-cute moment' is the moment typically depicted in romantic comedies as the charming, unexpected, sometimes humorous encounter between two people, setting the stage for their romantic connection.

to show that technological affordances do not just lie in an ultimate result, tying expectation/promise to output. It also lies in the ways in which the past, the present, and possible futures become merged in a realisation of our inherent interconnectedness as human beings, involving pushes and pulls between that which we think we know in our bones and a curiosity for the unknown. The affordance of technology, then, integrates its operationality and infrastructural offerings with its capacity to render embodied experiences part of negotiations around possible futures in newish ways.

Longing for strangeness and authenticity

Tinder as one of the most firmly established dating apps is part of a large assemblage of online dating tools. The conglomerate Match Group owns over forty-five online dating providers (including Tinder) across the globe but despite this market share spends a growing amount of money on marketing these platforms (Statista 2023). The company's first global Tinder marketing campaign in 2023 specifically targeted 'Generation Z',[15] exporting notions of what 'authentic relating' today looks like (Tinder 2023). The marketing effort underlines the normatively blurry and relatively scriptless concept imbued in the practice of connecting with relative strangers within a certain radius and yet outside a sphere of familiarity. Relationships are depicted as fluid, not in need of clear (especially heteronormative) categories, so long as they are 'authentic'.

Apart from the community code of conduct that is mainly meant to preclude harassment, clues as to what makes an appropriate and authentic Tinder encounter are subject to experiential uncovering. This produces frictions that sometimes are intriguing and at others frustrating and disillusioning. In its digitally delegated form, authenticity is reduced to particular data points – for instance by making sure the details of Facebook and dating app profiles match, only tangentially touching on more layered understandings of what this may mean (Duguay 2017). And whilst there is an acknowledgement that Tinder operates upon superficial, searchable factors that may at a certain point clash with experiential attributes, there is also a notion that risk and disappointment can be mitigated and hope kept in check.

What authenticity means was subject to individual exploration for Tinderers in Cape Town. Sophia, well educated, in her late twenties, and working for a non-governmental organisation, recounted having felt the need to explore dating people with whom she has little in common. This is after she had been in a long relationship with someone who had quite a similar background to her. Only by broadening her perspective, she reckoned, would she be able to understand what she actually wants. She matched with someone from an area that is poorer and is commonly described as 'Coloured' (from one of

15 Generation Z is defined as the generation born roughly between the mid-to-late 1990s and the early 2010s.

the areas people were forcibly removed to during apartheid). Sophia invited him to her home in a suburb of Cape Town that is popular with students and that is often described as bohemian. As they sat in the backyard drinking wine, Sophia realised that the previously playful mood suddenly shifted. Her housemates, both men and a couple, had come out to greet her guest, after which Sophia's date kept on asking her about their sexuality. 'He became totally obsessed with the idea that they were gay and together, and he kept asking about it … it was so uncomfortable!' After hinting multiple times that she had to get up early, her date finally left, and she felt relieved it was over.

I was surprised that Sophia had invited this man into her home, as most female participants would, like me, follow the protocol of meeting a new person in a familiar public space first. The match had been the result of an impulse – an urge to experience something new, the expectations of which quickly collided with the uncomfortable reality of two divergent experiential domains. Distorted expectations of what authenticity will look and feel like on a first Tinder date – and consequent disillusionment – did sometimes reinforce tenacious barriers. Soon after this experience, Sophia started a relationship with someone she had met at university some years earlier. However, such experiences did not necessarily mean that strangeness was avoided altogether.

Frictions

Stretching towards the authentic *and* the strange posed challenges to and meant different things for different participants – and at varying moments in time. Matt, for instance, was in a new relationship, for the first time with another man, but secretly continued seeking additional bondage experiences with women via Tinder. His partnership, grown from a long-term friendship, was familiar and new at the same time, as were his secret sexual escapades, in a way. And then there was Willem, who had not dated anyone for nearly a decade after his divorce. He now drew on Tinder to take cautious and deliberate steps to reconnect with the idea of dating and what assumptions and expectations it might entail doing so via the app.

Frequently, Tinder was embedded in a process of getting over someone or something and not being ready for a full commitment yet. Unlike common definitions of what has entered the public vocabulary as 'situationships', these explorations were never free of expectations, imaginations, and lingering feelings; they were very much part of experiencing the various dimensions of relating with another human being. Tinder as a means to connect and a carrier of meanings was an unsteady element in these negotiations – quickly deleted and re-downloaded at different stages. At the same time that negative social behaviour such as 'ghosting'[16] was closely associated with the

16 'Ghosting' is commonly defined as the disappearance from a relationship without any explanation.

emergence of dating apps and critiqued as a form of social decay, Tinder was frequently opted for precisely because it allowed for ambiguity. Tinder was, for instance, welcomed as a tool to 'sort-of-date' and have a 'sort-of-intimacy', one that lacks definition at its early stages – but will, at a particular point, metamorphose into either a something or a nothing. 'Getting over' someone was not a rare motivation for (re)downloading the app. This was done by creating *newish* moments with relative strangers, which seemed to provide opportunities to discover meaning through novel connections but grounding them in the logics of an accumulated wealth of experience.

In all their pluralism, the intimate narratives of my research participants tugged at embodied assumptions of what is desirable, strange, and authentic. They also revealed frictions of negotiating a technology contract through Tinder as a means imbued with the potential of extending one's desires, on the one hand, and exposing oneself to risks of the unfamiliar or unexpected, on the other. Sylvester's story is illustrative of this. Self-made, from a historically strategically disadvantaged area, and describing himself as Coloured, this fifty-two-year-old had a particular vision of his future with someone. He started his Tinder adventure by looking for a woman who would correspond to all his selection criteria: never married, childless, of Catholic faith, self-sufficient, modest, and preferably still of childbearing age. 'If things work out, I would settle down. Get married, have kids … ,' he said to me at our first meeting over coffee in Sea Point, an affluent coastal area of Cape Town where he had suggested meeting. When I saw him again some months later, Sylvester's approach had drastically changed: he was no longer looking for the perfect romantic match but had, instead, started drawing on Tinder to explore connections without confining them to the notion of a 'date'. He described this as a way to keep his expectations in check and embrace different kinds of connections, not necessarily in line with the 'traditional dating route' in the way he had envisioned at the outset. It also meant less pressure to becoming physically intimate, since he had not had sexual contact with anyone else for years, apart from a guilt-laden experience with a sex worker.

As a result of his new approach, Sylvester had started seeing women from different cultural, social, and racial backgrounds within those few months. 'I never thought I would someday go out with a Black woman, and on top of that a foreigner,' he explained. Sylvester's new method brought him into contact with a woman from Malawi, with whom he shared an unexpectedly pleasant evening and even his first kiss in years. 'It was easier than I thought, maybe also because she was gonna leave Cape Town soon,' he elucidated. 'I did not even feel uncomfortable holding hands in public – I enjoyed it.' Recounting the kiss, Sylvester compared his feeling to a television show, in which participants are blindfolded and explore their attraction to a stranger by relying on their senses. The blindfold metaphor avails itself quite readily to describing

both the allure of the unknown and Sylvester's use of the dating app to play with normative categories and the restrictions they come with.

However, when the blindfold comes off, other elements may enter the equation. When later on Sylvester started seeing a woman from Zimbabwe via Tinder, economic and social status became more significant. She worked as a live-in house help, he explained in a hushed tone, and that he was not initially physically drawn to her. Providing cheap domestic work was one of the few ways during apartheid to get access to the wealthier parts of the city, and the same labour and living patterns (still in exchange for minimal and informal compensation) have persisted over time. As such, it is an area of work that exemplifies the endurance of old power dynamics and attributions of worth. When his match invited him to visit her as her employer was not around, they lay in bed together naked for a while. For Sylvester, it was a reassuring experience as regards possible connections, adding nuance to himself by reaching towards the unfamiliar to comfortable degrees. By detaching the idea of meeting someone from meeting 'the one' made possible for him, even if only momentarily, to expand the tight moral frameworks that stipulate what feels authentic, even if they did not fundamentally alter his frame of reference.

Conclusion: authentically strange

Dating app profiles are often laughed at in online commentaries, with users decoding the strategies and archetypes drawn on, and Tinder and similar apps are directly linked to an entirely new (partly humorous, partly disillusioning) reference system evolving around it. Yet there is something about Tinder's promised affordance to match with someone beyond one's direct physical reach that keeps people swiping despite often feeling disillusioned.

Tom McDonald (2019) observes that 'the stranger' has been a recurring figure in anthropology and sociology, often taken to represent the antithesis of kinship and friendship. It represents an absence of relations or a lack of sorts, associated with what is thought of as an anomie of life today. Yet, connecting with strange people and ideas is integral to living in a world of movements, flows, and ideological shifts. Matching with relative strangers over and over again via Tinder can be interpreted as a willingness to renegotiate realities, though this does not happen in an instant.

The ethnographic examples presented in this article might, at first glance, seem to support Phoebe's view that dating apps and old tales of 'romance' lead people to behave 'like arseholes', searching for new ways to have their individual desires met without necessarily foregrounding the feelings of the other individual/s involved in their 'learning moment'. I argue that this is not reflective of a hedonistic trend, fuelled by technologies, or a liquification of love as per Bauman (2013). Instead, the depth of these narratives,

processed as personal learnings and retold to me in my role as a researcher and attentive listener, reflects an urge to grapple with what it might mean to be human in the time of Tinder and co., much like in Pype's (2018) contemplations of 'technology contracts'. These negotiations are very much tied up in specific societal climates and histories, which have to be carefully looked at through individual accounts before making any generalising claims about technologies and their social impact.

However brief they sometimes are, Tinder encounters are consequential – they become part of one's fabric and constitute an embodied reverberation in encounters yet to come, even when experiences are treated as somewhat removed from reality. Following dating accounts over time gives credit to embodied memories – as well as efforts to build new ones. Yet, in turn, attributing too much weight to specific moments of using dating apps glosses over the ambiguities, contradictions, and frictions that afford meaning. It also plays into persistent affinities towards simplistic, binary assumptions around technologies: human versus artificial; authentic versus strange. Tinder does not dictate realness but forms part of a process of moving in and out of conversation with different realities.

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Leah Junck considers herself a digital anthropologist, fascinated with questions of what the integration of computational technologies into peoples' lives means for our ability to relate to one another and envision a shared future. This interest was fuelled through her work on the Tinder dating application, the role of social media in neighbourhood surveillance in South Africa, and understandings of artificial intelligence in healthcare in Mozambique. She is now working as an applied anthropologist, seeking to encourage contextually grounded and inclusive conversations around technologies.

Single Motherhood, Sexuality, and Mediated Intimacies on Dating Apps

Irida Ntalla

Introduction

> *I have never met a single mother (me included) who is not far more complex, critical, and at odds with the set of cliches she is meant effortlessly to embody than she is being encouraged – or rather instructed – to think.*
>
> — Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers*

Single mothers need to juggle their parenting duties and romantic life, intertwining the maternal and erotic facets of femininity. The epigraph from Jacqueline Rose's account of motherhood captures the intricate way in which single motherhood intersects with matters of sexuality, identity, and societal expectations. This article considers the balance between motherhood and womanhood in the realm of intimacy and sexuality within the digital domain. The findings contribute to the scholarly conversation on maternal sexuality, often sidelined, and aim to broaden existing narratives that normalise single mothers' sexuality and desire. Single motherhood is far from a unified entity; rather, how it is experienced varies, as between the single mother by choice and the stigmatised young single mother, or the lone single mother and the middle-class single mother, to name but a few. This article discusses single motherhood through the lens of autoethnographic notes and digital ethnography, thus focusing on a specific section of these experiences. Single motherhood is often a transitory state and the intricacies surrounding the identity of the 'single mother' start from its very definition, which continued to be marked by social expectations, stigma, and discrimination (Carroll 2019; Morris 2015; Talbot 2021). The single mother, mother and single woman in one, may be in this state only transiently. She is a prime example of capability and autonomy, yet always at risk of being seen as profoundly incapable, a site of ideological double-binds that are always in danger of being unmasked (Rose 2018). Described as 'sinners, scroungers, saints' (Rose 2018: 29) and 'domestic intellectuals' and 'darlings of the popular culture' (Juffer 2006: 9, 4), single mothers do challenge, though not always intentionally, the myth and the internalised fantasy of the nuclear family.

Figures indicate the widespread phenomenon of single parenthood and single motherhood within the context of the United Kingdom (UK): one in four families take this form (ONS 2019); and 83% of the single parents are

women. The use of dating apps, which have become integral to modern romantic experiences, by many of these single mothers marks a significant shift in the history of dating cultures (Hodgson 2017). These mothers navigate the world of online dating influenced by various emotional, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Apps, platforms, and devices impact ways of meeting partners, engaging in and sustaining intimate relationships. The variety of dating apps, a significant part of the growing 'app economy' (Goldsmith 2014), includes popular choices like Bumble, Hinge, OkCupid, and Tinder alongside others such as Plenty of Fish, Happn, Badoo, Facebook Dating, and Match.com as well as options tailored for single parents such as Frolo Dating and PlayDate. Dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge are often seen as restricted to casual interactions, marked by 'negative bonds' which Illouz (2019) describes as short-term, non-committing relationships with minimal self-involvement and little emotional connection, reflecting the condition of hyperconnected modernity. These apps are popular, increasingly socially acceptable, and in some cases arguably essential for meeting new people, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, which further accelerated their rising use (Garcia-Iglesias et al. 2024). This network connectivity alters how we experience intimacy (Hjorth 2011), disrupts and challenges traditional forms of intimacy, and acts as an infrastructure of intimacy introducing new practices, arrangements, and expectations while forging their shapes and intensities (Paasonen 2017). The existing research on single mothers' sexuality and romantic lives is limited (Morris 2015; Stoicescu and Rughiniş 2022). It focuses largely on the psychological consequences of dating on a single mother's mental health (Rousou et al. 2019), the effects of dating on the well-being of a single mother's children (Xiao et al. 2022; Langlais et al. 2016), and the life satisfaction of single mothers (Pollmann-Schult 2018). Single mothers' romantic and sexual goals, challenges, and outcomes are often overlooked and seldom discussed.

The article contributes to the literature on dating cultures through the lens of single mothers who date online. It is an area that requires further analysis considering the proliferation of these online platforms as means to meet partners and the diverse ways intimacy and relationships are formed and navigated. These digitally mediated intimacies have the possibility of challenging but also reproducing heteronormative imaginaries (see Ferris and Duguay 2020; Licoppe 2020). This perspective intersects with the complex narratives of motherhood and sexuality, often filled with contrasting views ranging from victimisation to empowerment, helpful for re-imagining contemporary femininities in the sense of becoming and potentiality (Braidotti 2002). The transition into single motherhood and 'becoming' a single woman shapes experiences with dating. It points to the interplay between autonomy and dependency, with the latter often captured by ideals and fantasies such as the nuclear family as the main form of care and intimacy. The

discussion here provides insight into mothers' sexuality that may exist outside of normative scenarios and social structures and in everyday, though often precarious, forms of pleasure and desire.

The article connects insights from media studies, digital sociology, and anthropology to explore the landscape of online dating. It argues that online dating practices, which often promise a rationalisation of intimacy and romantic encounters and an alchemy of love (Bandinelli and Gandini 2022), serve as the space to unpack the complex intersections of cultural norms and personal identity, particularly for single mothers. By integrating perspectives from my own experiences, this study applies an autoethnographical lens to analyse how single mothers engage with these apps, present themselves, and disclose their motherhood status as part of sexual capital within the broader context of digital intimacies. The article draws on digital ethnography conducted on Facebook groups for single mothers and single parents (predominantly in the UK) from 2020 to 2022. It also engages with TikTok trends and short-form videos that highlight experiences of dating by single mothers.

The article begins with discussions of the research methodology and the theoretical basis for studying single motherhood and online dating, as background for the discussion of the ethnographic data in the subsequent three sections. The first examines the intersection of motherhood and womanhood within the context of single motherhood, exploring the often-conflicted maternal identity and expression of one's sexual self and how these impact one's approach to online dating. This leads to an analysis of practices of single mothers on dating apps, focusing on the management of their online identities and the negotiation of their visibility. Third, the article further discusses how single mothers navigate perceptions and expectations as part of sexual capital, and the strategies of self-disclosure they employ. A brief conclusion reflects on the nuances of such experiences and practices.

It is important to note the limitations of the study: it does not directly address factors such as age, nationality, race, or social class. The lived experiences captured by the methodological approach used in this study are those of heterosexual single mothers within a UK context.

Methodology

The article draws on autoethnographic notes and on digital ethnography of, first, publicly available discussions on Facebook support groups for single mothers and parents and, second, TikTok trends and videos attached to specific hashtags such as #singlemumdating and #singlemumtok, which I engaged with during a period of two years (2020–2022). Autoethnography as a methodological approach is undertaken retrospectively as a process of recalling, reflecting, and reviewing moments and stories that comprise our lives, finding patterns and key themes that help us understand certain phe-

nomena. Applying this methodology, I visited and revisited observations of dating I had made as a newly single mother in the urban environment of London, undoubtedly with some distance and less urgency and immediacy. As an interpretive method, autoethnography occupies a progressive position because of its valance whilst employing revelation, reflexivity, and self-critique located in the lived experience of the cultural context that is analysed (Johnson-Bailey 2021). It acknowledges lived experience as a social phenomenon that deserves scrutiny, prominence, and value in feminist thought. Writing in the first person focuses on the outwards, the cultural aspects of personal experience (Chang 2008), to expose, inwards, a 'vulnerable self' moved by refracting and resisting cultural interpretations (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 739). It is a methodology that is often suited to investigate sensitive or hidden topics. It locates research in emotional life (Ettorre 2016) and opens the scope of speaking about a subject with honesty. Rose (2018) argues that our conception of what it is to be a mother is fatally flawed as such women are often held accountable for societal ills, including the threat to welfare, and are burdened with unrealistic expectations of perfection. This brings to attention the difficult feelings that are associated with motherhood.

The ethics of the self, foundational to autoethnography, demand an ongoing reflection on approaching the experience of single motherhood authentically and with care towards others. In my attempt to include a reflexive narrative of dating as a single mother, I am cognisant of the intense 'identification' towards a fixed, primary position and the privilege of 'voice' as part of the process. I consider the potential pitfall in the proposition that autoethnography is an art construction to 'represent the author in a particular way' (Walford 2020: 35) or enter into a process of self-indulgence or self-absorption. As demonstrated by Sara Ahmed (2014), feminism teaches us that discussing our personal emotions is not about shifting focus away from systemic matters and is not a form of 'indulgence'. Rather, it is about sharing stories of transition and historical context and instances where we may face constraint and discrimination. These personal accounts should be embraced and seen to contribute to wider narratives instead of being dismissed as self-indulgent or regarded as merely centring on 'damaged identities'. Recalling my experience of online dating as a single mother, I am aware of my privilege as a white, educated, migrant woman in the UK. I had the experience of simultaneous identities: a woman and a migrant deriving from a working-class background and yet as an adult populating many middle-class spaces which provided me with notable privilege as a single white mother. Ahmed (2014) writes that

> *privilege does not mean we are invulnerable: things happen, shit happens. Privilege can however reduce the costs of vulnerability, so if things break down, if you break down, you are more likely to be looked after. When support is a question of access you have a support system.*

An ongoing reflection of the ethnographic work on single mothers in digital spaces relates to my positionality as a researcher in line with the 'identification' of a single mother. Who is the single mother, and who can use this term? 'Single mother' is a contested term that encapsulates a multitude of lived experiences, related to the intersection of gender, ethnicity, social class, language, and other systems of domination that determine our privileges, inequalities, and proximity to power, including the 'route'/transition towards being a single mother. I recognise the risk in solidifying certain narratives and understandings of groups of people, with the potential of 'betrayal', 'misrepresentation', and 'narrowing' of the experiences of the communities under consideration and not giving enough credit to the strengths, troubles, and specific needs of single mothers in the diverse forms of single motherhood. I take a critical feminist stance towards the discourse that sees whiteness as a maternal citizenship of the 'good motherhood', which is intensified as part of 'good lone motherhood' (Carroll and Yeadon-Lee 2022). I am aware that the article focuses on heterosexual single mothers within western norms, considers sexuality in a narrow, binary manner, and does not reflect on race and class. Yet I hope to open the discussion towards the more complex experiences of other single parents and their sexual lives.

Digital ethnography is a valuable tool to engage with narratives on single motherhood and dating. My approach to observing online communities included collecting and analysing twenty online threads and relevant comments from three key Facebook support groups (predominantly within the UK context). I based my selection of threads on keywords on the topic of online dating. The online dating platforms discussed in the threads varied, yet the data collected comes mainly from Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge. My focus lay not specifically on dating but on peer support, networking, and advice on single motherhood and parenting. I collected data by joining online groups, following specific threads, observing, and sometimes participating. Instead of doing participant observation in a classical anthropological sense, I used an approach that can be viewed as 'observation of participation' where the ethnographer both experiences and observes their own and others' co-participation within the ethnographic encounter (Tedlock 1991). Facebook and its community groups provide opportunities for mothers to communicate with existing networks, extend their networks (Lupton et al. 2016), and find specific groups, thus easing their feelings of marginalisation and stigmatisation (Ammari and Schoenebeck 2015). Ethical considerations such as confidentiality, anonymity, and representation are important as the research engages with online discussions. In many of these groups, I shared invitations for women to assist with my research and I was open about my identity as a researcher. At the same time, the accounts and discussions I used for the research are publicly available. I anonymised all people I draw on in this article; and during my research I treated them with respect and care.

The study also draws on content from TikTok attached to specific hashtags, such as #singlemumdating and #singlemumtok. In this context, the disclosure of my identity as a researcher did not play a role. In my choice of content I did not focus on specific videos but examined trends as part of audio memes and narratives that become repetitive because of the platform's algorithm when searching specific hashtags. I examined approximately fifty videos for the key narratives of why or why not one should date a single mum. I interpret these not as individual cultural artifacts but consider them collectively within the broader background of trends and platform-specific languages (Schellewald 2021). TikTok is a platform and tool for entertainment and education, an app to create short-form videos as purposeful digital mediation and storytelling of everyday life. Its short-video format is characterised by a high degree of sociality, immediacy, and playfulness. Many scholars recognise it as a separate and unique category of social media, distinct from its long-form predecessors (Kaye et al. 2022). Angela Lee and her co-authors suggest that TikTok enables self-making not only through introspection but also through the discovery of one's self within the diverse communities and aesthetic styles presented on the 'For You' page, in line with the platform's affordances for user participation and creativity (Lee et al. 2022: 17). In analysing the data from these two platforms, I consider the unique affordances and user interactions specific to each platform. Yet, as the article's focus is not on these two digital spaces as social networking platforms, there are limitations in situating fully the narratives presented**.** The Facebook groups were mainly focused on the UK context because of my own spatial arrangements, but I do not directly analyse the specific social or socio-demographic contexts of the women quoted in this study. The TikTok content is in English, and I used hashtags that use the spelling 'mums' rather than 'moms' to focus the research spatially. As already noted, the searches led predominantly to white mothers, and a more diverse examination of this would have required deeper explorations of specific hashtags, something that was not feasible within the remit of this article.

Becoming a single mother

The process of becoming a single mother involves choice and dependency and carries with it expectations and fantasies. Choice may include the ability to leave a harmful relationship whilst dependency often reflects the need for financial and peer support. These factors significantly shape how a single mother approaches dating, desire, and sexual intimacy in everyday life. As Jane Juffer (2006: 31) argues, 'how one becomes a single mom shapes life as a single mom'. Thinking through metamorphosis, Rosi Braidotti (2002: 24–25, 106) sees the 'female corporeal reality' as a process of becoming, incorporating the body closer into her Deleuzian thinking as part of the creation

of gendered sexuality and subjectivity. The subject is never fixed but exists at 'different levels of power and desire, constantly shifting between wilful choice and unconscious drive' (Braidotti 2002: 76-77).

I recall becoming a single mother as a continuous metamorphosis rooted in cultural and intellectual forces and materiality. The possibility of becoming in this instance carries painful adjustments, such as the lack of a stable ground, as demonstrated in the need to reinvent oneself with a child, find appropriate housing, and build a single-headed family, a challenge that may not resonate with all single mothers (for instance, mothers that are single by choice) but is significant for many. Becoming a single mother may not carry the stigma it once did, especially when it represents and maintains the white and middle-class norms of good parenting (Mack 2016: 59). But it also emerges as a state of possible freedom, perhaps expected to break down and counter the myth and deeply internalised ideal of the nuclear family. Yet the question remains: How free are most single mothers to pursue these possibilities, particularly when the social moralities surrounding the two-parent family continue to confer privilege and societal approval (Juffer 2006)?

Single mothers can be portrayed in popular imagery as lacking resilience, but they are also expected by societal structures to have stronger skills than other women to overcome adversity and the affective capacity to survive and weather insecurity and hardship, making them 'heroes'. For me, my ability to 'bounce back' (Gill and Orgad 2018) was strengthened in moments of realisation, and I achieved insight by therapy, conversations, and participation in self-help communities (all of which are not available to all) in which I reflected on what it was that was holding me back. The fantasy of the 'traditional' ideal of the two-parent family maintains the prevalence of certain imageries and 'rational' choices which can lead some mothers to remain tied in harmful relationships. Fantasy here gestures towards psychoanalysis, bringing scenarios, narratives, and social structures that people might desire to be the imagined. Fantasy is not merely imaginary as its reality is intertwined with the reality of our desires. Consequently, fantasy is not antagonistic to social reality; rather, it serves as a precondition or psychic glue (Rose 2004). Acting as a foundational story, the family is deeply entrenched in the core of many cultures, both widely affirmed and intensely criticised. It is crucial to recognise that the contextualisation of intimacy within the family, specifically in the Western paradigm, is assumed to exert a stabilising influence; it organises desire and social reproduction (Balani 2023: 62) and disciplines those who resist the current reproductive order (Gotby 2023: 42). Furthermore, this contextualisation of intimacy acts as a filtering device to social benefits with racialised access (Balani 2023: 63). The increasingly 'equal' division of labour in the two-parent family has led to shifts in formations of intimacy and personal life (Giddens 1993), such as forms of cohabitation. Despite declining marriage and rising divorce rates, family and marriage remain a key

milestone in the narrative of an individual life (Balani 2023). Whilst other kinship forms have become less stigmatised, with a loosening of the traditional sexual dyad and the father-mother-child model, the hegemonic status of the nuclear family remains deeply ingrained, advocated as being the most beneficial for the offspring, equated with intimacy, care, and solidarity, and fantasised about as such. These psychoanalytical and material conditions, rooted deeply in single mothers' social imageries, often oscillate between two contrasting poles: at one end, the rhetoric of autonomy whilst at the other, the imagery of dependency.

The image of the mother within an 'intact family' is constructed around an idealised domestic sphere, where the maternal role is both glorified and restricted by societal expectations of selflessness and moral purity. Rose (2018: 16) argues that expressions of maternal desire are seen as selfish, demanding that mothers save the world from their desires, as if sexuality never existed outside marriage. This captures a critical view of how societal and cultural scripts often perceive and regulate female sexuality within the context of motherhood. The mother's ongoing desire and sexuality after having children is less extensively treated in scholarship (Scerri 2021; Zwalf 2020; Montemurro and Siefken 2012). With the enduring denial of mothers as sexual beings and the notion that good female sexuality should remain within the bounds of marriage (Rooks 2020: 103), the ideology of asexual mothers continues to render mothers' sexuality invisible (Cass 2020: 42). Popular media seems to depict single motherhood in a more complex manner, shifting from narratives of pain to discourses of empowerment but also capturing the messy realities of motherhood, arguably challenging the stigma and shame attached to single motherhood and the feeling of loss of respectability (Morris and Munt 2019). As Jo Littler (2020: 514) notes, portrayals of 'mothers behaving badly', marked by hedonism and domestic chaos, are based on neoliberal conceptions of responsibility and do little to challenge patriarchy. Cumulatively such representations work to bring visibility to mothers' desires; they position sex and sexuality in the everyday as something that has to be managed, just like every other aspect of everyday life (Juffer 2006: 58–59). The single mother, 'free and irresponsible, sexually promiscuous and available to men' (McIntosh 1996: 154), is judged against the mother in the outdated 'good mother' myth (Scerri 2021). 'Manipulative or sexual, the single mother exhibits either too much control over her sexual life or not enough', argues Rose (2018: 36) in her consideration of teenage single mothers, who have been subject to scrutiny for long for a perceived lack of sexual control and/or an active sexual life. Amongst this, there is the archetype of the 'MILF' (Mother I'd Like to Fuck) that is assigned to desirable mothers: whilst it acknowledges maternal desire beyond caregiving, it also reflects a raced and classed objectification of single mothers, idealising them as the sexual hot mummy and placing high expectations on them (Friedman 2014: 51–52).

Motherhood and womanhood: between invisibility and visibility

Becoming a single mother forms the narrative backbone of this study. It brings an array of challenges, such as the emotional 'baggage' a single mother carries, her internalised 'imperfections', and her positionality that may influence her entry into the algorithmic dating culture. Shifting from being a mother to becoming a sexual being, a woman again, a metamorphosis occurs as the woman enters the realm of intimacy and sexuality. A comic strip by cartoonist Anna Härmälä (2024) captures this sentiment. A single mother, contemplating the daunting prospect of engaging in new sexual encounters, exclaims: 'It's just so unfair. Everything is completely reorganised inside. Pushing out 4 kg for hours. Now I have to try sex with someone entirely new. I'm like a virgin again, a virgin mother.' The metaphor of the 'virgin mother' encapsulates the paradox many mothers face, yet the conflict between maternal identity and sexual being seems more visible in single motherhood. Whilst virginity has traditionally been associated with purity and chastity, it also signifies sexuality as a social value. Scholarship has identified three 'social roles' in which women are commodities of exchange: the 'mother', 'excluded from exchange', part of the domestic sphere; the 'virginal woman', who 'is pure exchange value'; and, finally, the 'prostitute', whose value 'has already been realised' (Irigaray 1985: 184, 185, 186). These female archetypes of the virgin, the mother, and the whore are deeply rooted in Christianity, speak to women's sexuality, and exist in society and all shared social expectations.

When I entered the online dating scene as a newly separated woman with a child in the early 2020s, the experiences I made were distinctly different from the ones I had made in 2010 during a previous, more limited engagement with dating apps. Then, online dating felt more like a novelty (particularly on the heterosexual love market), whereas now it has become a commonplace that I was about to navigate. The anecdotes that single women share in Facebook discussion threads in the early 2020 vary widely. One woman describes her initial experience like this: 'I am single after sixteen years relationship. I downloaded Bumble the other day … Took me an hour to realise swiping right means I am expressing interest … I keep swiping wrong.' In this setting of mediated dating, a swipe with the finger to the right makes an interaction with another person possible: it solidifies a match and realises a mutual attraction. Dating apps thus produce new affordances such as swiping, liking, matching, and texting, and a related etiquette and grammar when users figure out how to deal with this techno-social milieu (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). They also produce new narratives, with the question 'Do they work?' a common one in online threads where single mothers who are dating share details about their tactics and experiences of contemporary romance.

In online dating cultures, Tinder is often a popular choice, as it is well-known and established across the globe. Especially in the context of the UK,

it is widely accepted as not for 'serious' encounters, with many utilising it as a hook-up app for sexual encounters. My initial attempts at using dating apps as a single mum were with Tinder. I was not on Tinder to seek or find my 'soulmate'; rather, I saw it as a recreational activity, a playful space to seek validation and combat feelings of loneliness. This is one way in which dating apps are used: the seeking of casual sex, ego boosting, and entertainment (Hobbs et al. 2017). The scholarly literature understands dating apps as providing 'network intimacy' (Nebeling Peterson et al. 2017: 5; see also Chambers 2021) that allow a plethora of connections and experiences. Dating online is argued to exemplify 'liquid love', characterised by fragile 'human bonds in an age of … individualisation, consumerism, and rapid … change' (Hobbs et al. 2017: 274), where long-term and stable form of relationships are replaced with recreational activities (Bauman, cited in Hobbs et al. 2017: 274). Contrary to this view, these apps 'are not [broadly] "liquefying" ideals like romantic love, monogamy or a commitment to longer-term relationship' but rather expand the possibilities available compared to previous generations, where technology is used as a mean to seek meaningful connections (Hobbs et al. 2017: 281).

Tinder, launched in 2012, primarily matches users by local proximity and requires users to upload only a few photos and write an optional brief text; it does not employ detailed filters or request users to answer questions to establish compatibility (Ward 2019: 132). Although Tinder does not require actual images of the user – it only requests users to respect intellectual property and the privacy rights of others – self-representation becomes crucial. In the culture of Tinder and other dating apps, crafting an effective presentation of the self is key not only to attracting attention and increasing desirability but also to managing one's visibility strategically. An 'individual could choose to mask their gender', face, and body; nonetheless it could be conducive to upload such images to successfully use the app, as visual cues are used 'as resources for making identities intelligible' (MacLeod and McArthur 2019).

My sole Tinder profile photo, which I kept for some time, captured in a blurred interplay of beige, white, and black hues a fleeting glimpse of a woman in motion – an image purposefully enigmatic and unidentifiable. 'Tinder offers subjects a point of identification as desiring and desirable, hence opening a space of enquiry into one's and the other's desire' (Bandinelli and Bandinelli 2021: 181). The use of such apps allows the user to 'interpret, judge, imagine, wonder, fantasise' (Bandinelli and Bandinelli 2021: 188). Even though my Tinder account lacked a distinct profile picture, I received several matches, possibly reflecting the app's male-heavy membership and men's preference for casual hook-ups (Lopes and Vogel 2019). Where a clear facial picture provides a 'form of insurance … acting as a promise of what one can expect in real life' (Mowlabocus 2016: 104), the lack of one requires further digital

labour once a match has been made, including chatting to establish interest ('What are you looking for?'), establishing elements of trust, and sharing images. For users who seek transparency, optimisation, and, especially, speed, this approach wastes time as it adds an unnecessary 'mysterious' element with no potential for pursuit. The use of discreet images or pictures of headless torsos echoes methods employed by gay men and queer individuals who wish for confidentiality and discretion on platforms like Gaydar and Grindr (see Licoppe 2020). It maintains a veil of anonymity and offers a shield against stigma and prejudice, which users might consider necessary, especially in certain socio-geographical landscapes. This digital act plays with achieving a delicate balance between revealing and concealing in a context where private desire meets public identity. For me, privacy was key, for reasons of proximity to the father of my daughter, other parents, and the local community. 'What if my child's father comes across my Tinder profile? What if someone from the school environment also uses these apps? Would that put me in the spotlight? Would that make me a bad mother?' Thoughts like these crossed my mind at the time. They point towards the imbalance that marks the societal stereotype that if a mother is sexually active, she is a bad mother and does not prioritise her children. Amanda Kane Rooks (2020: 117) in her analysis of Sue Miller's *The Good Mother* unpacks a cautionary tale showing that mothers often face the greatest consequences for attempting to exercise sexual freedom. 'Apparently, I'm a disgusting whore and it's too soon to be dating,' writes a Facebook user as she comments on being spotted by a family member on an online dating app. 'Single mothers … your dating days are over … focus on your kids … no time for anything else for me,' says another person on the same thread. These gendered charges of immorality exist, but individual women may experience them differently. During this phase, I chose to reveal my identity as a single mother selectively, and information about my child was not part of my dating life. In their research on single mothers using dating apps, Maria Stoicescu and Cosima Rughiniș conclude that participants justified using Tinder because they saw it as a tool to manage their intimate needs, with some seeing their motherhood as 'somehow separate' from to their social and romantic identity (Stoicescu and Rughiniș 2022: 979). This may indicate that the women had 'internalised' the stereotype and societal attitude that sexual activity conflicts with maternal responsibilities, even as they were aware that this area of life was a key component in their care for their self (Juffer 2006: 59).

Tinder's gamified approach to dating allowed me to navigate the dating scene at my own pace, building skills in online intimacy and gradually progressing towards in-person interactions. A comment from a Facebook thread speaks to such experience: 'I am forty-four and after twenty-two years of marriage got into online dating apps. It's brilliant for your self-esteem and to improve your flirting/banter.' Tinder and similar apps foster a sense of 'per-

sonal autonomy and control' (Chambers 2013: 122), as they make users feel active and empowered in navigating a 'dating life' and in rediscovering their sexual and romantic identity. Stoicescu and Rughiniș (2022: 975) note that 'by using the app, single mothers may feel empowered to manage their dating activities and address their desires'. They identify four types of motives: freedom and liberation; entertainment; the cultivation of eroticism and intimacy; and temporal justifications (such as time wasting or time efficiency). Neoliberal ideas such as autonomy, esteem, and the capacity for self-expression encourage individuals to seek new experiences and creatively reinvent their subjectivities, contributing to what Dana Kaplan and Eva Illouz (2022: 88) call 'neoliberal sexual capital'. Illouz (2012: 162) considers dating apps as 'technologies of choice', where making the 'right choice' is central for navigating the market of romance (Bandinelli and Gandini 2022: 2) and the right choice is relevant to the user's motives. My research shows that the primary concern may not be the right choice nor the burden of the responsibility of picking a romantic partner. Rather, in initial phases of dating, where Tinder acts as a playful and entertaining space, its affordances and features allow an experience of inbetweenness: being seen and unseen, private and exposed at once. On reflection, this inbetweenness helped me move from an inherent guilt that is often linked with motherhood to embracing that complex area of womanhood that is fraught with challenging standards. For a single mother, the process from motherhood to womanhood is a negotiation between, on the one hand, being a single woman entering the dating scene and managing an online identity as single and, on the other, being a mother concerned with privacy and discretion. Key components in navigating the digital space are societal judgements of single mothers who are sexually active and yet responsible as parents, gendered stereotypes, and the social and romantic identities enabled by the affordances and features of online apps.

Navigating perceptions and sexual capital

During my dating period as single mother, a significant connection I formed viewed my identity with admiration. This perspective mirrored the heroic portrayal of a single mother as a prime example of capability and autonomy: it acknowledged and fetishised the effort involved in managing everything independently. In this portrayal, single mothers are seen as hard workers, their resilience is celebrated (internally and externally), and their strengths, capacities, and gifts capture the imagination.

On TikTok, single mother creators narrate their experiences as they open up spaces for discussion, spaces in which men have a lot to say about single mothers, their dating lives, and their sexual capital. Male creators would often respond to questions set by single mother creators as to why, or why not, they dated single mums. One such answer was the following:

> *Step aside boys, I have this one. I will give you four reasons for dating single mums. Nothing is more attractive to a grown man than a woman who is strong, who is a fighter, fierce and ferocious, and will protect her cubs at all costs. Number two, she is incredibly loyal, which is so important to every single guy in the market. Number three, all you boys have been talking about going to her house to eat her snacks. You missed the most important part; she is the snack. Number four and the most important, they are the novel shit, cut to the chase, right here, right now, all the way in or all the way out.*

The statement, embraced by many single mothers on the platform, invites women to become moral subjects – heroes and warriors – through their enactment and sense of resilience, responsibility, loyalty, and maturity. This male creator's characterisation of single mothers as 'the snack' is loaded and requires scrutiny: with it the creator aims to capture the desirability of the single mother as he 'educates' others whom he describes as having a 'boyish attitude' and not acting as 'real men'. This narrative is shared and imitated by other male and female creators who advise others on how and why to date single mothers in line with the affordances of the platform, which promote replication and mimesis (Abidin 2021; Zulli and Zulli 2022).

Sociologists and other sex researchers use the concept of sexual capital to explain how sexual subjectivities, experiences, and interactions – including actions, feelings, and thoughts – are used by social agents to their advantage, be it in economic markets, in marriage markets, or in sexual encounters (Kaplan and Illouz 2022: 31). What has enabled the formation of sexual capital is the loosening of the social norms and taboos that regulate sexuality, along with the increasing incorporation of sexuality into the economic field (Kaplan and Illouz 2022: 5). A single mother's attractiveness and her sex appeal ('she is the snack') reflect her personal sexual attributes, and her sexual competence ('cut to the chase … all the way in or all the way out') contributes to her sexual capital. The latter, relating to 'embodied sexual capital' or sexual know-how, improves the individual's status in the relationship market (Kaplan and Illouz 2022: 84). Her loyalty and mothering practices ('will protect her cubs at all costs'), which reflect her self-worth, as well as her self-confidence ('fighter, fierce and ferocious') are all desirables that form neoliberal sexual capital. The authors' conceptualisation and taxonomy of sexual capital integrates sexual and non-sexual advantages into the economic sphere: in it the seemingly distinct private domain of sex, sexuality, and reproduction intersects with the public sphere of economy within a historically nuanced structural perspective.

'You've arrived at milftok … enjoy all the snacks', responds a single mother creator. The MILF acronym, perceived to be a porn genre and a source of empowerment all in one, exposes a problematic archetype of popular culture

(Friedman 2014): moving to the other edge of motherhood as a purely sexual being. The acronym shifts the assumption that mothers are silent about their sexual desire and depicts them through a raced, classed, and objectifying term. On TikTok, we can glimpse white, blonde women in front of brightly lit backgrounds displaying their bodies upfront, posing invitingly, with the focus directed to the body parts attractive to younger men. Hashtags like #milftok and #cougaroftiktok are predominantly used by men who express their desires in response to videos, finding their niche on TikTok. Digital domains and the 'mamasphere' (Wilson and Yochim 2017) provide a broader public sphere for negotiating and monetising motherhood. In this case, TikTok creators make visible the sexuality and desires of single mothers in what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018: ix) refers to as an 'economy of visibility'. We see mothers labelled and represented as MILFs, potentially owning their sexuality but at the same time being owned by existing portrayals and the 'tyranny of sexiness' (Martin, cited in Friedman 2014: 51). Motherhood is not primary in this imagery and kids are rarely present, showing that single women maintain the dualism of motherhood and sexuality. MILFs on TikTok (be they celebrities or not) are also desired by younger LGBT+ women, expanding the understanding of heteronormative bonds. This form of desire is predominantly showcased by younger women, with MILFs again taking a passive role but seemingly consenting to this positioning (in some cases being in the background, feeling desired and enjoying being adored). This may also be seen as bringing visibility to non-normative sexualities and desires, yet the mere act of making such imageries and representations visible comes to stand as a political act in and of itself, often leaving existing invisibilities and structural inequalities unchallenged (Van Cleaf 2020: 39).

Yet, the acronym MILF also subjects single mothers to unwarranted assumptions and expectations. 'This morning a twenty-year-old was harassing me to take me on a date because MILFs are his fetish [three laughing emojis],' writes a Facebook user on a thread. While this stereotype is something of a media mythology, it fetishises the maternal and feminine roles of single and older mothers by casting their sexuality as liberated and promiscuous. In my own online dating experience, several dates that came about when I openly identified as a single mother were steeped in these MILF stereotypes. Yet whilst the acronym seems to allow single mothers to be sexy and naughty, it simply captures them in a mechanism of 'objectification in [a] new and even more pernicious guise' (Gill 2003: 105). The expectation and visibility of sexual freedom is not necessarily politically transgressive. The comment 'Someone contacted me on Instagram the other day, presumably because I was using the hashtag single mum, so he must have assumed I was thirsty' by another Facebook user confirms this. These anecdotal experiences, the sexualising of mothers, and, specifically, the eroticisation of single mothers do not disrupt the sexual-maternal divide (Zwalf 2020) and do not in any

pragmatic terms consider the actual conditions under which single mothers seek healthy sexual relationships.

I argue that single mothers, when they engage in self-disclosure on dating platforms, are not just sharing personal details but are navigating the complex terrain of sexual capital through strategies of visibility. This involves a strategic revelation of personal information that intersects with the utilisation of sexual attributes for personal advantage. Self-disclosure refers to the act of an individual conveying information about themselves to another person (Wheeless 1976). It influences relationships, especially romantic ones, as it helps individuals gather information on potential dates and the viability of future relationships (Greene et al. 2006). The choice around disclosure is also shaped by the norms and expectations of each app (Bandinelli and Gandini 2022).

Practices of self-disclosure

In the second phase of my online dating as single mother, I switched to Bubble and Hinge, each with its own specific functions. Bumble is generally perceived to be more 'serious' than Tinder, whilst Hinge is considered a reputable option especially amongst creatives and intellectuals (Bandinelli and Gandini 2022). I started to share carefully curated photos of myself. Both apps use engaging prompts to persuade daters to populate their profiles with pictures and personal and other relevant information. These elements are designed to attract prospective matches and optimise the functionality of the apps. Notable on Bumble is the option for women to initiate the conversation once a match is made. The app integrates the topic of children and parenting and one's ideal plan for reproduction through questions such as 'What are your ideal plans for children?', for which it provides the following set of possible answers, apart from the option of not answering the question at all:

- I want someday.
- I don't want.
- I have and I want more.
- I have and I don't want more.
- I am not sure yet.
- I have kids.
- I am open to kids.

Similarly, Hinge prompts users to disclose whether they have children, want more, and/or are open to children.

What are the strategies of self-disclosure in relation to one's single motherhood? Do single mothers declare their identities? Looking back, I realise that my approach was varied and somewhat erratic and inconsistent, as I frequently changed my settings whilst navigating feelings of maternal and sexual ambivalence. These sentiments included anxiety of exposure and the

fear that I may have shared too much about myself in these digital domains that are accessible to so many, whilst the manner of my exposure was directly related to the number of matches I received and the type of daters I attracted. Part of the ambivalence I felt was triggered by a sense of dishonesty: while the affordances and the set-up of the apps require personal information, which prompts truthfulness and trustworthiness, the dating apps rely on self-representation, which often includes a degree of deception (McGloin and Denes 2018). The threads on the Facebook groups show that single mothers pay close attention to self-disclosure and position themselves based on their intentions and their relationship with the digital, including considerations of safety. One user stated: 'I tell them straight away [that I have children] so [that] I can weed out the ones that aren't wanting anything serious.' Another wrote: 'I would say on my profile … mother of … .' These comments capture the idea that dating apps rely on 'efficiency' to connect busy individuals who may not have enough time and energy to look for love (Hobbs et al. 2017). It is common to spend a lot of time preparing a dating profile online to produce a desirable presentation of myself that would 'stand out' from 'competitors', something that Bandinelli and Gandini (2022: 427) have discussed in line with digital self-branding and the branded self. Nonetheless, as the authors (2022: 429) note, this ecosystem is characterised by structural uncertainty because of 'accepted irrationalities and … the inherent dimension of risk', which makes it difficult to build up relationships of trust.

Safety played a significant role for me in my use of dating apps, and I would never share information about my child. In the threads, many mothers are concerned with potentially attracting 'weirdos', and in online discussions many try to convince others not to advertise that they have children. Concerns related to privacy and security include the risk of encountering sexual predators and cyberstalking (Spitzberg and Hoobler 2002), and this may be more prominent when children are involved. The complexity of disclosure undoubtedly also comes from externalised stigma and internalised guilt and shame (Morris 2015), as captured in this Facebook comment by a single mother: 'I also don't like people knowing my business and judging me.' Other tactics of self-disclosure involve a more 'organic' approach. 'If you match, then you can mention it,' one user wrote, with another explaining that 'there is no way I would hide the fact I have kids for any length of time'. Dating apps rely mainly on appearance, by which users quickly establish whether they find someone attractive, a decision which is often quite impulsive. Beyond this first stage, there is the chatting process through the app's messaging system. During this phase those who are matched gain knowledge about each other, and this practice of 'questioning' (Bandinelli and Gandini 2022: 426) initiates a process of sharing and helps to build interpersonal trust. The experience of navigating these socially mediated exchanges – 'reading the room' to understand the appropriate level of sharing – marks a distinct phase

of online dating. It demands time, energy, confidence, and social capital, critical for forming potential relationships. During this phase the engagement becomes more complex: it is influenced by whether the matched individuals manage to identify a common outlook and shared desires and fantasies in the pursuit of a romantic encounter. The length of this article cannot fully capture the continuous identity work required as a relationship progresses.

The comment 'I did [disclose my single mother identity] every time and that's when I don't hear from them again' from a mother on Facebook sparked conversations. Similar ones take place on TikTok, and memes underscore the recurring challenge for single mothers navigating the online dating scene. Desirability is impacted by such disclosures, for potential partners may consider a mother with a child as too much to manage. This reminds us of the historically rooted role of chastity and the traditional view of reproduction as part of domesticity. Scrolling through single mothers' online forums and threads reveals a common narrative: as a single mother, you enter the dating life with a 'baggage'. Children are seen as 'baggage', something that often leads interested men to 'ghosting', or withdrawing from a relationship without explanation, as explained by the single mother entrepreneur Zoe Desmond. She took this as inspiration to launch her own dating app, Frolo Dating (Libbert 2021), an app that promotes ideal self-branding based on everyday lived experiences of sexuality and motherhood. She uses the perception of children as 'baggage' and turns it into a positive 'unique selling proposition' or 'USP' for single parents to use when building their profile on her app. Her app, Frolo Dating, but also PlayDate, another dating app for single parents, require full disclosure of the user's parenting situation and details about their children.

Yet one date bluntly told me that if my status as a mother was transparent on the dating app, they would not match with me. 'I would not date a single mother as I don't want to [be a] father [to] your children,' seems to be a common sentiment. The level and approach to self-disclosure depends on the single mother's motives, but motherhood is always key, as illustrated by this Facebook comment: 'I make it obvious straight away as she [her daughter] will be part of my life, so [there is] no point dating someone without telling them from the get-go.' Similarly, a TikTok creator explained: 'I am not looking for a baby dad; I am looking for an orgasm.' Many TikTok's single mother creators are keen to show the benefits and realities of dating single mothers. These narratives emphasise single mothers owning their sexuality and actively countering the notion that they are passive or asexual. They respond to experiences where potential partners withdraw after learning of their single mother status, thereby affirming their sexual agency and desire. These self-presentations embody the standards of sexiness in the dating market, where sexual capital is a personal, embodied attribute. The single mother's body here is an 'emblem of liberation, fun … pleasure and pride' (Attwood

2004: 15). Exclamations such as 'You look nothing like you had a kid or you gave birth' have become a common way to 'praise' the single mother, adding to the existing discourses of the 'yummy mummy' and the sexy and active mother. Such 'compliments', which ostensibly confirm a woman's desirability and sexual autonomy, operate within a framework that can be both liberating and objectifying, simultaneously challenging and reinforcing internalised misogyny, a pertinent subject for sociopolitical analysis as to how it shapes and reflects women's experiences.

I was present on dating apps during the Covid-19 pandemic: digital intimacies were heightened, which highlighted dating apps beyond the perspective of an in-person, embodied date, and online daters found that 'sexting is better than the real thing' (Lord, cited in Bandinelli and Bandinelli 2021: 194). Sexting, a form of intimate communication between two strangers, can be seen as a shared experience. It hints at the shift of the erotic to a highly individual form of hedonism which is pursued through episodic and uncommitted encounters and achieved through forms of auto-eroticism (Attwood 2004: 80) and acceptance of self-pleasure. At the same time comments on online threads show single mothers' frustration of receiving unsolicited pictures, predominantly by men, something which has become common practice and well-known amongst people who use dating apps. This behaviour is motivated by a 'sex imperative' linked to gender (Attwood 2006: 59), a preoccupation with self-revelation and exposure. As other comments reveal, single mothers are aware of their sexual preferences, with objectives of achieving 'fun and desirability' from short-term or long-term interactions. Several comments from an online thread capture this sentiment well: 'I like a bit of naughtiness but … it is hard work'; 'I am far too tired from the sexting labour.' Dating apps are often perceived and experienced as 'addictive' and time consuming (Stoicescu and Rughiniş 2022), leading users to disconnect from them, though later often reactivating their accounts again. This pattern underscores the time management required by single mothers, who must balance domesticity, work, and a sex life – in the absence of a solid support network. The gendered nature of intimate life and caregiving is intertwined with the single mother's emotional life and sociality, including sexuality, and has moved to the digital space (Dobson et al. 2018). In this discussion, the emotional and affective labour as part of the process of dating online also involves the labour of navigating perceptions and ideals around motherhood. The question 'How do you find the time to date and balance childcare and work?' is a common starting point in these online discussions and a shared reality that reflects the dual burden of managing both visible and invisible labour. Responses are detailed, filled with tips and emotional support, with messages of resilience but also with those of despair. Chatting and sexting whilst the kids are in bed captures some of the labour that is required to maintain a dating life and satisfy one's sexual desire. Dating apps can offer

enjoyment that does not involve physical interaction yet adds to one's sense of desirability. They are grounded in the possibility of a romantic encounter which is likely never to be fulfilled – an experience of the impossibility of completeness (Bandinelli and Bandinelli 2021: 190).

Conclusion

A question that frequently arises in online discussions amongst single mothers is, 'So, are these apps working?' This is not surprising seeing that many romance novels and popular media have single mothers nearly always married by the end of the story (Juffer 2006: 61). Apps too are used with the intention to find the 'soulmate', and examples of new online dating apps such as Frolo Dating and PlayDate suggest that spaces for single mothers to meet single fathers are evidently on the rise, potentially contributing to the expected happy ending. Yet the real-life situation of single mothers, at least those using dating apps in the UK, is different and more complicated, as this article illuminates. It examines the intricate experiences of single mothers with online dating and the complex ways in which they navigate their subjectivities, motherhood, and sexuality in these spaces. It understands personal and lived experiences as processes of self-reflexivity, 'not as an individual activity but an interactive process that relies upon a social network of exchange' along with digital ethnography aiming towards a 'feminist knowledge that brings out aspects of our existence, especially our own implication with power, that we had not noticed before' (Braidotti 2002: 13).

I argue that becoming a single mother markedly influences how one approaches online dating. Becoming a single mother requires resilience and demands that she navigates deeply engrained fantasies about family formations negotiated through gender roles and patriarchal structures, all of which shape her choices and experiences. The sexual experiences of a woman are intertwined with her experiences of motherhood, requiring her to negotiate a culturally imposed conflict between being sexual and being a mother (Cass 2020: 41). This tension between her maternal identity and her personal desire is shaped by societal roles and archetypes that define how single mother's sexuality is perceived. Sexuality and motherhood are matters that are generally discussed separately, pointing to a taboo of the sexual maternal (Zwalf 2020), which shapes the perception of single mother's sexuality in the online dating cultures. This demands closer scholarly attention.

Platforms such as Tinder provide ways for single mothers to re-engage with their sexual identity, enabling them to carefully manage their role as single mothers into their romantic pursuits. It allows them to selectively integrate their identity as single mothers into their dating life, emphasising their sexual and romantic identities as discreet yet integral parts of their overall personhood and motherhood. The study also shows that on dating

apps like Hinge and Bumble, the prevalent perceptions and visibility of single motherhood play a crucial role. The features and affordances of these apps extend beyond merely choosing potential partners; they are skilfully used to manoeuvre through the complex landscape of sexual capital – a concept which expands from that of erotic capital, understood as a personal (often feminine) asset that women deploy both in the labour market and intimate relationships (Hakim 2010). Key insights of this study reveal that dating apps offer a playful and flexible approach to dating by which single mothers can tactically manage their sexual identity and autonomy and experiment with and re-invent their subjectivities, potentially contributing to their neoliberal sexual capital. Historically and socially conditioned, it encompasses the benefits individuals gain from investing time, knowledge, and affective energy in cultivating and enhancing their sexual selves (Kaplan and Illouz 2022).

The study demonstrates how popular imageries of single motherhood become important in the women's practices of self-disclosure whilst using dating apps. They may use the apps' affordances and features not merely for making the 'right choice' but for strategically navigating the realm of sexual capital, potentially challenging the discourse around single motherhood and sexuality. Challenging the view of sex and sexuality as an essentially private matter, of sexual capital as a purely personal asset, and of the sphere of reproduction as outside sexual capital, the article considers single mothers' experiences on dating apps beyond seeking romantic love. It rather sees them as entangled in gendered dynamics, inseparable from marketability, labour, and neoliberal attributes. Looking forward, this study opens up avenues for further investigating the diverse experiences of single mothers across different sociocultural backgrounds and for expanding understandings of the intersections of motherhood and sexuality in the complex dynamics of dating, intimacy, and identity in the digital age.

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Bjork-James, Sophie (2021) The Divine Institution. White Evangelicalism's Politics of the Family. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press

Sofia-Katharina Hehl

The Divine Institution. White Evangelicalism's Politics of the Family by Sophie Bjork-James offers a compelling contribution to the rapidly evolving field of the anthropology of Christianity. This academic sub-field emerged in response to the rise of the religious right in the early 2000s, recently also focusing on white Christians who have significantly influenced the politicisation of Christianity (Schneider and Bjork-James 2020). This scholarly interest has intensified as Christian societies worldwide grapple with the impact of secularisation, globalisation, and capitalism (Schneider and Bjork-James 2020; Coleman and Hackett 2015; Radermacher and Schüler 2017).

Focusing on the United States, Bjork-James, alongside other scholars in the field, observed that particularly white evangelicals[1] exert a significant political influence, forming the foundation of the religious right and its conservative politics. These politics are especially shaped by racial, sexual, and gender-related concerns. Highlighting the centrality of race to the politics and worldviews of white evangelicals, Bjork-James argues that anthropological research must scrutinise the substantial number of right-wing voters and the rising racism and far-right extremism globally by making whiteness a more prominent subject in the studies of race and religion. In that sense, Bjork-James's work is innovative specifically in its criticism of the tendency of anthropology to ignore race as a category in studies of white Christianity. Whilst research on Black Christianity has consistently considered race as a critical factor, studies on white Christianity often ignore how whiteness shapes religious and political ideologies. Bjork-James argues that this oversight normalises whiteness and overlooks its influence on the conservative politics of the religious right, which is a dangerous omission (see also Schneider and Bjork-James 2020). As anthropological studies on Black Christianity have for a long time been including race as a social factor, the theories and concepts on this theme are far more advanced than in the study of white Christianity. Consequently, Bjork-James draws on concepts from these studies, primarily developed by scholars of colour, as a theoretical foundation for her analyses, adapting them to the different historical and social contexts of white Christians.

1 The author uses the lower case when referring to the social category of ‚white' but capitalisation for the category ‚Black'.

Central to Bjork-James's analysis is the argument that the politics of the family, a focal point for evangelicals, are deeply embedded in a worldview shaped by race and colonisation. Making this emphasis on the family the main subject of her research, she explores how both everyday religious practices and evangelical politics revolve around the family, with its inherent hierarchies and gender norms. By connecting these practices with political actions, she demonstrates that the evangelical movement enacts its beliefs about the family in both the private and the public spheres.

To fully grasp this emphasis on the family within the evangelical worldview, Bjork-James employs an intersectional approach derived from Black feminist studies. This approach highlights how the patriarchal nuclear family, seen as a divinely ordained ideal, intersects with other categories such as gender, race, and economics. This methodology is crucial for understanding the complex dynamics at play in evangelical family politics.

Bjork-James provides a vivid ethnographic account of Colorado Springs, frequently described as the 'Evangelical Vatican' (p. 26). This predominantly white, middle-class community features numerous megachurches and Bible study groups, presenting a harmonious yet insular social fabric. Over sixteen months, beginning in 2008, Bjork-James immersed herself in this community, attending sermons, listening to Christian radio, conducting about 100 interviews with evangelical leaders, pastors, and congregants, and participating in national conferences of the religious right. Through her detailed narrative, Bjork-James introduces her arguments with rich, illustrative language and intimate interviews with evangelicals and ex-evangelicals. The participatory observations she made in small-group Bible studies enable her to bridge the gap between everyday religious practices and broader political movements, providing a comprehensive understanding of how white evangelical family politics are influenced by historical and contemporary contexts.

Throughout the book, Bjork-James demonstrates how the nuclear family became central to the moral order of white evangelicals in Colorado Springs. This family model, shaped by distinct gender and sexual norms with race as a key factor, drives the movement's opposition to feminism, abortion, homosexuality, and the perceived decline of traditional masculinity. This logic also underpins Christian nationalism and white supremacy, which have become prominent subjects of scholarship, particularly since the presidency of Donald Trump (2016-2020).

To illuminate the dynamics between evangelical politics and their racial implications, the author provides a broad overview of the history of white evangelical politics: it originated not from a need to defend conservative politics of the family and gender but from opposition to the government's effort in the 1970s to racially desegregate the country. This disagreement was not merely about defending segregation but about protecting their culture from what they perceived as an 'overreaching secular state' (p. 34). After succeed-

ing with this political agenda at least on some levels, they shifted their focus towards family and gender values to defend their religious culture and worldview. An intersectional approach shows how this new political focus today is still partly shaped by race. Defending the family and its hierarchies involves opposing societal changes – perceived threats to the old social order – such as civil rights movements, evolving gender roles, and increasingly secular national politics.

This familial hierarchy and social order are defined by rigid gender roles, with male headship and female submission forming the core of what is known as the 'Divine Order' (p. 65). Male headship in particular is seen as essential to establishing a family that adheres to this 'Divine Order' (p. 65). The idea of the ideal father as leader of and provider for the family is reinforced by Christian media, bible study groups, and important evangelical activists. Those institutions and their defence of the heterosexual, patriarchal family not only serve to perpetuate patriarchal structures in lived evangelical practice but also support a specific nationalist and racist agenda. This is further justified by the fact that this God-given hierarchy within the family is crucial to national identity and foundational for a stable and moral United States.

The author analyses how evangelical politics of the family structure perceptions of homosexuality. To understand how evangelicals view homosexuality as antithetical to the ideal family, the author examines the 'ex-gay movement', where evangelicals claim to have overcome their homosexuality. The movement posits that 'healing' homosexuality is possible by enforcing a stronger gender identity in the individual, an identity which did not develop properly in the person's childhood because of the lack of a stable gender identity in the individual's parents. Thus, ideas of family and gender norms are closely linked to the political opposition to homosexuality. A central theoretical approach in this book as regards sexuality and sexual orientation is the concept of 'white sexual politics', which draws from the concept of 'black sexual politics' as coined by Patricia Hill Collins (2004: 85-88). This approach illustrates that the evangelical politics of family and heterosexuality have historically linked sexual purity to the strength of the nation, with an emphasis on sexual purity and gender ideals being closely tied to racism. This dynamic continues in the emphasis by modern white evangelicalism on heterosexuality and the patriarchal family. Through this concept, the author explores the historical and contemporary connections between sexual politics, racism, and nationalism within white evangelicalism in the United States.

In the final two chapters of the book, the author shifts her focus from the historical impact of racism on white evangelical politics to the future of these politics. She examines not only the evolving political agendas of younger generations of evangelicals but also the changing racial demographics of the country, which will undoubtedly influence the direction of white evangelical politics. However, the exact nature of this impact remains uncertain. No-

tably, the increasing presence of Asian and Latinx evangelicals in the United States is expected to alter the political landscape in the coming years. Research indicates that rising racial diversity may provoke greater racial hostility amongst white evangelicals, driven by fears of 'status threat', or the anxiety over losing dominant-group status, which has been significant amongst white US-Americans in recent political contexts.

When discussing the future directions of the religious right in the United States, it might be useful to examine closely the involvement of evangelicals with the Republican Party, especially considering that Bjork-James's research took place during the Trump era. She frequently mentions the substantial support by white evangelicals for Trump, even suggesting that his victory in the 2016 election would not have been possible without their backing. A more detailed investigation of the impact of the religious right onto the Trump presidency, but also vice versa of the Trump presidency on the religious right, seems pertinent, especially in the context of the next US election in late 2024.

In addition, I would like to address a specific terminology used in the book. The author occasionally uses the terms 'America' and 'Americans' when referring to the United States and its citizens (for example, pp. 27, 59, 60, 105, 139). This usage, which implicitly claims the name 'America' for the United States alone, is a product of US imperialism. Numerous South American artists and intellectuals have criticised this practice, with rapper Residente (365_days 2022) and conceptual artist Alfredo Jaar (Blitzer 2014), for example, integrating it into their art projects, highlighting the broader context of the American continent.

Regarding the stylistic elements of the book, I find it notable how the author utilises Colorado Springs as a symbolic representation to demonstrate how the traditional evangelical order is threatened by modernisation and a rapidly evolving society. The characterisation of Colorado Springs as the 'Evangelical Vatican' (p. 26) serves as an allegory to highlight the shifting dynamics within evangelical culture and the religious right over time. For instance, Bjork-James notes significant changes upon a follow-up visit to Colorado Springs in 2016. The presence of gluten-free restaurants, beer halls, and modern cafés where evangelical meeting spots had once stood exemplifies the encroachment of modernisation and secularisation, even within this evangelical stronghold. Conservatives who adhere to a traditional world order and a patriarchal social order rooted in hierarchy must witness the socio-economic changes of the globalised world even within their own neighbourhoods, no matter how hard they try to defend the traditional order – mostly through defending a traditional hierarchy in the family. For example, some pastors in Colorado Springs expressed concern about the increasing number of families in which both parents work to meet the economic demands of suburban living. They also note a growing division between the northern and southern

parts of the town. The north, home to megachurches and other evangelical institutions, epitomises the cultural and social boundaries established by white evangelicals to separate their self-described 'Christian bubble' (p. 41) from 'outsiders' (p. 57). This boundary-making strategy illustrates how white evangelicals attempt to maintain a certain status quo by differentiating themselves from perceived external threats. This phenomenon is increasingly becoming a focus of contemporary anthropological studies of Christianity (Robbins 2014; Coleman and Hackett 2015). The process of creating and maintaining boundaries is a recurrent theme in these studies, reflecting how evangelical communities navigate and respond to the challenges posed by a rapidly changing world.

In conclusion, *The Divine Institution* serves as a compelling demonstration of the central role of the politics of the family and its racialisation in the formation and lived expression of white evangelicalism. Examining this entanglement is increasingly urgent in contemporary times because of persistent racist structures and the rise of right-wing extremism in the Global North. As Bjork-James argues in her recent work, there is a pressing need to theorise race, particularly whiteness, within religious studies more rigorously and fearlessly, without shying away from discussions about power and racism (Schneider and Bjork-James 2020). Viewing family and sexual order as key elements of the religious right's politics is not entirely novel within the discipline, since other scholars have dealt with these themes previously, as Bjork-James herself states. However, by employing an intersectional approach, Bjork-James adeptly uncovers the complex interplay of social factors such as race, gender, and economics in shaping evangelical family politics. Her work underscores the importance of examining both historical and contemporary influences on white evangelicalism, rendering her book an indispensable resource for scholars and readers interested in this field. What I find particularly enriching are the carefully chosen anecdotes of the author's experiences in the field and the remarkably intimate narratives her interviewees recount about negotiating gender, sexuality, and family ideals. Bjork-James illustrates how family norms influence evangelical discourse on race, homosexuality, biblical interpretations, and conversion practices. In line with other researchers who have focused on the intimate dynamics within individual and small Bible study groups, Bjork-James asserts that an internal examination on the microsphere of evangelical family values is essential to grasping the larger context of white evangelicalism (for example, Bielo 2009).

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Finnegan, Ruth (2022) The Hidden Lives of Taxi Drivers. A Question of Knowledge. Milton Keynes: Callender Press

Gábor Henry Raschberger

In her 2022 ethnography *The Hidden Lives of Taxi Drivers. A Question of Knowledge*, Irish anthropologist Ruth Finnegan explores the little researched field of private transport in western Europe. From hundreds of informal interviews conducted during twenty- to thirty-minute taxi journeys in her hometown of Milton Keynes, she goes beyond simply exploring a profession to paint a picture of the diversity and individuality of taxi drivers. The work is embedded in her extensive knowledge of the city and the historical background on the development of the transportation business. It becomes clear that the field unites many areas of anthropological interest that can only be discovered through expanding one's own view of the urban environment. With her results, Finnegan presents an omnipresent field, one that most readers will already have encountered in their lives, though one that holds many surprises. The publication not only gives deep insight into the work practices of a whole industry but proves that dealing with the seemingly banal can lead to a fundamental examination of the ideas, fantasies, dreams, and meanings of human existence.

Beginning with the preface to her 102-page book, the author explores why the aesthetic familiarity of private transport in western cities does not lead to attention to the individuals behind the steering wheels. The drivers of the countless taxis on the streets, together with their life stories and internalised knowledge, are 'hidden in plain sight' (p. 9); they are only seen as regards to their function as service providers. Finnegan's first direct contact with her field of study came when she began to rely on taxis to get around her city after deciding to stop driving her private car in her older age. This already demonstrates that the world of taxi drivers and its importance to society is always linked to external factors, such as the infrastructure of a particular place. The author organises these overlaps with other subject areas of cultural research under the headings 'transport networks', 'work experiences', 'life stories', 'migration', and 'social mobility'. In doing so, she makes clear how rooted the taxi business is within society and, conversely, how relevant it can be for an anthropological perspective on urban identities.

In the first three chapters, Finnegan establishes the theoretical ground on which she subsequently builds her ethnography. By emphasising the pop-cultural relevance of taxis in the street scene and their symbolic power in books and films, where they are mostly used as a symbol of departure or the start of an adventure, the author makes it unmistakably clear how

all-present the topic is in everyday life. The second chapter provides insight into the historical development of the private transport business, from human-powered to animal-run to motorised. Through continuous innovation and the development of a system of convenient mobility, modern taxis could effectively be called the result of the constant and transculturally prevalent need to be transported from one place to another. Although Finnegan conducted most of her research in the small British town of Milton Keynes, she shows in her third chapter, 'Urban Setting', that the taxi industry there overlaps with that across the world. For this she draws comparisons with the taxi industry in cities and on continents she visited during her five years of field research. Particularly important for the universality of the results, however, is her in-depth exploration of the working methods and environments in which taxis operate and the resulting embodied knowledge of the humans taking part in the business.

The ethnographic core of the book, which consists of two parts, each with three chapters, presents the drivers on a more personal level, exploring with the reader which type of people choose to work in the industry and for what motivations. Finnegan focuses especially on the migration factor, which she states is directly linked to the world of taxi driving. For instance, many of the interviewees shared with her their history of migrating to the United Kingdom, which still affects them in their daily lives. Key factors here are financial dependencies in their former homes, self-founded families in the new country, and the hope of giving their own children a future, linked with education and a professional career. In her portrayal of the drivers, however, the author reflects not only on her interview partners' current situations but explicitly on their dreams and visions for the future. This shows the different layers of dealing with cultural identities, gaining autonomy over the workforce, and creating real opportunities to improve the economic situation for their families abroad and in the United Kingdom. Through the portrayal of individual fates, Finnegan offers a complex and all-encompassing description of real working conditions. Amongst other things, she examines the basic requirements that every taxi driver must fulfil in order to carry out their work. Presented are the role of the state in the form of regulations, associations within the community, and different business models available to drivers, including the people involved and the financial and human resources required. A separate chapter entitled 'Ignorant Riff Raff …' is dedicated to the complexity of the field and the high standards that taxi drivers must uphold in their daily work. In contrast to the prevailing social stigmas surrounding the taxi industry, disciplined behaviour and adherence to a high code of ethics are commonplace for the vast majority of drivers.

The author notes that, despite her open-mindedness on the subject, she was surprised at how positive her actual impression turned out to be compared to her expectations. In most cases, it was not the drivers themselves

but rude passengers who caused conflict in the workflow. Finnegan shows how much value the drivers place on education and respect – and how a determined approach to work could lead some of her interviewees to become well-off business owners with their own vehicles and employees.

The 'question of knowledge', which is already presented in the title of the book, forms the essence of Finnegan's ethnography and gets explored in detail in Chapter Seven. Technical knowledge and the ability to drive a car, Finnegan argues, form only the foundation of the profession and are by no means enough to pursue it successfully. Starting with the amount of learning required for a prospective driver to know the roads by heart, she explains the complex requirements for such an individual to pass a driver's certificate. Although modern aids such as navigation systems can assist drivers, their actual learning starts when they begin to drive. Because of the customers' expectations that taxi drivers can answer any question or fulfil any request relating to transport, drivers have to learn everything that could be relevant to their clients. The nature of the job, of dealing with people in a wide range of emotional and physical states, demands from them a significant measure of social and emotional intelligence. These levels of practical knowledge cannot be acquired in theory but are learnt in the course of daily work – and thus are embodied knowledge. This learning from and passing on of knowledge to passengers is further enabled by the anonymity and time-limited nature of the interaction between client and driver in the interior of the car. Finnegan describes this location as an 'intimate temporary place' where it feels safe to share knowledge (p. 68). As neutral actors who encounter people of all kinds in their work time, the drivers hold a quasi-diplomatic immunity which enables them to participate in – and learn from – all parts of society.

A practical connection of knowledge to individual biographies and fates is the focus of the sixth ethnographic chapter and the concluding chapters. Reflecting on her research methods of involving drivers in informal interviews, Finnegan examines the role of her using first names in her research. She compares the sharing of names to the classic anthropological concept of a gift exchange. By exchanging what she classifies as one essential feature that differentiates people from each other, one's personal name, she was able to dissolve the general interpersonal separation between strangers. Her way of exploring the possible meanings of her driver's names and related topics like childhood and cultural identity open a level of dialogue that deals with individual biographies and personal life perspectives.

In Finnegan's detailed descriptions of particular rides, she allows the drivers to express themselves about values, religion, future prospects, and the duality between work and private life, as well as hobbies and interests. At this point, the manner in which Finnegan relates to the drivers changes. She no longer engages with them as service providers but focuses on their individuality as humans, with goals, dreams, and idiosyncratic ideas of what

a good life is. In her sympathetic conclusion to the final chapter, Finnegan presents taxi drivers as nothing less than modern philosophers, collecting and reflecting on societal knowledge whilst working. They are not only responsible for the safe transportation of their passengers but are also active but silent listeners in the helpful way of priests and therapists. By doing so, drivers accumulate knowledge from a wide variety of sources, which their customers can then draw on, implied in the unspoken contract of each taxi journey.

Although Finnegan engages self-reflexively with her methods and the dynamics between researcher and interviewees throughout the ethnography, she provides additional insight into her methodology in the appendix. As she conducted her research on occasion, alongside running everyday errands, her spontaneous interview style is ideally suited to the ephemeral nature of the subject. She certainly fulfils her aim not only to describe the patterns she encountered in the field but to provide explicit examples that capture the elusive and spiritually charged dimension of human life embedded in a taxi ride. By providing a rich collection of graphics, photos, and quotes from the taxi drivers' environments, the author succeeds in writing an empathetic ethnography that communicates on a fundamental level of humanity. She takes the reader close to the subject, which makes for an immersive reading experience. Through a structured processing of the collected data, Finnegan locates the individual drivers and their feelings in work processes and in underlying forces, even without applying any major theoretical concepts. This allows an understanding to emerge beyond the academic level, which makes the book accessible to a wide audience. In terms of its range of content, the ethnography is just as versatile as the people it describes.

When taxis are recognised as intercultural meeting places, they can be considered as sites for negotiating matters such as migration, labour, and identity. The focus on the individuals in the taxi business marks an essential addition to the exploration of urban spaces and is therefore as relevant to the subject as the concealed knowledge that they reveal. A comparison with taxi ethnographies outside of Europe proves many intercultural similarities in the industry. Kathy Taylor's (1999) *Through the Rearview Mirror* or Tracy Luedke's (2010) *Driving Lives: An Ethnography of Chicago Taxi Drivers* also deal with the image of the all-knowing taxi driver and the struggle of having to accumulate the knowledge of a whole city as a working environment. Finnegan shows that whilst her drivers are far from any Mexican or American metropole, they deal with similar issues and ways of building knowledge. Expanding this image, she successfully empathises with the uniqueness of the drivers and the relevance of their biographies in relation to gaining, keeping, and sharing this valuable expertise on human living.

With *The Hidden Lives of Taxi Drivers. A Question of Knowledge*, Ruth Finnegan expands the anthropological perspective on the subject by

approaching and depicting the field in an empathetic way. By exploring individual emotional layers, she succeeds in humanising what would otherwise remain anonymous and, through that, revealing the constructive elements that make up said knowledge.

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Nachruf auf Rosemarie Oesselmann

Astrid Wonneberger und die Ethnoscripts-Redaktion

Am 29.06.2023 verstarb im Alter von 92 Jahren Dr. Rosemarie Oesselmann, die nicht nur als Studentin, Doktorandin und Dozentin lange Zeit Teil des Instituts für Ethnologie der Universität Hamburg war, sondern auch über zehn Jahre als Mitglied in der Ethnoscripts-Redaktion die Entwicklung der Zeitschrift mitgeprägt hat. Nach einer so langen und intensiven Zusammenarbeit wollen wir ihre Person und ihre Leistungen an dieser Stelle mit einem Nachruf würdigen.

Rosemarie Oesselmann 2009. Foto: Astrid Wonneberger

Rosemarie Oesselmann, geb. Kühling, kam erst spät zur Ethnologie. Geboren 1931 in Osnabrück, erlebte sie ihre Kindheit und Jugend in der Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit. Nach ihrem Abitur war an ein Studium lange Zeit nicht zu denken. Mit ihren Englischkenntnissen war sie für die englische Besatzung von Interesse und als Übersetzerin tätig. Sie erhielt ein einjähriges Stipendium in England.

Aufgrund verwandtschaftlicher Beziehungen in die Region rund um Stolzenau an der Weser verbrachte sie viel Zeit in der Gegend und lernte dort

ihren späteren Ehemann Rolf kennen. Zusammen gründeten sie eine Familie und bauten 1960 eine Druckerei auf, in der Rosemarie u.a. als Lektorin tätig war. Erst als ihre drei Kinder erwachsen waren, konnte sie ihren Traum vom Studium doch noch verwirklichen, ein Vorhaben, das von ihrer ganzen Familie unterstützt wurde. Aufgrund ihres Interesses an Geschichte und kultureller Vielfalt entschied sie sich 1988, Ethnologie und Geschichte an der Universität Hamburg zu studieren.

Angesichts ihres Alters war sie anfangs unsicher, ob und wie sie von den Kommilitoninnen und Kommilitonen akzeptiert werden würde – würden diese sie z.B. duzen? Letztlich stellten sich ihre Bedenken bald als gegenstandslos heraus. Die schnell entstandenen Freundschaften mit einigen Mitstudierenden und Lehrenden, darunter vor allem mit Angelika Hillmer, Prof. Waltraud Kokot und mir, bedeuteten ihr immer sehr viel, gingen weit über eine berufliche Zusammenarbeit hinaus und hielten bis zu ihrem Tod.

Ihre erste Feldforschung im Rahmen des damals obligatorischen Feldforschungspraktikums im Magisterstudium führte Rosemarie 1991-1992 nach São Paulo in Brasilien. Ihr Sohn Dirk leitete dort zu der Zeit ein Favela- und Straßenkinder-Projekt, das ihr einen guten Zugang zu den Bewohnerinnen und Bewohnern vor Ort ermöglichte. Mit ihrer sprachlichen Begabung erlernte sie in kürzester Zeit Portugiesisch, so dass sie mit den Menschen reden und ihnen zuhören konnte. Besonders bewegten sie die Erzählungen und Schicksale mehrerer Frauen, die aus den Dürregebieten des brasilianischen Nordostens nach São Paulo migriert waren und deren Erfahrungen und Überlebensstrategien in den Armenvierteln des Ballungszentrums ins Zentrum ihrer Forschung rückten.

Nach ihrem Magisterabschluss 1994 (Thema: „Die Auseinandersetzung um den Begriff ‚Kultur der Armut'") griff sie den Schwerpunkt „Frauen in Brasilien" in ihrer Dissertation erneut auf. Ihre zweite Feldforschung führte sie 1995 bis 2000 mehrfach nach Belém, eine Großstadt im Norden Brasiliens, wo inzwischen auch ihr Sohn Dirk lebte. Im Zentrum ihrer Arbeit standen die Lebensgeschichten von neun Frauen, die aus dem Nordosten Amazoniens nach Belém migriert waren. Zu ihnen baute Rosemarie enge Beziehungen auf, von denen einige auch noch Jahre nach ihrer Forschung Bestand hatten. Thematisch ging es vor allem um die Lebensbedingungen der Frauen in Amazonien, ihre Motivation zur Migration, die Anpassung an das neue, städtische Leben und um Alltagserfahrungen, die letztlich auch zu Veränderungen ihrer Identitäten führten. Im Jahr 2000 konnte sie ihre Promotion erfolgreich unter dem Titel „Wege der Veränderung. Migrantinnen in Ost-Amazonien" abschließen.

Die Lebenssituationen von Frauen standen Zeit ihres Lebens im Fokus von Rosemaries wissenschaftlichem Interesse. Bereits während ihres Studiums widmete sie sich intensiv den Themen Frauen im Mittelalter und Hexenverfolgungen. Nach ihrer Promotion führte sie mehrere Lehrveranstal-

tungen im Institut für Ethnologie in Hamburg durch. Ihre Fachkompetenz war aber auch außerhalb des universitären Bereichs gefragt. So wurde sie für zahlreiche wissenschaftliche Vorträge angefragt, u.a. vom Kloster Loccum.

Im Jahr 2006 wurde Rosemarie außerdem zu einem festen Mitglied der Ethnoscripts-Redaktion und bereicherte die Institutszeitschrift nicht nur mit ihrer fachlichen Expertise, sondern vor allem auch mit ihrer jahrzehntelangen Erfahrung als Lektorin und ihrem ausgeprägten Gefühl für Formulierungen, sprachlichen Ausdruck und (schriftliche) Formalia, die sie während ihrer Tätigkeit in der Druckerei erworben hatte. Bis 2019 wurde keine Ausgabe veröffentlicht, ohne dass ihr geschultes Auge einen letzten Blick auf die Endversionen geworfen hatte. Nur wenige Tipp-, Zeichensetzungs- und Layoutfehler dürften ihr entgangen sein.

Wir haben Rosemarie mit ihrem ungewöhnlichen Lebensweg, ihrer Zugewandtheit, Offenheit und Fröhlichkeit sehr geschätzt. Wir haben mit ihr eine Freundin verloren, die wir vermissen.

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