

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Reese Jacobs Neal

Always Looking, Always There
by Reese Jacobs Neal '25

I am eating chips and salsa with my family at La Paloma Blanca. There is mariachi playing and silverware clanging. And, somewhere in the room, there is a man watching me. I do not know his name. I do not know his face. I do know that, half way through the first round of margaritas, my phone screen lit up with a message.

Corner booth?

I know he is 30 feet away. I know he is online. I know his stats, by which I mean, I know the information listed on his profile.

Age	32
Height	6'1"
Weight	190 lbs
Body Type	Muscular
Position	Top
Ethnicity	Mixed
HIV Status	Negative, On PrEP
Looking For	Right Now
Accepts NSFW Pics	Yes Please

I know that he has a hairy chest. I know that I have no control over what he does next.

I spend the rest of dinner tense. Before we leave, my mom asks a man at a nearby table to take a photo of us in front of a Christmas tree. It is the holiday season, and my sister and her husband are visiting for the first time in a year. I am 18, and I have yet to come out to my family.

I get in the car.

*Didn't mean to weird ya out.
Just wanted to let ya know it was a pleasure
to have the view during dinner.*

* * *

Over the last decade, Grindr has rapidly become the world's most popular social networking app for queer people. It is difficult to comprehend the sheer influence that Grindr has had on gay communities and gay individuals. But, for those of us who are identifiably queer, it is less difficult to comprehend the context from which Grindr arose to ascendancy.

We know what it's like to be clocked as faggots. We notice the absence of queer spaces from nearly realms all of public life in our very heterosexist society. We notice the violence that occurs when queerness makes space for itself in public life. I am thinking of all of the siblings we have lost simply for going out to the wrong club or flirting with the wrong man. We understand that to be safe as a queer person, often, is to be invisible.

But invisibility isn't sustainable. Moving through the world denying parts frustrates your psychological development and self-esteem. And, it is so lonely. Sooner or later, queer people will want to actualize their queerness. And, to do this, queer people have long taken to the internet to form online spaces, such as chat rooms and discussion boards, in which they could explore their sexualities without the risk of immediate physical violence. For me, like many young gay men, this happened on Grindr.

When you open Grindr on your phone, you are met with a gallery view of the profile photos of fellow users. The app uses real-time location services to arrange these profiles in order of increasing physical proximity. You can see which users are currently online. You can see how far away they are, to the foot. You can message any user nearby; there is no need to "match". Very little of your information is private. Interactions are, and have always been, primarily about sex.

Grindr is the first app of its kind to integrate online queer community and physical proximity to the extent that it does—to not just provide you access to fellow queer people, but to provide you access to fellow queer people who are close to you. I grew up watching gay youtubers, following gay bloggers, but it wasn't until I began to meet gay people who were familiar with my

reality—the complex experience of being a gay person in poor, urban, Southern contexts—that I began to feel represented in my identity. This proximity allows for offline experiences that are similarly affirming.

I am thinking about a man named Ale. We met on Grindr in 2020. I liked his tattoos. He liked mine. We hooked up in my car, and then we got to talking. I learned he had just moved to my neighborhood from Chile. It was the height of the pandemic, and he was having a hard time finding a job, and friends. He was a good guy. And he was lonely. He didn't know how he fit into this new place yet.

Ale and I became friends after that. I showed him around the gay scene in town. I moved pretty soon after we met, and we didn't keep in great touch. But, these days, I watch his stories on Instagram. He seems to have figured it out. He found a job, and a group of friends. They go out often, to some of the spots that I showed him. And, I wonder if he met them on Grindr too.

The integration of online queer community and physical proximity has more complicated implications though. The chances of your online life interfering with your public life are significantly higher. This can have serious consequences. Grindr is regularly used to obtain the identities and locations of queer individuals for the purposes of extortion, legal persecution, and even violent crimes. Even for out individuals who live in communities where queerness is passively tolerated, being associated with an app centered around gay sexuality can devastate their personal and professional relationships. Each time Grindr reemerges in public discourse, I am reminded of the stigma that my sexuality carries as a gay man.

Thus, fierce cultures of anonymity are born. Grindr is overrun with profiles that omit face pictures and any identifying information. Instead, it is conventional to include pictures of your body, or no pictures at all. Names are rarely exchanged. Users communicate with and refer to each other using short universal vocabularies.

dl: *adj.*

“down low” abbreviated,
describes someone who does
not publicly identify as queer

discreet: *adj.*

describes someone will not
publicly acknowledge a sexual
relationship

face 4 face: *n.*

an arrangement in which
someone will only mutually
exchange face pictures

anon: *adj.*

describes anonymous sex,
when someone conceals their
identity during sex

Grindr's built-in features and established norms collectively encourage users to understand their body and others' bodies as objects that have been abstracted from personal identity, as categorizable commodities for visual-sexual consumption. On Grindr, anonymity, ironically, promotes exposure of oneself—a form of strategic visibility rooted in cultures of hypersexuality and self-objectification.

Look at my stats, look at my torso, and I could be anyone to you. But, at least then, I am safe.

While the motives behind the widespread concern for anonymity on Grindr are not unfounded, I worry about their ramifications. I worry about the messages I receive, from men who are hurting, men who hurt, and men who are both.

*dl married man here. use me.
new haven hotel for tonight.*

*generous john here
looking for now \$\$\$*

*daddy likes your pretty eyes. I have
a good feeling you will meet a boy
your age and have fabulous dates <3*

*do you want \$100? I can send my
yale ID to prove I'm not scamming.*

do you want \$140?

*looking for young hung
white sub. no limits.*

*looking for 2 young twink to
accompany me and 35 yr old
to fun hot tub/hotel night*

*reese? hey hahaha
see you around!*

It is no surprise that deeply ingrained cultures of racism, ableism, homophobia, exploitation, and sexual violence persist on Grindr. I worry that these cultures are reproducing the conditions for our own oppression and feelings of isolation. The messaging and experiences that these cultures produce have been internalized by the many young gay men who turn to Grindr to form their emerging identity as a queer person—myself included.

I have spent much of my recent years sitting with unanswered questions about my sexuality.

What do I really want?

What have I inherited?

Is there a difference?

Does it matter?

I try to do what feels right. I no longer conceal my identity. I no longer reduce my online self to just my body. I am learning to let go of the fear of being entirely visible. It has been difficult. And, at times, I wonder if I am just putting myself at greater risk. Still, I am trying my best to figure out ways to coexist with this app and all that it has left me with: all of the questions, all of the trauma, and all of the affirming experiences, too.

I know that Grindr is just an app; it is not the world queer people are working toward. But, it, at the very least, helps illuminate the world that queer people are currently in.

Some nights, I still open the app. I no longer mistake visibility for community, or being looked at for being seen. I understand that, when most of these men look at me, with or without my face, I am still an object to them. But, sometimes, it gets lonely out here. Sometimes, it helps to know that there is someone, 30 feet away, online, watching.