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In this project, I locate Grindr as a critical site of the (re)production of the respectable queer subject. Examining the mobile smartphone application as a venue for queer world-making and the challenges it poses to distinctions between the public and the private, I consider Grindr as a possible queer counterpublic with broad implications for its users. I ask how the process of blocking and explicitly writing that certain bodies are not welcome is in itself a crucial process of producing one's own normative identity and presentation, as well as producing the abject subject. Working with scholarship on queer world-making, identity formation, and critical race studies of affective influences on racialized identity, I argue that Grindr offers an avenue for users to produce identity and subjectivity that extends beyond the realm of its digital boundaries. I use phenomenological inquiry and critical analysis of theoretical scholarship to build my argument, weaving this together with my own personal experiences as lived knowledge. Using personal experience and existing scholarship to explore Grindr's potential for subject production, I seek to examine hegemonic sociality as it appears on the application.

GRINDR-ING RESPECTABILITY, NORMATIVITY, AND THE ABJECT OTHER

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

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To the people who put their lives on the line, in search of recognition and dignity, whose bodies rendered them unable to survive and thrive. This work is in honor of your bravery and perseverance in the face of ruthless opposition.

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*Endless hours of searching have gone by. I have wasted an entire day answering messages, sending and receiving pictures, pursuing endless vague possibilities for a meet-up or some kind of connection. Unsure of exactly what I want from this app, I cannot stop engaging. A sense of desperation fills my body as I wonder what it is that makes me so undesirable, so unattractive that nobody is willing to meet with me. At the time, my fatness permeates each encounter online, a specter that I know is lurking in the shadows waiting until the fateful request comes in: "body pic?" My heart races, knowing that what I send in return will likely end our conversation. Time after time, I face this fear by sending a photo that I think makes me look smaller than I do in reality. Trying desperately to make myself appear more 'attractive,' knowing well what this means in the gay culture of Grindr. I hope this guy won't mind the way my body looks. I hope this one will be different. A few minutes, or a few seconds, go by. The person on the other side of the screen disappears. I've been blocked. After so many attempts, and so many non-responses, I decide it's time to call it a night. Maybe I don't belong on this app after all.*

As a queer teenager in the 2010s, I discovered a great deal of my personal identity and interests through the Internet. From staring at men's underwear sections of online retailers to reading about histories of gay struggle for liberation on Wikipedia to connecting with other queer people through social media websites, I found a wealth of information online that assisted with figuring out who I was, what I liked, and what I wanted to do with my body. Like many other queers in my generation (and those generations that are burgeoning now), the Internet was a powerful site for the production of my identity. Once I arrived at college, I discovered the gay social networking mobile application Grindr, which increased my world tenfold. The physical space of the college campus, of the city, of the world, was transformed by the virtual liminal queer space of Grindr, as I opened the application to discover hundreds of queer people (primarily gay

men) within proximity of me. This sexually charged community space offered up avenues for meeting more people like me, for talking with strangers and discovering my sexuality, for not feeling so alone as a queer introvert in a world that privileged extroverted modalities of sociality.

Over time, though, this ‘community space’ appeared to transform before my eyes as I delved into social justice education. Learning about the socio-cultural structures of racism, misogyny, fatphobia, and so forth, forced me to realize that these systems of oppression were occurring before my eyes in the virtual space to which I retreated in search of queer peers. Profiles that explicitly expressed disinterest, disgust even, in interacting with non-white/fat/feminine bodies and personalities wore down the enthusiastic energy with which I once approached the application. As I explored my gender expression in more feminine ways, and my body doubled in size over my first few years of college, I came to closely know the feeling of being rejected by others on Grindr for the way I looked. I soon realized that this was only a replication of larger phenomena within the physical social landscape of queerness, of the so-called ‘LGBTQ community.’ During this time, the modern ‘LGBTQ rights movement’ was in full effect, having won its fight for inclusion in the United States military via the repeal of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,’ and feverishly approaching its desired outcome in the battle for access to the heteronormative institution of marriage. I was not fully cognizant of the way in which this movement was working at the time, but as I developed my foundation of critical queer, trans, and feminist thought, I joined the critics of this movement by the time marriage equality was officially accepted as law by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The approach of this movement, which sought ‘equality’ through inclusion, relied upon racialized images of the ‘modern queer.’ The gay men and women at the forefront of this movement were largely white, thin, cisgender, and marginally wealthy people who engaged in the representation of the ‘respectable queer American citizen.’ The same representational approach to ‘gay rights’ reverberates throughout social movements and within intracommunity queer discourse today. Returning to the place where I refined and more deeply discovered my identity (sexual and otherwise), Grindr offers a platform for intracommunity queer dialogue, as it is a privatized space for its queer users to share information, ideas, and even sexual interests with one another. While examining Grindr as community space for dialogue may seem unorthodox, it constitutes a critical space for engagement with other queers for many within the ‘community’ who lack resources to otherwise find people like them (e.g., for rural queers or people experiencing homoerotic sexual or romantic attraction but do not experience queerness per se as a salient identity). It is here, within this queer liminal space, that I locate my interest in the ongoing (re)production of the respectable queer subject. I have explored some aspects of Grindr as a site of sexual racism and as a site of identity development via abject *Others* in previous writings; I turn now in this work to examine how both of these analyses of Grindr allow for a deeper study of the respectable queer through the paradoxical private and public nature of the Grindr grid. This respectable queer, as will be made evident in my work, is enabled and constituted through state violence and death-dealing against the biopolitical ‘threat’ to the larger population, an abject subjectivity necessary for the folding-in of certain queers into the category of respectable citizenship. Grindr, then, serves as my site

of inquiry, where I will contend with it as a space where queer respectability is activated, under what conditions, and at whose expense this activation occurs. Further, I will explore the phenomenon of the private-public (or public-private) as Grindr alternately plays with public and private space in its digital world.

My argument hinges on an understanding of ‘citizenship’ and ‘freedom’—and their ties to respectability—within the folds of the U.S. nation-state defined and understood in relation to *uncitizenship* and *unfreedom*. The U.S. state’s biopolitical investment in its governed populace is constitutively wrapped up in the administration of violence and death to those subjects who pose a threat, real or imagined (usually the latter), to the populace. This convening of necropolitics and biopolitics is the foundational premise of the U.S. citizen and ideals of ‘American freedom.’ The humanity of the free citizen rests upon the inhumanity of the *unfree* citizen, meaning that citizenship and governance always rely upon the abjection of *Others* to remain stable categories of political subjectivity. The imagined biopolitical threat of the queer subject—understood within the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that exploded into the U.S. in the 1980s, and thought to undermine the reproductive potential of heteronormative populations throughout history—meant that the ‘homosexual’ was included via exclusion, occupying a space in the category of *Other*. Thus, the mainstream focus of the ‘gay rights movement’ on the construction of the respectable queer—the acceptable sexual citizen—emerges as a corrective, a call to be included in the ‘majority.’ Within this activist framework, freedom means not only being removed from the “death-

world” of abjection (Mbembe), but also being folded into the population through claims to the co-constitutive ideals of respectability and normativity.

Grindr’s proliferation as a gay community space offers a more localized understanding of this process of identity-through-abjection, or abjection-as-identity, via the specific kinds of sociality that take place within its orange and black façade. As such, the goal of this thesis is to contend that examining Grindr as a site through which to understand larger patterns of queer communities, politics, and identity, provides an alternative engagement with queer political action, one that studies the close-up, everyday transactions of affect and abjection, knowledge and identity, as a site of radical meaning-making for a queer world. I am interested in understanding the complex nature of Grindr as a site where queer people develop and understand their own identities—both through interacting with each other and rendering others within the parameters of the app as abject—and how doing so interfaces with political and social action by queer agents. The affective circulations of shame, disgust, and hatred are constitutive of respectability; as such, processes of abjection and exclusion in a community space such as Grindr inform more deeply-held notions of respectability and disposability. Freedom or unfreedom, like the forms of identity made possible through the discursive practices that occur on Grindr, rest upon the abjection of the bodies against which they are defined. This is where queer political action itself becomes a necropolitical project, investing in the literal and social death of Others; modalities of social engagement such as through Grindr further enact this necropolitical violence, inscribing abjection onto the bodies of those rendered Other.

As I work through my argument, I will study the phenomenon of Grindr, tracing the way its features and the community it constitutes are forces that allow for identification through abjection within the queer community. There is some scholarship about Grindr itself as a tool for queer identity and sociality, with little research that clearly articulates how abjection activates the identificatory possibilities of the application. Looking at this research, I will draw connections with scholarship on queer sociality in the physical world. Grindr offers a world of its own, similar to that of the gay bar or the cruising ground, where the sexualized economy of bodies, which often constitutes queer (men's) community spaces in general, becomes accessible at the click of an icon. Unlike the physical space of the gay bar, however, Grindr offers an avenue to exclude and render abject bodies that look 'different' or elicit racialized, gendered disgust, making the customization of one's visual community space (the home screen of Grindr) an easier process through features such as blocking and filtering the users that appear on the screen. Doing so renders these users invisible, abject, there-but-not-quite-there in a manner that eerily echoes processes of constituting the citizen-subject within the nation-state by figuring any who pose a 'threat' to this subject as socially or physically dead. While blocking a person on Grindr whose body or identity elicits disgust will not result in that person actually dying or being socially dead in the way that the abject Other of the nation-state becomes, the process of identity and meaning-making through abjection remains a crucial process to both structures of meaning and identity. Social death proliferates within the space of Grindr, as one finds oneself continuously blocked and ignored, disposable and rendered visible only through their invisibility. I am

interested in how such experiences on Grindr mirror these ‘real-world’ practices of abjection and social death, and how its users create and inhabit an abject Other position that melds into the same Other figure the state uses as its site of violence.

Alongside my analysis of Grindr, I will draw upon critical scholars who contend with issues of respectability politics in the modern ‘gay rights movement.’ As these authors argue, this movement calls upon the state as a benefactor of freedom and redress within the parameter of its oppressive systems of domination and control. Calls for military inclusion, marriage ‘equality,’ hate crime and anti-discrimination law, and the façade of normalcy through respectable citizenship, all highlight the paradoxical nature of turning to the state for freedom when the state is itself a thief of freedom. The necropolitical underpinnings of the state, seen in the settler-colonial taking of land, the institutions and legacies of slavery and anti-Blackness, and the biopolitical regulation of populations, are implicitly endorsed and called upon when this movement requests inclusion in the state. These underpinnings, which are foundational to the idea of citizenship and respectability within the framework of the U.S. state, are crucial to understanding whose lives and bodies are at risk in calls for allowing (certain) queers to be folded into the paradigm of respectable citizenship. Asking what the role of respectability in this movement means for those who are routinely denied inclusion into the domain of respectable citizenship and domesticity—those bodies and lives that are queered, racialized, and abjected by way of ‘threatening’ the possibilities for the respectable citizen—troubles commonly held notions of ‘inclusion.’

By looking into Grindr as a specific site of the activation and (re)production of the respectable queer, I take these arguments against popular ‘gay rights’ political action and study how and where its subjects come to know themselves as such. Grindr as a privatized, yet also relatively public space for the production of identity via abjection, disgust, and even politics, reveals more about the ‘undercommons’ of the ‘gay community,’ as it provides a sort of private-public community landscape for its users where the heteronormative structures of sociality appear to be suspended while logged into the app. Because these structures are so deeply engrained, however, white supremacist, misogynist, fatphobic, and ableist language still proliferate within this app, perhaps even more so due to the empowerment of being behind a screen in a relatively uncensored space. The discourse that emerges, then, works to (re)produce the respectable queer through the (re)production and imposition of normativity. I am interested in asking how the process of blocking, filtering, and explicitly writing that certain bodies are not welcome is in itself a crucial process of producing one’s own normative identity and presentation. How does such a form of writing as filling out a bio description inscribe its meaning on the bodies of those it categorically includes by way of exclusion? What does this abjection mean for the blocked, the muted, who nonetheless still exist on Grindr but on far fewer screens than their non-abjected counterparts? And for the normalized, respectable subject doing the blocking, how does this act reiterate such an identity? How does the exclusion of others, the elision of disgust and non-normativity, make a normative and respectable identity position all the more real and felt?

## A Review of Literature

### *Power Over Life and Death*

Michel Foucault offers the conception of “bio-power” and biopolitics in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, arguing that “it was the taking charge of life, even more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body ... It is no longer a matter of bringing death into play in the field of sovereignty but of distributing the living in the domain of value and unity” (143—144). In this text, Foucault examines the shifting focal point of sovereign power in Western society, arguing that sexuality was by and large the vessel through which power was able to move through and around people, granting it access to their bodies and their minds. Controlling the health and life of its subjects, the state has consolidated more power over them and the way in which they exist under its rule. Sexuality becomes a crucial site of this regulatory regime, normalizing ‘healthy’ practices and those which put a risk to the collective life of the population. As a central location of regulatory power and control, sexuality has thus become a central part of the subject’s identity, the culmination of the project of sexuality Foucault analyzes throughout this text. Foucault’s biopolitics, then, understands sexuality as a specific form and practice of power rooted in the control of the larger population. The governance of the population’s health and life is what gives credence to the state’s claim to dominance. Further, to pull from Giorgio Agamben’s work in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, through the exclusion and abjection of the non-citizen, the nation-state’s population becomes more solidified as a concept, the People (“the total state of integrated and sovereign citizens”) versus the people (“the wretched, the

oppressed, and the defeated”) (177). This distinction proves crucial in understanding how the folds of citizenship and respectability are crafted via discourse of inclusion and abjection.

If biopower/biopolitics constitutes the political investment in the regulation of the life of the population, focusing on the protection of citizens, where does death come into play? As Foucault argues above that the power of the sovereign is no longer invested in death-dealing but in life-giving, a critical eye will notice that the state still operates through the deployment of death as a form of population management. Achille Mbembe’s seminal essay “Necropolitics” takes up this ‘flip-side’ of biopolitics, crucially asking, “Is the notion of biopower sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective?” (12). In other words, biopower may not fully encompass the ways in which war, terror, and other forms of violence endorsed by the state or other political actors are deployed in the pursuit of power. Using the historical examples of slavery and colonialism, Mbembe traces the sovereign power of life and death, and the delineation of which persons (or bodies) are worthy of living: “...sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (27). The disposable bodies, marked as such outside the margins of the People who are to be protected because of their supposed value, lose their humanity in the eyes of the state, finding themselves included within the state only in that they are excluded. This inclusive exclusion means that they are potential subjects of death, or ‘bare life’ as Agamben would term it. To be left in this exclusive category,

disposable and bare, is to be forced into what Mbembe calls “death worlds”: “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (40). Life-in-death, then, as a state of abjection and exclusion, means finding oneself always already dead, always already outside of the periphery of the People the state seeks to protect. This location is where we find the abject subject—the racialized, the gendered, the deviant—the liminal space of inclusion-by-exclusion. The existence of the abject, the subject outside the periphery, is constitutive of respectability itself.

A key tool and condition of necropower is social death—the process through which exclusion from social realms of connection, communication, and citizenship is ascribed to certain bodies, rendering them abject, outside, and essentially dead to others. Social death also refers to the status of having been through this process, of *being* socially dead. Mbembe writes that “Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life” (21); life under slavery provides a salient example of how social death operates and what its effects are for its subjects. Orlando Patterson provides an in-depth example of how social death operates as a process and as a state of subjection. Patterson argues that a person came to be known as a slave by and through their social death, a stripping of rights, identity, and familial ties: “Because the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his mater, he became a social nonperson” (5). The intrusive and extrusive conceptions of social death explain the processes of alienation that rendered the slave an outsider within the communities and the homes that they served. Patterson argues that symbolic authority and its power to alienate human beings from not only their communities, but also their

bodies made it possible to subjugate them as non-humans existing in the not-yet dead space of social death. Such an understanding lent itself to the (re)production of imagined difference, which was used to justify and inform practices of enslavement. “Outsider” status was conferred upon individuals based on differences perceived as a result of one being an enemy, or becoming an enemy by no longer subscribing or belonging to social norms. Slavery, as an alternative to the death punishment, constituted its own kind of death, a death-in-life as its subjects existed as the living dead. Social death continues to operate in evolved form in the United States today in systems of valuation, criminalization, and demarcations of dis/respectability.

### *Queer(ing) Respectability*

While there are divergent understandings of what respectability means and looks like, this work considers respectability as both a particular subjectivity and a political strategy for social movements. What does respectability, then, entail within this context? In her analysis of the Black feminist intellectual Anna Julia Cooper, Brittney C. Cooper elaborates the difference between “respectability” and “dignity:” “Demands for dignity are demands for a fundamental recognition of one’s inherent humanity. Demands for respectability assume that unassailable social propriety will prove one’s dignity” (5). Respectability manifests here as a political approach to gaining dignity, or full respect of one’s humanity, by engaging with the norms of a white supremacist, capitalist, cis/heteronormative society which only allows certain people access to full inclusion. Yuvraj Joshi elaborates: “To be respectable is to follow a normative standard of behavior in public, while being aware of continual evaluations against that standard ... Moreover,

at the same time as identifying with the norm, *respectability entails differentiating oneself from others who fall outside the norm*” (418, emphasis added). Claiming proximity to the standards of white, middle class, heteronormativity is thus enhanced through claiming distance from people who do not meet these standards. Respectability, in order to uphold itself, requires the performative repudiation of non-respectable Others. For queers within the ‘gay rights movement,’ this means performing distance from the nation’s abject Others to attain access to the mainstream.

Cathy Cohen’s “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” asks salient questions about the particular modalities of queer political action that remain crucial to ask today. In this now-iconic text, Cohen incisively critiques “the limits of a lesbian and gay political agenda based on a civil rights strategy, where assimilation into, and replication of, dominant institutions are the goals” (437). This framework of activism, one that focuses on ‘rights’ and ‘inclusion,’ willfully ignores the multiple axes of power and oppression that structure the lived experiences people face on a daily basis. Cohen argues that heteronormativity itself is rooted in white supremacy, and that institutions (such as marriage) are mired in a history of white supremacist population control and production designed as tools to affirm who is worthy of respectability, citizenship, and inclusion (453). Therefore, when gay and lesbian rights groups situate marriage equality and access to other dominant institutions, they are seeking inclusion into the parameters of a white supremacist state institution. This particular kind of activism relies upon ideologies of respectability to garner access and inclusion for these activists and the specific group of people they represent.

Echoing Cohen's critiques, Dean Spade further argues that this kind of political approach, in centering only one vector of identity (that is, queerness) necessarily elides other aspects of identity that structure lived experiences in different ways. This non-transformative political approach, he argues, only serves one group of individuals within U.S. society: "The resultant legal reforms [of single-issue queer identity politics] are so narrow in their understanding of the issues that they only provide access to the sought-after right for those who do not have other intervening vectors of marginality, if for anyone at all" (92). Appeals to the law for inclusive language and access to certain 'rights' specifically benefit white gay men and lesbians, restoring their place within the hegemonic structures of the U.S. state. Here, again, the necropolitical function of respectability emerges: to be respectable, to be included in the structures of the state, is to endorse the white supremacist, capitalist violence which makes such institutions possible in the first place. This process of seeking inclusion and recognition within the U.S. state can best be understood through an analysis of homonationalism.

Jasbir Puar uses the term "homonationalism" as an analytic to understand how queer citizenship becomes legible in the eyes of the state in her seminal text *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Homonationalism functions to understand how the queer subject, once excluded from the state's ideology of ideal citizenship, finds itself included and even lauded as part of the exceptionalism of U.S. citizenry, through proximity to heteronormative practices of respectability. The inclusion of queer subjects through homonormativity is bound up with white supremacist ideologies invested in the biopolitical regulation of the (white) population through

heteronormativity and respectable whiteness. This is by and large contrasted against ‘Other’ populations thought to be a threat—Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian populations who are figured as terrorists post-9/11—to the nation; the exclusion of this threat (through violence and death-dealing) is enabled and proliferated by the inclusion of the queer subject into the nation’s ‘protection.’

Examined through a homonationalist lens, respectable queerness relies upon the metaphorical figure of the terrorist, the racialized Other. The mainly white queers invested in the work of being folded into the U.S. state engage, either knowingly or unknowingly, in the nationalist project of rejecting the ‘terrorist’ to protect the nation from its enemies. Inclusion in the state means complicity in the state’s constitutive violence, by and through engaging in hetero/homonormative modalities of existence and engagement with the state (e.g. seeking access to the formerly heterosexual institution of marriage or inclusion in the U.S. military). This particular approach to queer inclusion in the nation-state colludes with the state’s violence, effectively creating a queer respectability that demonizes the racialized bodies of the state’s supposed enemies. As Joshi argues, “...respectability is not simply a performance, but a system of hierarchy and domination that confers privilege only alongside other relations of inequality” (463). As we see in Puar’s examination of homonationalism, queer political projects of respectability empower the hierarchical violence of the state against its supposed enemies—entering the folds of social and legal recognition in the U.S. means becoming a supporter of the necropolitical project of maintaining the nation’s sovereignty.

Chandan Reddy's *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* examines the ways in which freedom, in the context of the United States, is inherently bound up in practices of normative and regulative violence imposed by the state to maintain this freedom. As social groups—in this case, gay rights organizers—make calls for freedom and inclusion within the state, such calls implicitly endorse the state-sanctioned violence that is constitutive of the state itself. As Reddy argues, the notion of 'freedom' for queer people and the U.S.-based movements pushing for this freedom cannot be delineated from the violence perpetuated against non-Western and non-white peoples globally. Like in Lisa M. Cacho's *Social Death*, Reddy makes clear that calls for inclusion and value in the state's eyes contributes to the devaluation of an abject Other. For example, Reddy calls upon the passage of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which was an amendment added to the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act (1—2). Hailed as a victory for LGBTQ+ people in the United States, this Act was only made possible through its inclusion in the largest National Defense Authorization Act budget in United States history; the 'victory' of wider-ranging anti-hate crime legislation is bound up in the military violence that the United States perpetuates abroad. This provides a salient, concrete example of how social death and social value operate within the U.S. sociopolitical climate: inclusion in legislation that 'protects' queer and trans people relies upon the state's violence against its enemies to be considered legitimate.

The 'legitimate violence' deployed by the state is constitutive of citizenship within this state's parameters; the citizenship offered by the state, then, is crafted and

made possible via this state-sanctioned violence against its enemies. To be moved from the category of ‘enemy,’ or the state’s abject Other, to the category of ‘citizen’ necessarily requires the movement of the enemy categorization onto other bodies. The state’s delineation of ‘irrational,’ ‘primitive,’ or ‘uncivilized’ populations—its enemies which threaten the ‘civilized order’ of the state—is a rhetorical tool used to maintain this separation which allows for the salient identification of citizenship. These ideals—citizenship and freedom, *uncitizenship* and *unfreedom*—are rooted in ideologies of respectability and social value, and as such, are constructed through claims to one’s proximity to respectability. Because respectability structures the ideologies of citizenship and freedom, which operate through the violence and physical/social death imposed upon those against whom these are defined, respectability itself functions as a necropolitical tool of the state.

### *Queer(y)ing Abjection*

Julia Kristeva understands abjection as the affective reaction to an experience or object that elicits fear, disgust, horror, hatred, as it threatens the ever-fragile distinction between the Self and the Other. This disrupts the understanding of selfhood, of meaning, as it forces the recognition of the self in uncomfortable or upsetting ways. Kristeva uses the corpse as the prime example of abjection, as it forces a recognition of one’s own materiality as a body rather than an abstract subject. “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). The abject, in this sense, elicits the uncomfortable recognition of the Self in the Other, as in the living human coming to recognize herself in

the lifeless corpse, which forces a realization that death is not so far removed from her own selfhood. This is more than signification, but real recognition with the forces that one repudiates: “A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death ... as in true, theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to survive” (3). This material abjection, the recognition of one’s own certain death in the face another’s lifeless body, haunts the imaginary net of safety one creates to get through life. No longer evading death permanently, the subject must now recognize her own vulnerability to death and destruction.

I examine this conceptualization of abjection not as an absolute, objective definition—instead, I am using Kristeva’s theory of abjection as a starting point for tracing the ways in which it functions as a regulatory tool in a white supremacist social order, specifically in its oppositional constitution of respectability. Robert Phillips argues that abjection, when examined more broadly, “refers to the unintelligible or beyond classification. As such, the abjection of others serves to maintain or reinforce boundaries that are threatened” (19). I argue that abjection in this sense emerges also as an embodiment for those pushed away to maintain the boundaries. Abjection, then, serves as both a process of repudiation of the disrespected and a feeling of Otherness for those rendered outside the boundaries of respectability. On the one hand, the Abject Other comes to be known as such through this process, an inscription on the psyche and body of the human becoming abject in proximity to respectability and the one becoming respectable. On the other hand, the respectable subject emerges as such through this

process as well; by pushing away that which causes feelings of disgust or disruption, that which challenges the boundaries of respectability and humanity, the respectable subject solidifies their own identity. The definitions and demarcations of value, and in turn respectability, are bound up in this process of creating the abject Other and subsequently casting it out.

In *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*, Lisa Cacho argues that the inscription of social value onto certain bodies requires the devaluation of *other* bodies as illegible, illegal, and/or criminal. The citizen (or the respectable subject) can only be known as such in opposition to the non-citizen, a subject status ascribed to racialized, criminalized bodies. Figures such as the “illegal alien,” the “suspected terrorist,” and the “gang member” remain prescient sites of inherent criminality, hollow vessels of *un*-value that become occupied as needed with the racialized bodies of Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and Middle Eastern/Muslim (identifiers regularly conflated as synonymous) peoples. These figures, while operating distinctively in relation to the specific bodies to which they are ascribed, assemble into the singular specter of the Other, the enemy which must be killed, socially or literally. These valuations of un/citizenship or respectability are inherently bound up in discourses of humanity; the shared humanity of the subjects on either side of this dichotomy threatens the self-recognition of the respectable subject, and thus must be reconciled through the imposition of social death.

In this regard, claims to respectable citizenship endorses this killing. As Cacho makes clear in her text, racialized persons soliciting the marker of value from the state

must offer rebuttals against the figures of *un*-value, facilitating the movement of abjection onto the bodies of other racialized peoples in order to claim this worth. Cacho writes that “the state recruits people of color to demand their due recognition as deserving U.S. citizens or law-abiding immigrants, but the manner of their recruitment requires that they do so by disavowing another racialized group’s social value” (15). In order to revive one racialized group of the socially dead, then, another must be socially killed. While Cacho’s analysis of social death and value focuses on the lives and bodies of racialized peoples, I argue that this system of valuation is necessary to maintain claims for queer respectability as well. The specter of the Other, the criminalized body undeserving of respect and value, is precisely the shadow which allows for certain people to be figured as respectable, as citizens. Again, Cacho makes this clear: “...in the United States, human value is made legible in relation to the deviant, the non-American, the nonnormative, the pathologized, and the recalcitrant—the legally repudiated ‘others’ of human value in the United States” (18). The homosexual was once a visible figure that fell within the lines of this ‘other,’ and in pursuit of changing this, queer political action relied upon images of respectability—claims to white, wealthy, cis/heteronormativity. Understanding the production of queer respectability through the lens of Cacho’s work makes clear that this respectability is inherently dependent upon the production of an abject Other; disgust, and the casting out of that which elicits feelings of disgust or horror, then, cultivate an image of that which is unworthy of respect and value. Grindr returns here as a specific site of the (re)production of both of these subjects: within its digital walls resides a kind

of worldmaking sensibility saturated with the effects of respectability and abjection, as I will examine more thoroughly in the following chapter.

### **Overview of Chapters**

This project consists of three chapters. This first chapter has situated my project in the theoretical framework in which I am working. Examining biopolitics, necropolitics, respectability, and abjection, I have set the groundwork for the theoretical work I do in the remainder of my project. The second chapter will situate Grindr as a site of queer world-making and community, as a counterpublic in the vein of Nancy Fraser. Here I trace the history of Grindr as a mobile application and a community space, the paradoxical public/private world of queer sociality. As noted above, other scholars have engaged with Grindr in a multitude of approaches that include how it is used, interesting aspects of its functions, and the kinds of experiences that people have through the app. I work alongside these scholars to establish Grindr's place in the 'queer world,' figuring it as a central site of queer community building as I examine how people use the application and how it informs the identities of its users. I also situate the scholarship about Grindr in order to highlight the ways in which my work differs here. I explore Grindr as a 'private-public,' as it constitutes a private space of queer sociality, but the grid of profiles are public to all who download the application. How this site as a 'private-public' world is navigated and utilized for communities and individuals is crucial to understanding its ability to reproduce the respectable queer subject. This critical analysis of Grindr's place within the queer community will highlight the importance of

such a site for certain queer subjects in locating others ‘like’ them when they may not be able to do so in the physical world.

I also consider the accessibility of Grindr as an online community space allows it to trace and redefine the boundaries of what counts as a queer community and a queer space. Accessing Grindr in a public space transforms the texture of this space for its users, creating a new world in which fellow queers are more accessible than they ever have been in physical space. This space, paradoxically both public and private, echoes the ongoing paradox of queer spaces as private publics, or public privates, from the bathhouse to the outdoor cruising ground to the gay bar, spaces that are hidden away from the ‘public’ eye, but for those involved, all movements and flows are public events. What does it mean to create and find identity within such spaces? How does the abjection, exclusion, muting, of some certain subjects in the public-private continue the process of rendering these racialized, feminized, fat, disabled, etc. bodies as undesirable on the public-private stage inform not only these subjects’ identities, but the community/group identity as a whole? What might it uncover if we consider the profiles of Grindr, explicitly noting which bodies are not welcome, as a form of public-private discourse capable of constructing the boundaries of the queer ‘community’?

In the third chapter, I phenomenologically examine the ‘Block’ feature, in which the click of a button can make users mutually disappear from one another. As a virtual exchange of energy, the Block’s pseudo-discursive potentiality becomes a phenomenon all of its own. Blocking sends a clear message to the person on the receiving end: you are unwanted. This feature, which silences and renders invisible those subjects who offend or

elicit disgust for the agent of the Block, represents a digital abjection, as the site at which one disappears, perhaps becoming (within the domain of Grindr) socially dead upon the accumulation of Blockings. What would it mean to think about this moment, the mute, as a form of disablement within the digital sociocultural parameters of Grindr? In so doing, the Block may work to render its subject as outside of the model of respectability/acceptability on Grindr, but what if it also inscribes this delineation of abjection onto the mind of the blocked-subject? What if repeatedly finding oneself blocked on Grindr forms a model of self-understanding as outside of the realm of the socially alive, leads one to a belief that they are socially dead? In this chapter, I meditate on the phenomenon of blocking in my own experience, as well as focusing on accounts of the affective reverberations of being blocked. A phenomenology of the Block, then, will honor these moments, considering how the Block's affective reverberations contribute to and create queer respectability by and through the abjection of Others.

Examining Grindr as a site of critical inquiry will make way for a deeper understanding of the respectable queer subject which is weaponized in mainstream assimilationist movements for equality. Grindr maintains itself as a site of the personal becoming or influencing the political, a space of queer world-making and identity formation that has unchecked implications for community and political action in the 'real world.' This unlikely site of examination creates a new kind of queer subject-making, a digital replication of processes of respectability and abjection that redefines the boundaries of queer community and subjectivity.

Finally, in the concluding fourth chapter, I return to the question of abjection to consider it beyond the end. This realm of social death may offer more power than may seem likely. Engaging the works of bell hooks, Darieck Scott, and Shaka McGlotten, I trace abjection's potential to create resistance, or some kind of power, as a subjectivity. What kind of vantage point might abjection offer for those relegated to it? As I honor the complexity of social engagement and social death, this concluding chapter returns to ask what may be left out in analyses of abjection as hopelessness. Asking these questions, along with the questions I ask throughout this project, can lead to new ways of thinking about queer inclusion and political engagement. Considering the complexities of queer respectability and abjection, affect and engagement, public and private, may guide us to imagine otherwise, to create new possibilities, and ultimately, a more liberated future.

## CHAPTER II

### QUEER WORLD-MAKING AND PRIVATE-PUBLICS

*It's my first week at college, and I'm excited to finally try out this app that everyone online talks about. After downloading it and creating an account, I spend hours scrolling through the grid of local gay and bisexual men around me. I strike up some conversations with people that look interesting. Others reach out to me, often for sex, but also sometimes just to talk. The simple message "I've seen you around campus and I'd like to hang out" led to a few real friendships. Walking around campus feels different, knowing I can log onto an app and see who's around me that I don't notice in real life. I'm making connections across campus and in town. Is this what it feels like to belong in a space?*

In the spring of 2009, the mobile application Grindr made its first appearance on the Apple iTunes App Store (Kincaid). Designed as a social networking space for gay and bisexual men, Grindr quickly rose to prominence as the premier application for gay social networking. As of 2019, the application boasts over 3 million users across the globe (Fitzsimons). Grindr was hailed as an innovative social networking application because of its use of global positioning system (GPS) to organize users on the grid based on their physical proximity to one another. Its prominence within gay and bisexual men's communities, coupled with its ease of use and accessibility to anyone with a smartphone, has situated Grindr as a critical site of queer community formation. Its potential to create communities through this digital access to geographically nearby gay men is coupled with the prevalence of overt sexuality and 'digital cruising.' Such communities built within Grindr are private in that they are only accessible to users who have created

accounts on the application, thus creating an exclusive space for queers to meet. The digital nature of Grindr, that it can only be located on a smartphone application and otherwise remains invisible, renders it a sort of private space in this regard as well. At the same time, these profiles are somewhat public because anyone can create a profile, screenshot interactions and other profiles, and share them with the ‘outside world.’ The complexity of Grindr’s private-public nature as it reconfigures physical space through the apparatus of a smartphone application allows its users to imagine a different modality of co-inhabiting physical space and engaging with one another in this space.

As a site of queer world-making, Grindr’s digital apparatus provides an opportunity to work around the governance of public space in the social and legal realms. Such governance dictates whose bodies can inhabit public space, what they can do within this space, and whose bodies are always already deemed dangerous in the space. I draw here on Martin F. Manalansan, IV’s “triangulated exploration of space, race, and queerness” (144) as he examines the ways in which the turn to create a better ‘quality of life’ in New York City included regulating public space and policing queers of color within this space. The governance of these spaces ascribes a certain criminality or illegality to queer bodies of color, as Manalansan argues: “...the various styles of occupying everyday public space have been radically altered so that an innocent staking out of public space for whatever reason can easily be couched as ‘loitering,’ ‘vagrancy,’ or a suspicious congregation of people” (146). As such regulation proliferates, Grindr offers an alternative way to seek out other queers in public spaces with less risk of state discipline. Thus, engagement with public space in a privatized digital realm reconfigures

understandings of public and private in relation to queer communities and their occupation of space. As I explore in this chapter, the potential for reconfiguring the public and the private through Grindr's apparatus becomes diminished or wasted as it ultimately enables more policing, regulation, and exclusion of non-normative queer subjects.

This chapter examines Grindr as a critical site of queer community and identity production, asking how its parameters exceed and redefine the boundaries of what counts as 'public' and 'private,' as well as what can count as a queer community or queer space. Paradoxically, Grindr also reinforces these boundaries in perhaps unexpected ways, as it becomes a site of research from outside sources and its users police the presence of non-normative bodies in its 'public' domain. As a site of analysis, Grindr's potential for reconfiguring the public and the private can make way for deeper insight to larger questions about the public and the private as social constructions, how these constructions impact queer political organizing, and the work that queer politics needs to engage. The way opening the application transforms the physical landscape upon which users stand, through its digital reorganizing of space, leads to crucial questions about queer worldmaking and the limits of such public-private epistemologies. Both the 'public' and the 'private' invoke the ideology of respectability in their iteration and regulation, which I argue is a necessary analysis for thinking about Grindr as a social technology capable of enabling the production of queer identity, subjectivity, and community. Understanding queer respectability and abjection through such a lens makes way for analyses of the distinction between public and private, including questions about

who is allowed to have or access privacy and whose presence in public is policed or rendered dangerous. This analysis is crucial for examining queer political activism, as within these politics, the public and the private continue to exist as racialized domains invested in the necropolitical function of respectability.

The queer political focus on single-issue identity politics, as Cathy Cohen critiques, undermines its allegedly radical goals of equity and inclusion. Cohen notes that “a lesbian and gay political agenda based on a civil rights strategy, where assimilation into, and replication of, dominant institutions are the goals” ultimately contains its own limitations that prevent such an agenda for radically altering the order of things (437). As Grindr creates a counterpublic for queers to organize themselves socially, it replicates norms of queer sociality rooted in ideas about public and private, respectable and abject, engagement. Cohen crucially contends that “queer activists who evoke a single-oppression framework misrepresent the distribution of power within and outside of [GLBT] communities, and therefore limit the comprehensive and transformational character of queer politics” (441). By focusing solely on queer identity as an organizing factor, subscribers to this formation of queer politics fail to acknowledge their own engagement with power in relation to queer and trans people of color. Public and private space are granted and regulated based on racialized identity, a fact which cannot be ignored when engaging the ways in which these distinctions impact queer populations and queer world-making.

David Eng’s reading of the Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* underscores arguments about queer respectability and the right to privacy. Eng argues

that as Justice Anthony M. Kennedy justified the decision not to criminalize sodomy between two men with language describing their many years of intimacy and their committed relationship, he inscribed a normative vision of queer liberalism onto the case. Eng writes, “The implicit bargain the Court proposes is clear: ‘The Court, and the Constitution, will respect our sex lives, but on condition that our sex lives be respectable’” (43). This demand for respectability as the precursor for respect entails a performance of heteronormative coupledness, which requires the separation of public and private life. In other words, for queer sexuality to be respected under the law, according to the ruling of *Lawrence v. Texas*, this sexuality must be relegated to the private, intimate sphere. Any other form of queer sexuality does not fall under this ruling. As Eng writes, “*Lawrence* reinscribes the traditional divide between the public and private, upholding conventional liberal distinctions between the state and the family, civil society and the home ... It emerges precisely as a function of the sublation of race, as the racialization of intimacy” (43). Normative intimacy, in this regard, is not afforded to those who deviate from the white supremacist norm of respectability.

Privacy is inherently about the claim to property, as Eng elaborates in *The Feeling of Kinship*: “Whiteness was, and continues to be, a valuable and exclusive property essential to the self-possession of the liberal individual, to the value of his or her reputation, and to the normative definitions of the enfranchised U.S. citizen-subject” (46). The ownership of whiteness as a property value affording self-possession and enfranchisement necessarily predates full access to having privacy. Queer political organizers failing to acknowledge the role whiteness plays in claims to privacy, intimacy,

and equality in the U.S. fall short of fully including the spectrum of people within the LGBTQ+ community. Doing so not only defines such a movement as being only for certain people with certain bodies and subjectivities, but also plays into the necropolitical function of queer respectability in that it erases non-white persons who are queer and queered from any liberation-focused work. Uncritical queer inclusion in the state buys into white supremacist notions of social value and inherently endorse state violence against ‘other’ bodies, as I argue in the first chapter in relation to Lisa M. Cacho. Examining the ways in which Grindr as a queer counterpublic troubles and redefines, while also reinforcing and regulating, the public and the private can provide a deeper look at how queer respectability continues to be (re)produced affectively and socially. This chapter seeks to engage these questions in the service of larger considerations about the work of queer political organizing.

This chapter begins with a brief introduction to Grindr, explaining its interface and how it functions as a site of queer sociality. I move from this introduction to explore existing scholarship on Grindr, specifically as it appears in medical, communication, and sociology fields, to establish my relationship to this work. I argue that this project diverges from existing scholarship because I draw in scholars such as Cohen and Eng, whose crucial work on the racialization of the public and private in queer politics influences my arguments about Grindr’s connection to these politics. My approach to Grindr as a vehicle for reproducing queer respectability, and thus necropolitics, stands in stark contrast to other scholarship which misses these important connections. To draw these links, I examine Grindr’s potential as a site of queer community building and the

reorientation of public and private domains. In so doing, I use Nancy Fraser's theory of counterpublics as oppositional domains in relation to larger publics to understand Grindr's potential of creating a counterpublic. I also examine intimacy as understood through the mediation of public encounters and heteronormativity by way of Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner. Tracing how these concepts come up in existing scholarship and in users' self-regulation of their public-private sphere, I argue that Grindr's potential for fostering radical counterpublics is instead used to trace the boundaries of normativity and acceptability onto its digital apparatus, thus reinscribing and reproducing queer respectability and abjection.

### **Logging On: An Introduction to Grindr**

The design of Grindr is fairly straightforward. One opens the application to see a grid of profile images with names. From the left side of the screen, users can create their own profile. Prompted to upload one or more profile images, users choose how to present themselves to others on the grid. Spaces for filling out the profile include display name and biography, free-form spaces where users can write whatever they wish. The remaining spaces for biographical information contain drop-down menus, from which users can choose which pieces of information they would like to share about themselves. These options include age, weight, height, ethnicity, position, "tribe," gender identity and pronouns, STI/STD status and last tested date. The only mandatory option to fill out is age, but users have the option of whether or not to show this to others. All other categories are optional, including name, bio, and profile image. Because Grindr allows

the choice of what to display to others, users have the option to keep their profile ‘blank,’ showing only a grey box and online status. In the settings, users have the option whether or not to show their distance from others—should a user choose to allow this information to show, their profile would indicate “2 miles away” or “27 feet away” depending on where the GPS locates them in relation to the user viewing the profile.

After filling out any desired profile information, users return to the home screen to see who is around them. The bottom row of the screen shows icons that lead to the user’s profile information and settings, the home grid, an “Explore” page, private chats, and a “Favorites” page. The home grid of images and blank icons is arranged by physical proximity, so the first icon leads to the profile of the closest other user. The standard membership to Grindr allows users to see up to one hundred profiles as they scroll; the “Unlimited” option allows users access an unlimited number of profiles, as well as other exclusive features, for a small monthly fee. Clicking on a photo icon opens the chosen profile in full. At the top right of the profile, two icons rest, indicating the option to Block the user (which I engage in more detail in the next chapter) and the option to add them to one’s “Favorites.” The chosen user’s full profile photo and display name, as well as any of the above information as chosen by the creator of the profile, are available here. The short biography (the “bio”) may share a range of information such as a user’s sexual preferences, social and cultural interests, hobbies, employment, and quotes or catchphrases. The bio provides the most space for personalization on the profile where users can show more about who they are than other spaces might share.

Before or after reviewing the profile, users may click the word bubble icon, the symbol that indicates the option to send this person a message. Doing so opens a private chat window between the two users. These messages remain private, though users have the ability to take screen shots of them to disseminate in other spaces. The “Explore” page allows users to choose a location other than their current one and see profiles in that area. One must purchase a membership in order to engage with these profiles other than simply acting as a voyeur. Finally, the “Favorites” page shows all the profiles the user has saved, for easy access to the particular chosen profiles. This layout, sleek in design with dark backgrounds and white text with orange accents, evokes the feeling of cruising in the dark, seeking connection with other queers in a space that feels as though it hides in the shadows. While one may be out in public during the day, logging onto Grindr opens a door to a sort of counter-community that can only be accessed by those who know about the application. Its features allow a new kind of organization to the experience of meeting people, collecting profiles and interactions from those physically nearby in neat categories.

### **Entering the Chat: Existing Scholarship on Grindr**

Much of the earliest scholarship on Grindr seems to be focused on medical research; for researchers interested in studying health factors in gay male communities, Grindr seems to be a rich site for their work. Burrell et al., for example, argue that Grindr is a crucial tool for recruiting men who have sex with men (MSM) for HIV prevention research, noting its appeal to younger, white-identified gay men (1816). Winetrobe et al.

also study Grindr as a site of research on the health lives of MSM, examining how specific profile features might correlate with higher rates of unsafe sex practices. They argue that sexualized profile photos (i.e., naked chest/abs) may be associated with sexual risk-taking behaviors. HIV prevention interventions delivered or linked through such apps should target individuals who are longer/frequent users and who present sexualized profiles” (1303). Rendina et al. also argue that Grindr is a useful site to recruit research subjects to study “predictors of lifetime and past-year testing” (41). Goedel et al. recruited subjects to research “associations between weight perception, body dissatisfaction, and self-objectification with sexual behaviors among of sample of MSM (N = 92) recruited from Grindr, an app popular among MSM, to complete an online survey” (142).

While not the central focus of this project, this seeming trend of medical researchers finding subjects via Grindr is troubling and is exemplary of my arguments about queer publics and privates. As I argue throughout this chapter, Grindr offers an avenue to circumvent the regulation of public and private space and the bodies that have access to such spaces. That medical research has found its way into Grindr in the pursuit of MSM who can be studied implicitly engages and endorses discourse surrounding these men as perverse, *queered*, objects for the study of aberrant sexuality. Further, the entrance of researchers to this queer space shows a disregard for what might be considered a queer private; such disregard extends arguments that queers and MSM specifically are not inherently capable of *having* a private space. Rather, this discourse supposes that these men require surveillance to ensure that they are engaging in ‘safe’

sexual practices and not risking the spread of disease. That the majority of the medical researchers recruiting subjects on Grindr do so to study HIV/AIDS in MSM communities starkly reminds one that MSM and queer populations are always already associated with the virus. That a queer counterpublic exists which enables queers and MSM to connect for sexual encounters supposedly poses a threat to the medical safety of a larger public, and their sexual practices must be studied and contained to ensure that HIV will not spread outside the parameters of this virtual community. This existing research shows that the parameters and regulation of queer public and private space continues to proliferate, and the above mentioned scholarship itself is part and parcel of such regulation.

Grindr's use for interpersonal communication among its users has similarly inspired a breadth of research in sociological analyses. Licoppe et al. write about Grindr as a "resource to produce a distinctive type of social encounter, quick sexual encounters between strangers," (2555). They examine the search for sexual encounters through the chat, examining how users navigate this digital obstacle to achieve such encounters. While I agree that casual sexual encounters are the primary goal of many users' time on Grindr, I question some of the claims that the authors make about the emotional effects of casual sexual engagement. Specifically, they argue that these casual encounters "are designed to preclude repeat encounters and relational development, so that the protagonists are supposedly left unaffected, emotionally, relationally, and socially, by such encounters" (2555). As a core element of this project, I argue in response that casual encounters, sexual or not, always leave an effect on the persons they involve. The sharing

of physical space, intimacy, touch, and feeling garners affects that stick with a person long after the encounter is over. Further, the inability to have or denial of certain encounters also affects the potential participants, especially in moments where the denial is because of the way one's body appears. That the sight of a profile that explicitly names your body as undesirable or being blocked by a potential sexual partner because they cannot see past your non-normative body leaves an embodied, affective response is centrally engaged in this chapter and the following. Such encounters and non-encounters matter in the way that they circulate affects which have very real effects on the people who experience them. These affects are crucial to understanding queer respectability and abjection.

Other scholarship that engages Grindr as a site of study comes closer to the work I am doing in this project, as it considers the production and performance of identity on Grindr. For example, Rusi Jaspal examines how gay men construct and manage their identities on Grindr, and how the online identity interacts with users' offline identities. Jaspal argues that using Grindr simultaneously enables self-definition and makes it more difficult for users as they interact with one another and choose which aspects of themselves to share (200). Conner also examines self-presentation on Grindr and the ways in which this presentation is bound up in larger social phenomena. The emphasis on the physical aspects of individuals who log on to Grindr informs the presentation of self on users' profiles and interactions with one another (402). Further, Conner argues that "Grindr actually reproduces existing patterns of inequality. Broadly speaking ... I found highly exaggerated performances of self that reflect hypermasculine standards of

manliness” (413). While I agree with the arguments Jaspal and Conner make in their respective works, their approaches to the study of Grindr remain highly individualized. My work in this project seeks to engage how the constellation of individual experiences on Grindr inform the larger issues of queer respectability and abjection. Rather than remaining at the level of the individual, this thesis argues that individual actions are an integral part of the necropolitical function of queer respectability. My approach to the larger issues at stake accounts for individuality in the replication of queer respectability while arguing that this replication is precisely what enables the power of queer respectability and the violence that makes it possible.

The public and private aspects of Grindr have also appeared in existing scholarship, though not as a central facet of the work. Blackwell et al.’s study of co-situation on Grindr lead to what they argue is evidence that the application affects how people show themselves and their behaviors in certain contexts. Such contexts include what one writes on the profile that others can see and what one writes in a private chat with another user. The authors find that some users wish to be perceived favorably by other users on the application, without garnering negative reactions from others outside of Grindr. The profile may seem private, as only those who have accounts on the application can see it; however, “it would be quite easy to download the app and immediately see if one’s next-door neighbor is also signed in with a photo, in ways that would not be true with chat rooms or conventional dating sites where a specific person might be harder to locate” (1132). The profile, then, only affords some level of privacy in this regard. ‘Outsiders’ may still access Grindr and identify people they know as users of

the application. Blackwell et al. argue that knowledge of this may impact what users write on their profiles in order to protect themselves from potentially judging eyes. This aspect of Grindr's relationship to the public and the private are not central in Blackwell et al.'s study. Such a relationship offers distinct possibilities and problems, as I examine in this chapter.

What existing scholarship on Grindr misses is that the experience of using the application and discovering a digital world within the physical world makes way for the possibility of queer community building and self-identification. Honoring experience and affect as a source of critical knowledge production, I insert my voice and my own experience on Grindr in this work to shed light on the possibilities that emerge within the application. I do so intentionally to acknowledge my own stakes in this argument, though I want to emphasize that my voice is not included here as the authority on Grindr or users' experience on the application. My experience is a vital site of knowledge, but it comes from my own relationship with power and privilege based on my social identities. As such, this is not a definitive account of every Grindr user's experience, but rather a supplemental source of knowledge that elaborates why this work is important to me and why it may be important to others who have used Grindr. I tell my story to make way for others' stories, which I seek to incorporate as much as possible in the remainder of the work. Doing so critically and self-reflexively, this one former user's experience of Grindr may enhance the arguments I make here about Grindr.

## **Joining the Grid: The Digital Community of Grindr?**

In the opening vignette to this chapter, I ask myself, “*Is this what it feels like to belong in a space?*” In my rural hometown in southeastern North Carolina, I only knew a few other queer people, most of whom lived at least an hour away. The internet fostered these connections, though the physical distance between us proved difficult in terms of being in the same space together. I was the only out queer person in my high school, and the relentless bullying I faced as a result led me to see my queerness as a weakness, something that separated me from the space of the halls. I turned eighteen before moving to college, and downloaded Grindr as soon as I could. The application amazed me; I could find other queers near me in a town that seemed saturated with heteronormativity? It felt like a dream come true until I logged on and saw that the closest person to me was 40 miles away.

Things changed when I left for college and moved into a residence hall. As a young queer person living on a college campus for the first time, it seemed that Grindr opened a whole new world to me. Sitting on my dormitory bed taking in this new experience on the first day, I opened Grindr to see a grid full of already familiar faces. The nearest person to me, according to the application’s GPS, was 15 feet away. As the school year went underway, I met countless people on Grindr. I had a few casual encounters, but mostly engaged in friendly conversations with anyone who would talk to me. People from my classes or that I saw in the cafeteria would send me messages saying they wanted to get to know me better. Some sent me messages inviting me to join the university’s queer student organization or to attend an event happening on campus. For

the first time, I felt embraced by my environment, enhanced and enabled through Grindr in a way that I never thought possible. It seemed as though some kind of community existed on Grindr in my local community. Being a young, able-bodied, white, masculine-presenting person also enabled a certain idealistic view of this community space, which would soon change.

While I did not realize it at the time, Grindr afforded me a new opportunity to engage with the physical landscape of the college campus in those early years. The application transformed the space in front of me, through my smartphone, reorganizing the physical world into a digital, queer world where I could find community. My engagement with the world around me had shifted through the use of Grindr, as I explored new possibilities for connection and community within its grid. Such engagement with space is consistent with the trajectory of queer world-making in what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner call “mobile sites of drag, youth culture, music, dance, parades, flaunting, and cruising” (561). These ever-moving sites of cultural knowledge production are difficult to define as such, precisely because of the mobility which makes them vital for such production. Grindr joins this legacy of queer world-making as it creates a counterpublic of queers seeking sexual or non-sexual encounters in its grid.

What does it mean to seek and form community through the apparatus of Grindr? Fox and Ralston argue that for LGBTQ individuals exploring their identities, there remains a lack of resources for helping them explore and articulate these identities in their personal communities and in popular media. As such, these individuals often must

turn to the Internet to learn about themselves and find communities where they feel safe to self-disclose (635—636). The bio on Grindr allows such a space to self-disclose, while interactions with the population of largely queer-identified users on the app makes way for self-discovery and self-articulation. Thus emerges Grindr’s radical potential as queer counterpublic and epistemological tool: self-articulation and engagement with a loosely defined community influences the formation of identity, individually and collectively. As users collectively articulate themselves on Grindr and exchange information with one another, community emerges through the common use of the application and the cultural norms that persist.

Though radical community formation is a possibility of using Grindr, the group norms that emerge within the application can prevent such a formation. Crucially, I am referencing the proliferation of exclusive and discriminatory statements written in the users’ bios. The blog *Douchebags of Grindr* exists for the sole purpose of documenting Grindr profiles that contain discriminatory language, hate speech, and rude profile texts. Another example of the parameters of the public and the private, *Douchebags of Grindr* serves as an archive of the kind of messages users receive from profiles before even opening a private chat with others. Examples found on the blog include statements such as: “WHITE only. NO old guys,” “I’m saying this as nice as possible: I’m not into black guys,” and “Over 35, Asian or fem = block.” In my days of using Grindr, I recall seeing such statements on a regular basis as I scrolled through the profiles of nearby users, so much so that Grindr launched an initiative “Kindr” in 2018 to combat discrimination, hate speech, and bullying on the app (Wheeler). Such an initiative is a commendable

move for Grindr to make, though I am more interested in examining how these profile statements impact the world-making that happens on the application.

The proliferation of statements like the above quoted on Grindr, and the continued performance of respectability that comes with these statements, set and enforce group norms that are controlled by dominant members of this digital space. Markers of masculinity, whiteness, and fitness particularly afford greater power to users holding these markers. As these users author their bios to define who and what they are not interested in, they set the standards for participation on Grindr. These standards empower users to discriminate and exclude others, while arguing that they simply have ‘preferences’ that do not include these bodies. Within this private queer space, the public bios create an atmosphere of anxiety as risks emerge from communication with others.

### **Tenuous Boundaries Between Public and Private**

Browsing the grid of profiles on Grindr while in a public space creates an interesting internal tension between public and private space. I recall the feeling of privacy I had while looking at the application on my smartphone, even while surrounded by other people. I also know the anxiety of producing a profile that displayed myself as an interesting, desirable person within the inner public framework of Grindr. The users who surrounded me in any given space had access to what I wrote and what image I chose to use, creating a sense of public-facing stress that my profile had to bear. Additionally, public space felt more intimate in certain moments when I connected with other people who occupied this space through Grindr. Though in public space,

surrounded by people, the conversation shared through the application along with exchanged glances in person lent to a feeling of privacy as we were the only ones who knew. This tension between public and private space frames the remainder of this chapter, in which I argue that demarcation between public and private space becomes tenuous as Grindr restructures these meanings for its users. Boundaries between the two seemingly oppositional realms are porous in the queer world of Grindr, though the regulation of public and private may still proliferate here within this space.

Logging onto Grindr reorients the physical landscape that surrounds the user. Chase Aunspach writes that “In some ways, all material spaces can instantly become a little gayer based on who is logged in and visible on Grindr. Traditionally heteronormative spaces are transformed and shifted toward the queer” (41). This digital-material shift redefines the space in which one stands, creating a queer alternative which overlays the landscape surrounding it. Steve Harrison and Paul Dourish’s examination of the distinction between ‘space’ and ‘place’ feel particularly useful here: “a place is a space which *invested with understandings* of behavioural appropriateness, cultural expectations, and so forth” (69, emphasis in original). If places are distinct because they socially construct meanings over and on spaces, Grindr’s digital landscape constructs an ever-shifting place that reorients the material world as users move through it. As a place, the home grid of Grindr is defined not by the physical space, as it transcends such boundaries, but it is defined by the bodies and ideas moving through and around it. Though the grid is limited to 100 users at a time in the free version of Grindr, these users can constantly change as their physical location, and thus proximity, shift.

The digitally mediated place that Grindr creates affords a sort of location for a counterpublic to emerge. Nancy Fraser uses the term “*subaltern counterpublics*” to describe the alternative arenas for public participation created by marginalized groups such as women, workers, people of color, and queer people (67). She argues that these counterpublics are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (67). That counterpublics are made up of individuals who are traditionally left out of the public sphere enables them to push the boundaries of discursive space and reconsider the limitations of participation in society. The potential of a queer counterpublic is troubled when considering the impact of race, class, and gender in how people relate to power, as Cohen argues (457). Grindr as a counterpublic offers its users the ability to create a public knowledge that is only accessible within its own counterpublic, challenging the idea that it is only public or private, but rather a complex relationship between the two. At the same time, a single-identity approach to building this queer world means that boundaries between private and public become reinforced even as they are being challenged.

It is notable that public and private realms are not necessarily mutually exclusive to each other; instead, notions of the two are co-constitutive. Like respectability and abjection, these concepts inform one another, and each depends on the other to exist. Berlant and Warner crucially examine the ways in which the public mediates the very notion of intimacy:

First, its conventional spaces presuppose a structural differentiation of "personal life" from work, politics, and the public sphere. Second, the normativity of heterosexual culture links intimacy only to the institutions of personal life, making them the privileged institutions of social reproduction, the accumulation and transfer of capital, and self-development. Third, by making sex seem irrelevant or merely personal, heteronormative conventions of intimacy block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures. Finally, those conventions conjure a mirage: a home base of prepolitical humanity from which citizens are thought to come into political discourse and to which they are expected to return in the (always imaginary) future after political conflict. (553)

Having the distinction between a public and a private realm constitutes the two as oppositional forces in a socially mediated binary. As Berlant and Warner argue, this supposed binary is one key way that heteronormativity is mandated and mediated institutionally and culturally. Queerness, and queer culture, stand in opposition to these normative standards of being because of the intimate sexual relations that they cultivate and the refusal to stay within the public-private binary. As Berlant and Warner write, "Queer culture has learned not only how to sexualize these and other relations, but also to use them as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation" (558). Creating queer counterpublics structured around these dangerous intimacies creates queer worlds—Grindr, then, offers a digital mediation of such world-making.

Though it offers a potential site of radical queer world-making and the dissolution of public and private spheres, Grindr's impact and use are more complex. Reconfiguring public space through privatized digital media does indeed blur these boundaries, but the regulation of the public and the private for non-normative bodies continues within this space. For example, the atmosphere of anxiety I describe above as resulting from

exclusionary statements written in bios serves as a regulatory tool to maintain a normative space on certain users' grids. The desire to make one's grid personalized, and thus catered to their specific interests and preferences, leads this private-public to a higher level of privacy in its exclusion of non-normative bodies. As such, the privatization of the home screen represents another instance of the (re)production of queer respectability. Creating comfort by tailoring one's grid to their specific desires protects the boundaries of respectable queerness, maintaining a status quo that renders non-respectable queers invisible. As Joshi argues, "respectability entails differentiating oneself from those who fall outside the norm" (418). Exclusionary statements (e.g., "Not into Asian/fat/feminine") in the bios delineate such differentiation by performing the difference between that which is normative (respectable) and that which is not. Bodies become policed, albeit digitally, through the use of such performative statements, making way for feelings of abjection in the naming of certain bodies as undesirable and invisible.

Rendering and producing abject, undesirable bodies in public not only polices these bodies, but also reproduces the racialized boundaries between public and private. Returning to Manalansan, policies designed to keep Black and brown bodies out of public spaces in New York City in pursuit of a higher 'quality of life' resulted in violent regulation of these bodies and the way space was occupied. Many of these spaces were and are queer spaces, but as these bodies were forced out over time, language surrounding the space included ideas about "cleaning up" (145). While I do not wish to draw exact parallels, the regulation of non-normative or non-respectable bodies on Grindr out of the home grid demarcates this counterpublic as one that is only accessible for

respectable subjects in the space. Again, the boundaries between public and private are enforced through racialized and other hegemonic ideologies and practices meant to discipline. This also produces the bodies marked as respectable and abject as such, more tangibly constituting these subjectivities that impact how these bodies are treated in the world outside of Grindr.

Additionally, as outside researchers turn to Grindr as a source for research subjects and the production of scholarship, its potential for radically shifting the discursive limits of queerness, and queer communities, diminishes. The medical research described above troubles the notion of Grindr as a private-public, a space for queers to congregate outside of the heteronormative systems that led to the creation of this queer world. As I argue in the literature review, this investigation into queer counterpublics marks them as deviant, always needing surveillance to ‘protect’ them. Studies about sexual practices and risk of spreading HIV operate to maintain a public health, implicitly marking queers and MSM as posing a threat to the larger population. This biopolitical regulation of queer space is not new to Grindr, but its proliferation in the digital age underscores the encroaching power of state and medicine to regulate queer populations.

What does this mean for Grindr as a site of queer world-making? I believe that Grindr and applications like it still reorients understandings of public and private space, though with a more complex relationship to these spaces than one might see at first glean. The transformation of physical space into ‘place,’ and the production of a queer world that overlays the landscape of users’ locale challenges the distinction between public and private in the ways I explore above. This digital realm offers the potential for a radical

queer world or community, yet users' regulation of each other through discriminatory performative statements meant to exclude prevents this radical world from coming to fruition. As sociocultural hegemonic relations influence users' behavior on Grindr toward one another, queer respectability and abjection are continually being (re)produced. The grid as a counterpublic, a private site of queer publics, thus becomes part and parcel of state-invested systems of social value and activates the necropolitical function of queer respectability.

## CHAPTER III

### A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE BLOCK

*I've resorted to using a blank profile. Wearing makeup every day does not seem to meet anyone's standards of what they'll accept on the home grid. My face picture without makeup makes me feel ugly, like an incomplete person with my irritated skin and chubby face. Defaulting to the gray icon at least allows me to get some responses, until they ask for pictures. Some guys surprise me, still entertaining the idea of meeting up with me. Some guys are in the same public space as me. A few have looked at my picture, then saw me in the room, and blocked my profile, a forceful rejection. It feels like I'm being ejected from the already-invisible gay community spread over the city.*

After opening a profile on Grindr, the screen is filled with the photo uploaded by the user who created the profile, or the neutral gray silhouette that indicates no photo was uploaded. Along with the display name, statistics, and self-authored bio examined in the previous chapter, two icons appear at the top right corner of the screen: a star and a circle with a diagonal slash going through it, the universal “no” symbol. The star represents “Favorite,” which allows users to collect the profiles of others of particular interest in a convenient separate screen. The “no” symbol represents the Block feature. After clicking this symbol on another person’s profile, the profile disappears from the user’s screen; any messages exchanged between the two users are deleted and both profiles become mutually invisible to one another.

This chapter focuses on the moment at which the Block is enacted, the digital exchange of energy that effectively eliminates any and all possibilities for connection between two users. While the Block can be useful tool in some situations, such as when

one user is harassing another or sending unkind messages, my interest here focuses on moments when the Block is used as an offensive tool, a mode of erasing others who defy the standards of normativity set by profiles and discourse laid out in Chapter 2. Here, I consider how the Block represents and is bound up in the affective experience of respectability and abjection within the queer community. Drawing on phenomenological inquiry to perform a phenomenology of the Block, I examine the ways in which this feature provides an avenue for the instantiation of queer respectability, normativity, and abjection. The experience of being blocked, along with knowing that it occurs because of one's particular subjectivity within marginalized identities, will also come into question in this chapter as I ponder how the Block helps to produce the respectable queer subject and the abject queer Other. In this context, I argue that the Block enables the instantiation of state-sanctioned and interpersonal physical and psychic violence against non-normative others which create imagined boundaries between abjection and respectability. As its own form of digital social death, the Block enables comfort and disgust to flourish as often unknowing agents that produce particular forms of subjectivity within the community space of Grindr.

It may seem unlikely to consider Grindr as a space that can enable state-sanctioned violence against non-normative, disrespectful, and abject bodies. How does a mobile application designed for gay men to meet one another for casual sex and conversation relate to the necropolitical violence enacted by the state to enforce its borders of citizenship and value? The Block's subjectivity-forming affects, which I examine in this chapter, inform broader understandings of one's place in the world

beyond Grindr. While a phenomenon specific to this digital community space, the Block makes it possible for the respectable queer to have a self-awareness of respectability. Further, the Block is a tool of the respectable queer subject for casting out difference, designating certain bodies as disposable and void of value. This understanding of certain (racialized, femme, fat, disabled) bodies as without value bleeds into the apathy such respectable subjects may have toward the state-sanctioned violence used to ‘protect’ its people. As I argue in my analysis of Mbembe’s “Necropolitics” in Chapter 1, the abject or socially dead subjects in the domain of the state are rendered disposable in opposition to the valued, the citizens who ‘need’ protection. Within this framework, the Block is an epistemological tool used to demarcate who is and is not valuable, worthy of respect and protection in queer communities. Such demarcation lends to the respectable queer’s acceptance and even endorsement of state violence against Othered bodies.

When referring to social death, I draw on the work of Lisa Cacho to describe both the state of social death and the process of becoming ‘socially dead.’ As noted in the introduction to this thesis, Cacho argues that social value can only be transferred to certain persons through the devaluation of others. As she argues, “Value is made intelligible relationally” (13). The devalued subject does not literally die or disappear, but instead remains visible as the illegitimate subject, included in the folds of society by way of being excluded. Transferring the status of social death to this subject makes its opposite, the valued subject, all the more real. Given the real sociopolitical implications of social death within U.S. national contexts and the way social death has been used by scholars in the past, Grindr may not appear a likely site for social death to happen.

However, within this queer world context, where communities and identities can be created and found, I argue that the Block enacts a different kind of social death. Because the Block, used in the ways outlined in this chapter, renders certain users invisible to some and highlights their undesirability and hence their inability to ‘fit in,’ social death proves to be a useful way to think about this subjectivity. Finding oneself included in the community space of Grindr by being excluded creates conditions for the feeling of being part of the digital community space of Grindr, because of the way in which they are inside-outside the space as in/visible specters of non-respectability. How this form of digital social death happens, and what it means to be socially dead within the pixels of one’s screen, is a central inquiry of this chapter.

This chapter examines the Block as enabling the production of respectable and abject queer subjectivities using critical race and critical phenomenological approaches. By drawing on authors in these fields, including Sara Ahmed, Frantz Fanon, George Yancy, Audre Lorde, and Gayle Salamon, I find crucial connections that elaborate the production of queer respectability and abjection. I begin by tracing the contours of how I understand respectability in the context of queer identity, community, and Grindr. Using scholarship within critical race theory as well as within queer theory, I find links between the two schools of thought as providing rich analysis of queer respectability. A hegemonic kind of subjectivity, such as respectability, cannot exist without its marginalized Other, in this case abjection, so I follow this with a similar analysis of abjection as a subjectivity and a process. The same schools of thought that inform my analysis of respectability undergird my work here, as I consider the ways in which queer

respectability and abjection are inherently linked and co-constitutive. Following this analysis, the chapter focuses specifically, and methodically, on the Block as a tool for (re)producing these subjectivities. I describe the Block itself, noting how it works, what it is like to be blocked and to block others, and how these processes are constitutive of certain understandings of bodies and subjects. In doing so, I explicate the ways in which respectability and abjection, as outlined in the beginning of the chapter, are bound up in the instantiation of the Block as a central feature of Grindr.

### **Performing Respectability**

Respectability is deeply mired in the affects of comfort and disgust, as they circulate around the respectable subject as part of the performance of respectability. At its core, respectability is about a proximity to normativity. This normativity can be located in what Audre Lorde calls a “mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows ‘that is not me.’” She elaborates: “In america, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure” (116). These specific vectors of identity are the ones which benefit most from hegemonic systems of oppression, such as white supremacy, heterosexism, classism, and fatphobia. Maintaining a close proximity to this mythical norm requires an ongoing performance on the part of the subject seeking respectability; doing this is less difficult for someone who holds many of the identities Lorde lists, but becomes increasingly difficult for persons with fewer of these identities. The mythical norm provides a central figure of social respectability, dignity, and value against which—and through—all others are defined.

I use the idea of performance in the vein of Judith Butler's conception of performativity, which she argues "...is not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms" (12). For Butler, performativity is not a chosen act but rather a series of norms produced through the repetition of such norms over time in culture. This repetition makes the norms appear 'normal' and gives them social power, but also makes it possible to resist such norms in that their repetition is what grants them power—without such repetition, the norms would lose this power over time. Performance, on the other hand, may be understood as the individual expression of larger social phenomena, such as binary sex. In this schema, the performance of a binary gender (e.g. dressing in men's clothes to present oneself as a man) is the individual instantiation of the performative function of binary gender at large. The performative is made up of the structures and ideas that shape how we understand ourselves and the world around us, creating the norms that dictate individual performances. These individual performances then constitute the performative norms repetitively, thereby granting them social power and dominance. The alliterative performance of the norms, or "the approximation and citation of the law" (14), gives these social norms their legitimacy. While Butler uses performativity to describe the process of gendering bodies, I find her conception of performativity of norm-reiteration useful in examining how respectability is produced for queers.

Within this framework of performativity, Butler argues that norms gain their power through the replication and citation practices—the performance of performativity, so to speak. She notes that "[t]he paradox of subjectivation ... is precisely that the subject

who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms” (15). If respectability is the governing norm for queer social and political engagement, those who resist this norm are still bound up in the law of the norm. Crucially, “Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power” (15). Using Butler to understand queer respectability, we can see that resistance to, and exclusion from, respectability are still bound up in the performative regulatory power of respectability as a governing norm. This normative modality of existence governs even as it meets pushback and even as it excludes certain bodies. Examining queer respectability and the (re)production of the respectable queer subject using this lens allows us to understand how the Block is both a ‘prop’ for the performance of respectability and a tool of the performative power of respectability that governs queer sociality on Grindr.

My understanding of respectability as a political tool within queer political organizing and subjectivity is deeply rooted in historical analyses of Black respectability. While I draw on analyses of Black respectability politics to understand how such a politic operates within queer communities, I want to clarify that I am not drawing a parallel between Black and queer respectability. Instead of equating these forms of politics with one another, I seek to use what I have learned from scholars within the field of African American studies about racial respectability politics and the questions they raise in order to better understand how such a politic emerges within queer spaces. Further, it is necessary for this work to examine studies of Black respectability precisely because

queer respectability is always already about race. Access to queer respectable subjectivity is disproportionately afforded to white and white-passing queer subjects. Within the U.S. nation-state's conception of citizenship, a white body is more legible as 'valued citizen' because of the body's whiteness; Black and brown queer subjects are less likely to have access to this form of queer subjectivity, as their bodies are the ones against which queer respectability becomes defined.

The term "politics of respectability" was first coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880—1920*. Higginbotham writes that this approach to self-representation was rooted in Black Baptist women's response to white supremacist ideas about Blackness: "They contested racist discourses and rejected white America's depiction of black women as immoral, childlike, and unworthy of respect or protection" (186). Higginbotham argues that in fighting against such stereotypes, the Black Baptist women she studies assimilated to "dominant society's norms of manners and morals" (187) to show that these stereotypes did not accurately describe them. Politicizing individual behavior, then, figured as a key way to undermine the white supremacist discourse that belittled and dehumanized Black people. Higginbotham emphasizes that a politics of respectability did not "reduce to a mindless mimicry of white behavior," but "assumed a fluid and shifting position along a continuum of African American resistance" (187). Manners and morals grounded the politics of respectability along with protests and the fight for justice; as such, respectability worked as a strategy of assimilation to gain access to the same rights afforded to white people in the United States through 'proving dignity.'

The politics of respectability provided a rich lens of analysis for understanding Black approaches to gaining citizenship and rights, including the ways in which it served as a gatekeeper for dignity. Paisley Jane Harris writes, “The prevailing interpretation suggests that the politics of respectability undermined the rigidly scientific nature of racial categories, but generally tended to reinforce status distinctions within the African American community” (213). While this approach helped break down the belief that racial subjectivity was rooted in a scientific hierarchy that placed whiteness at the top, it may have created more separation among Black people based on their proximity to respectability. Such a hierarchical separation of people within a marginalized group is what I see in queer claims to respectability—the investment in assimilating to norms as a way to undermine cultural beliefs of inferiority or deviance renders those who cannot or will not assimilate as ‘lesser.’ As such, the claims to social value that respectability is predicated upon require the devaluation of some others, including those within the queer community who are racialized, femme, and/or fat.

Respectability emerges, then, as a performative subjectivity invested in the replications of norms which make up hegemonic ideals of propriety, saturated with the affective circulations of comfort and disgust. Sara Ahmed writes about comfort as the embrace of bodies in space: “To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view” (148). Comfort, then, is a sort of blending-in, falling into spaces with ease and without clear demarcations of difference. On Grindr, comfort might look like a white person logging on to see a grid

full of white bodies on the home screen. Whiteness as the norm allows for the blending of bodies, the ignorance of difference as one simply ‘fits in.’ According to Ahmed, “Heteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape” (148). The social spaces that privilege heteronormative ways of being embrace the extension of bodies that fall within the guidelines offered by such norms. Grindr’s landscape of white supremacy, cis-normativity, and bodily normativity functions in the same way, embracing those who meet the norms and allowing them to blur into the space.

Users who find comfort in such a space may not even consider themselves as part of a particular ‘world’ in which they find comfort. Ahmed argues that “Heteronormativity also becomes a form of comforting: one feels better by the warmth of being faced by a world one has already taken in. One does not notice this *as a world* when one has been shaped by that world, and even acquired its shape” (148). Again, the boundaries that lay out this world’s parameters blur as bodies become comfortable existing within them. Its subjects are enveloped in a landscape of sameness and normativity, reflecting a particular worldview in which they can see themselves as the primary or sole actors within this space. Notably, Ahmed argues that ‘queer spaces’ or worlds do not always make room for everyone to feel comfortable. Noting that she herself has felt uncomfortable in queer spaces, Ahmed writes that “the discomfort is itself a sign that queer spaces may extend some bodies more than others (for example, some queer spaces might extend the mobility of white, middle-class bodies)” (151). The visual and rhetorical landscape of Grindr, as I examine in the previous chapter, presents itself as such a space, one that allows for the

extension of white, cisgender, masculine, and thin or athletic bodies more easily than bodies that fall outside of these norms. As a queer space, Grindr makes way for the comfort of some bodies while enforcing the discomfort of others through the very same landscape.

For these persons whose bodies do not extend into the space of Grindr, discomfort may exacerbate the feeling of abjection, further enhanced by the performance of disgust on the part of the normative, respective subjects whose bodies have meshed into the space. The feeling and performance of disgust are necessary to maintain the boundaries between respectability and abjection—the normative queer and its Other. Ahmed writes, “Disgust is clearly dependent upon contact: it involves a relationship of touch and proximity between the surfaces of bodies and objects” (85). Disgust, then, is about repelling the closeness of bodies or objects felt to be unpleasant, dirty, or otherwise unwanted. It should be noted that bodies and objects are not inherently disgusting within this formulation; Ahmed argues that “offensiveness (and with it disgust) is not an inherent quality of an object, but is attributed to objects partly in the affective response of ‘being disgusted’” (85). The object, or body, at the receiving end of the performance of disgust becomes disgusting or offensive only insofar as the person who is disgusted makes it so. In other words, the act of performing disgust, of declaring an object disgusting, is the constitutive factor in the figuring of an object or body as disgusting.

As a protective performance meant to maintain boundaries between subjects and objects (or other subjects seen as objects), disgust works to repel those objects or bodies from closeness. Ahmed writes that “[disgust] involves a relationship of touch and

proximity between the surfaces of bodies and objects ... it is not that the object, apart from the body, has the quality of 'being offensive,' but the proximity of the object to the body is felt as offensive" (85). The demarcation of disgust on certain bodies, then, is not about the bodies themselves as being inherently disgusting, but that their closeness elicits feelings of disgust. The performance of being disgusted (i.e. through verbal exclamation, or in the case of Grindr, the use of the Block to cast away) moves the object of disgust away. Ahmed argues, "The movement is the work of disgust ... Disgust brings the body perilously close to an object only then to pull away from the object in the registering of the proximity as an offence" (85). This push-pull movement between bodies and objects circulates the affective performance of disgust, oscillating the bodies and objects near and away from one another as boundaries between Self and Other are threatened. The peril, then, of proximity is precisely the demarcation of boundaries that the closeness of bodies threatens to break down.

The boundaries between Self and Other, between respectable and abject queer subjects, rely on the space between bodies. As I argue above, respectability depends upon abjection—the constitution of abjection is what upholds the very possibility of queer respectability. For the respectable queer subjects using Grindr to encounter bodies on their side of this imagined boundary, the closeness of the abject Other may threaten or offend their claim to respectability. The persons inhabiting the liminal space of abjection are inherently devalued and dehumanized, cast as what the respectable queers 'are not.' As Ahmed argues, "Abjection is bound up with the insecurity of the not; it seek secure 'the not' through the response of being disgusted" (86). Marking another's body as

disgusting, being disgusted by the proximity of a racialized, femme, fat, queered body, secures it as ‘the not’: ‘I am not racialized/femme/fat/queered.’ The Block, as I explore in this chapter, serves as the tool to enforce this boundary and maintain the separation between what one is and what one is not. In the context of queer respectability and normativity, closeness with the bodies of those who are rendered abject in the pursuit of respectability in threatens the respectable subject with dis-respectability. Pushing away these bodies, often coupled with a statement proclaiming disgust, not only protects the respectable queer’s subjectivity but also reinforces the boundary between respectability and abjection necessary to maintain the dominance of normative bodies and subjectivities.

Because disgust can be transposed onto bodies and objects, I have been writing of “objects or bodies” as the recipients of disgust; however, the bodies cast as disgusting are inhabited by actual people, with feelings and particular subjectivities, and the person cannot be separated from the body in an account of the affective reverberations of disgust. How does it feel to come to know oneself as the object of disgust—and just as that, an object refracted through the gaze of the respectable queer who is invested in hegemonic norms that govern bodies? This chapter seeks to examine this feeling along with the ways in which it creates an awareness of the subject rendered disgusting. W. E. B. DuBois writes about this sensation for Black people in the U.S. as “double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (2). While his theory of double-consciousness is specific to Black subjectivity in post-slavery United States history, I find it useful in considering how the constitution of respectability

for some and abjection for others forces this kind of self-recognition for those rendered abject. Finding oneself in the liminal space of queer abjection means coming to see oneself in the third-person, aware of the ways in which one's body is defined and theorized by ideologies of hegemony and violence. Below, I explore this more through the work of Frantz Fanon and George Yancy, using their ideas to question how the performance of queer respectability, as the instantiation of respectability's performative power, puts the non-respectable subject in the predicament of looking-at-self that the respectable subject does not have to contend with.

### **Feeling Abjection**

The Block, a seemingly innocuous feature of the mobile application, teems with potential and interpretation. The Block itself presents as a useful, even necessary, tool for users who are facing harassment or bullying from other users. If, for example, a user receives multiple messages from another relentlessly, the receiver of these messages may click on the "Block" symbol at the corner of the other user's profile. As noted above, doing so erases all of the messages on both users' interfaces and the two users are no longer visible to one another. In the situation of harassment or hateful language, such a feature provides safety for the recipient of the repeated or harmful messages in question. In this way, the Block has a utilitarian purpose, one that can allow for a safer space for the users of Grindr. Such use of the Block, however, is not the central focus of this chapter. I am instead interested in those who use the Block as a rhetorical tool, much like

the bio as studied in Chapter Two, to consolidate the dominance of the respectable queer subject and its subjugated abject Other.

In this chapter's opening vignette, I describe the feeling of being blocked as "a forceful rejection." During the time I used Grindr, I had become intimately familiar with this feeling after its repeated incidence. My experience with the Block seemed to function in a cycle as I navigated this queer social space as a nonbinary person who wore makeup and weighed well more than the seeming 'average' Grindr user. Interactions began with good conversation, then the fateful exchange of photos. My palms used to get sweaty immediately upon sending photos of myself to others on Grindr; this cycle had taught me what would happen next, over and over again. My face, either with makeup or without, betrayed my size. Photos of my full body, which were almost always requested, exposed every inch of fat that I carried shamefully. Upon reception of the photo, time and time again, the person with whom I was chatting disappeared. With a dejected sigh, each time, I knew I had been blocked. I had grown to hate my face, my femininity, my fatness, and the repeated disappearances of my conversation partners only solidified this self-hatred. Through the ongoing cycle of being blocked after daring to show my face and body, I came to understand myself as unwanted and unwelcome.

What does it mean to make others disappear from the screen? What does it mean to be disappeared from another's screen? Considering the experience of the Block as a form of (digital) social death, it may also be understood as a tool of safety. In cases of harassment or bullying, the Block provides a safety net for the recipient of hateful or relentless messages; however, the Block as an exterminator of difference also provides a

safety net for the respectable queer subject. By using the Block to cast away those whose abject status presents a threat to the comfort of respectability, the respectable queer consolidates their identity through this apparatus. As noted above, Ahmed describes the feeling of comfort that assimilation to—or enmeshment in—heteronormativity provides. I understand heteronormativity here to mean the overarching norms and privileging of heterosexual relationships, sexuality, and aesthetics—uplifting these as the only ‘good’ or ‘right’ ideals while simultaneously demonizing sexualities, relationships, and aesthetics as ‘perverse’ and ‘immoral.’ Notably, the construction of queer respectability necessitates assimilation to heteronormativity, at least to some degree; this also means subscribing to ideals of white supremacy, cis-normativity, body normativity, and U.S. hegemony. Because heteronormativity works through and with larger structures of white supremacy, bodily normativity, and U.S. dominance, all of these ideals are intertwined and mutually constitutive, bound up in one another in an assemblage of the ideal respectable citizen—again, as Lorde calls it, the mythical norm. The subjects who threaten the boundaries of this mythical norm—those racialized, femme, fat, non-citizen bodies that dare to take up space in queer worlds—also threaten the normativity that the respectable queer seeks to produce and maintain within the parameters of Grindr. The Block functions as a regulatory tool when these non-normative bodies get too close—when their presence or touch threatens the boundaries of respectability that demand a separation between different bodies.

The Block as a regulatory tool serves two purposes: protecting the respectable queer’s subjectivity as such through the performance of repudiation, and reinscribing the

abjection of the non-normative queer being blocked. Bodies move near and around each other digitally within Grindr's interface as users' physical locations change and are reported through the application's geolocation system. So too do affects move through the bodies and psyches of the users as they interact (or not) with one another. These affects are mired in the sociocultural demands for delineating clear boundaries between respectability and abjection—which persons are of value, and which persons are disposable. The Block casts away certain bodies, sending messages which inflict a sort of knowledge of one's place within culture, both digitally and in the 'real world.' This feature, when weaponized as a regulatory tool, creates social death and the devaluation of these subjects' lives.

The devaluation of non-normative persons takes varying forms, particularly in the unsettling practices that take place on Grindr, as seen throughout this thesis. Consider Senthourn Raj's personal account of being blocked on Grindr:

In this intersubjective exchange, the profile refuses my sexual agency, as another apologetically prefaces that he is 'not into Asians/Indians...sorry just a preference.' Clicking and subsequently reading the profile I become aware of my race as one which is not 'preferred'. My body is overwhelmed with frustration and anger. Within moments, the profile vanishes from my screen, a sign that I had been 'blocked'. Blocking cuts through me. I become defensive of how my body is rendered intelligible through a gaze of whiteness. That is, shame engendered by this performative statement wounds my pride and affects my opportunity or willingness to consume further (9).

Raj's account of how it feels to be blocked and its implications ground the following section of this chapter. I examine how the receipt of the Block causes the blocked user to become more aware of their subjectivity within an object realm—the Block as a

communicative tool to essentially put someone in ‘their place.’ In doing so, I focus on Raj’s physiological reaction—“Blocking cuts through me”—to consider how one’s identity and understanding of self becomes fragmented through the physical-psychical violence of abjection and social death. This process forces the person being blocked to become aware of themselves and their body, with a hyperawareness of the gaze of others toward their bodies, in a way that the person doing the blocking does not have to consider. Drawing on scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, and George Yancy, I argue that the process of becoming what I refer to as socially dead through this kind of abjection manifests in a bodily sort of knowing that becomes real and physically felt—through a painful kind of bodily reaction. Raj describes the Block as a “performative statement,” a claim which I seek to extend as I consider the Block as a performance of disgust and, in turn, respectability in the vein of my analysis of Butler above. I draw on Sara Ahmed’s work on disgust and comfort to understand how these affective performances are deeply mired in the politics and constitution of respectability. Finally, I will turn the table around, so to speak, to consider how this performative act constitutes not only abjection for Raj, but respectability for the user on the other end of the interface.

The experience of being blocked carries with it the weight of undesirability, the feeling of knowing one can never quite be ‘good enough.’ Raj argues, “If bodies are oriented towards a white aesthetic, those who desire whiteness often find their ‘orientations’ moving away from the racial ‘Other.’” (8). This oscillation away from the Other, that which disrupts the desiring subject’s insatiable appetite for normative bodies, consolidates these normative and non-normative bodies into separate, seemingly

oppositional subjectivities. As seen in Raj's account, the feeling of being forced into a subjectivity that is essentially bound up in the abjection of one's own existence is more than just a mental feeling: "The affect inscribes itself onto my body – tightening my posture, generating greater concentration and perspiration accrues on my forehead" (8). This physiological reaction to the response "'not into your type man'" (8) suggests that the affect of being abjected, of being made (digitally) socially invisible, generates real bodily reactions. This statement and its accompanying Block show how such an act helps to bring 'types' into being, further reiterating the norms of respectability that govern bodies within the queer world of Grindr. Again, the categorization of bodies that makes possible the very demarcation of queer respectability depends upon the performance and acceptance of the norms that govern its seeming reality. The inscription of Otherness onto one's own body cultivates a pain response, like a needle pushed through flesh that determines the subject's fate within the realm of this queer social world.

When facing the Block as a form of rejection during my time on Grindr, I personally experienced the painful realization that my body, or my femmeness, or both, caused the rejection. This moment forced me to acknowledge my body as unworthy of attention and care, unworthy of attraction or sexual encounters, and unworthy of occupying space on Grindr. If no one wanted me here, why was I still here, enduring repeated instances of blocking and rejection? While I did not (and still do not) have a fully realized answer to this question, I know that the feeling of coming to know my body speaks to the way abjection and social death operate in constituting subjects within such community (and national) frameworks. In "The Fact of Blackness" from his book *Black*

*Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon describes an encounter with a white child on the train, who exclaims, ““Look, a Negro! ... Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!”” (112). Fanon writes: “...assailed at various points, the corporeal schema [of myself] crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema” (112). The encounter of the child’s exclamation extracts Fanon’s psyche from his body, in a sense, forcing him to become aware of himself as a Black person. No longer inhabiting his body unconsciously, Fanon’s Blackness becomes a fact for him, an external force that now informs how he moves through the world.

I argue that the use of the Block, especially when coupled with a statement about the reason for doing so, performs the same kind of inscription on the bodies of the person receiving the Block. For instance, when Raj receives the message, “not into Asians/Indians... sorry just a preference” (9) which is immediately followed by the Block, he is drawn out of his subconscious occupation of his own body. Through this process, Raj’s every encounter on Grindr becomes saturated with the racialization forced upon his body – he enters each new encounter with this knowledge in mind, always already feeling defensive of himself within the digital sexual economy of Grindr and beyond. “In this moment,” Raj writes, “I was produced as an object looked at by others and became self-conscious. Not only did the gaze penetrate my online body, it produced anxieties about how I acted and negotiated my flirtatious encounters offline” (9). The objectifying gaze of whiteness, which refuses Raj as a desirable being and reduces him to the repugnant object of disgust, thus alters his own consciousness about his own body in the non-digital world. This process, like in Fanon’s encounter, inflicts a “racial epidermal schema” that

combines the affective response to rejection with the corporeal knowledge of self-as-subject(ed).

The silent rejection of the Block, that speaks loudly with its reverberations of disgust, delineates labels and parameters which may confer self-identity for users on both ends of the Block. George Yancy writes about the *clicks* of car doors locking when Black bodies get too close to white people's cars: "The *clicking* sounds begin to fragment my existence, cut away at my integrity, depicting me in the form of an essence, a solid type, in ways that dehumanize me" (48). What might it mean to consider the Block as its own sort of digital *clicking*, in the sense that it casts judgment, inscribes labels, and secures barriers between bodies? Like the *click*, the Block does not explicitly say: "Your race scares/disgusts/upsets me, so I cast you out," but the receiver of the Block and the Black man hearing a *click* as he walks past a car are keenly aware that this informs the action. Yancy writes, "The *clicking* sounds mark me; they inscribe me, rematerializing my presence, as it were, in ways that I know to be untrue—in ways that are not me" (48). The *clicks* act as an external force that tells the receiving Black subject who they are as refracted through the gaze of whiteness. In the same way, the Block tells the receiving subject who they are: unattractive, repugnant, unworthy of sexual desire, not welcome in the racialized sexual economy of Grindr. The Block and the *clicking* sounds are two separate, but related, phenomena that create boundaries between racialized bodies and inscriptions of abject identity that are forced onto these bodies.

These boundaries created and enforced through the Block remain necessary for the constitution and replication of the respectable and abject queer subjects. However, the

maintenance of such boundaries through this way is always a futile goal, as contact remains necessary for the performance of disgust to take place. Ahmed writes, “Disgust binds objects together in the very moment that objects become attributed with bad feeling, as ‘being’ sickening ... The object becomes disgusting, in a way that allows the subject to recoil, only after an intimate contact that is felt on the surface of the skin” (88). Contact may not necessarily be physical when two people interact through Grindr’s interface, but what if we consider the digital profile to be an extension of one’s physical body? The profile, through which users interact with one another, represents the self and stands in for the body as interactions take place. As such, a closeness between two profiles represents the digital form of physical contact that may still be felt as real for those operating the application. Two users interacting through the inbox, then, essentially constitutes an occupation of space in a digital realm that stands in for the physical landscape that bodies may normally exist within. As such, the boundaries are already breached when two users exchange messages and photos with one another—their digital bodies are in contact as messages are shared back and forth. Even the simple act of opening another user’s profile, which is necessary to complete the Block, is contact in the form of acknowledgement. The *clicking* of a car door requires the acknowledgement of the body walking by, which may not be felt as physical, but is nonetheless a form of contact. The Block and the *click*, then, are phenomena that require some form of contact and thus, already fail in their attempt to create boundaries of untouchability between bodies.

However futile the constitution of these boundaries may be, for respectable queer subjects these imagined boundaries are necessary for laying claim to social value. Returning to Yuvraj Joshi, respectability is more than the performance and enactment of normativity: “respectability entails differentiating oneself from others who fall outside the norm” (418). Creating boundaries that enforce the distinction between respectable self and abject other, then, allows for queer subjects to embody respectability by keeping their bodies ‘safe’ from contamination. In the case of Yancy’s phenomenological study of the *clicking* of car door locks, the *clicks* presuppose a danger inherent in the Black body while performing white vulnerability: “Not only are the bodies that initiate the *clicks* performing their *white* identities through the *clicks*, but the *clicks* themselves install white identities, hail white identities, and solidify white identities” (49, emphasis in original). In similar fashion, the Block installs, hails, and solidifies respectable queer subjectivity as it enacts movement away from the abject or non-respectable body. This movement reiterates Cacho’s argument about the production of social value by and through the relationship between valued and un-valued personhoods. Casting aside and moving away from the dis-respectable allows for claims to social value while at the same time stripping the social value from those disposable bodies.

In the Postscript to the tenth anniversary expanded edition of *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar analyzes the continuing growth of homonationalism in the wake of Donald Trump’s presidency and in the years following the book’s initial publication. On her intent in using the concept of homonationalism, Puar writes,

Simply stated, homonationalism is the concomitant rise in the legal, consumer, and representative recognition of LGBTQ subjects and the curtailing of welfare provisions, immigrant rights, and the expansion of state power to surveil, detain, and deport. This process relies on the shoring up of the respectability of homosexual subjects in relation to the performative reiteration of the pathologized perverse (homo- and hetero-) sexuality of racial others (228—229).

The Block as it occurs on Grindr, as a phenomenon specific to this digital queer community space, produces this queer respectability that makes homonationalism possible. As Puar argues, the respectable queer is created in opposition to the pathologized sexuality of racial others. I would further argue that bodies othered on the basis of gender performance, size, and ability also inform the category against which queer respectability is created. As queers who are in close proximity to Lorde's mythical norm continue to Block and cast aside those whose bodies deviate or exist differently, the respectability and abjection become real, embodied subjectivities for the blocking subjects and the blocked subjects, respectively. This imagined space between sorts of bodies, between respectability and abjection, makes it possible for the respectable queer subject to regard the exploitation and violence against the abject subject with apathy or endorsement, if they at all regard these experiences.

As noted throughout this thesis, I have been subjected to the Block for my body size and femme appearance. I have also been embraced by users on Grindr after my weight loss and gradual switch to more masculine gender presentation. I have been the person who clicked the Block on another user's profile because I did not find myself attracted to them. My ability to experience all these situations and subjectivities on Grindr is not common or afforded to everyone on the application. My whiteness and my

physical ability have never posed an issue for me on Grindr and my fluctuating body size and gender performance were altered, in part, to make myself more desirable in the eyes of others. I recognize my own complicity in the Block as a subjectivity-forming phenomenon, as well as my own experience in the abject realm of Grindr. I know how it feels to be ignored and repeatedly blocked, and I know how it feels to receive numerous messages when logging on and uploading the ‘right’ profile picture. While my radical justice-oriented political stance did not change through any of this, I admit that I unconsciously participated in these interpersonal exchanges that produce respectability and abjection.

Acknowledging this aspect of my own subjectivity as a former user of Grindr is important to me as I conclude my critiques of its potential for creating these identities or subject statuses. As Puar writes, “we are all produced as subjects through [homonationalism], even if we are against it” (230). Recognizing my own complicity in homonationalist logics, even when I did not realize I was doing so, is a crucial step in contending with the complexity of its power. Further, I hope to provide an avenue for others to consider their own complicity with the structuring norms of homonationalism, normativity, and respectability. Butler’s concept of performativity is particularly useful here, as the norms gain their power through the repetition of them *as norms*; they do not govern, command, or incite the repetitions. As I argue above, without the repetition of norms, they would lose their power. Perhaps the recognition of one’s own complicity in this repetition provides a crucial way to undermine the performative power of respectability. Recognizing the patterns and behaviors that lead to the production of queer

respectability and abjection might make room for a different kind of engagement in community spaces such as Grindr. Just maybe, this could open a door to imagining something different altogether.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

*Gathered in an apartment-style dorm building on campus, I sit with a few friends from the university's queer student organization after a long meeting about reconfiguring its dynamics to be more inclusive and more centered around queer and trans people of color. The conversation of hooking up rises, and of course this conversation does not exist for us without Grindr as the central antagonist in all of our stories. One friend, a self-identified Black trans woman, speaks up: "It's useless for me. The only people who are interested in me see me as a fetish, and everyone else either blocks me on contact or just ignores me. It's like I don't exist." Staring into my drink, I think about how many trans women I've ignored on that app, without even having a friendly conversation. I wonder how many people feel invisible in this space because of me.*

In this project, I have traced the inscription, (re)production, and embodiment of queer respectability and abjection as two concurrent forces driving the legibility of queer bodies within the nation-state. Respectability, I have argued, both produces abjection and is produced by it in the same instance. The relegation of certain bodies into these subjectivities orders the spectrum for who and who is not worthy of inclusion, desire, and life. I have noted throughout that I understand this as the necropolitical function of queer respectability—in order for certain queers to become respectable and worthy in the eyes of the state, other queers and queered persons must be socially and discursively cast into an abject realm. Here, as I conclude my project, I seek to trouble what it means to be abjected. I turn to scholars whose critical work on abjection ask whether this kind of subjectivity is necessarily hopeless and powerless. What if abjection offers more

possibility, opportunity, and power than might be expected? What if the experience of becoming aware of oneself as abject, finding oneself in the margins, leads to a kind of counterintuitive power?

In the context of this project, I have described abjection produced through performances of queer respectability on Grindr via the bio and the Block as a sort of digital social death, an invisibility or a state of mute enforced by these phenomena. This demarcation of non-value placed onto the bodies of those deemed abject in the epistemological framework of Grindr enables state violence against these bodies while marking such violence as ‘legitimate.’ While I stand by this argument, I also want to explore the complexities of what abjection might have to offer. As I explore in Chapter 3, Butler argues that performativity is the ongoing repetition of norms; the repetition of these norms is what gives them their power and enforces them *as* norms (12). That the repetition of norms grants them power is crucial here – without such repetition, the norms would lose their power as new norms or standards become established. This aspect of performativity highlights its potential to be undermined—the very reason norms have their power enables resistance to them in the same turn. Abjection, then, might offer a rich starting point for recognizing the fallacy of the norm and posing challenges to its power.

Queer respectability entails a subscription to the law, the norms set in place and enforced by the state and dominant sociocultural systems set in place. Abjection, on the other hand, is marked by the dominant, respectable view as that which threatens boundaries of the normative, the demarcation between ‘respectable’ and ‘dis-

respectable.’ Kristeva writes, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). An abject subjectivity is thought to hold all of these descriptors, as a person whose body exceeds the limits of respectability disrupt its status quo. As in my work with Ahmed in Chapter 3, the comfortable space is disrupted by that which is different: the comfortable norm of white, able-bodied, thin, masculinity is broken up by the Black, disabled, fat, femme body. I examine the affects that produce respectability in response to such disruption in Chapter 3, as well as possible affective responses of those rendered abject. Here, I ask, *what power might be found there, in that space of discomfort?*

The margins of respectability, the space of abjection where non-normativity is cast, seems like a punishment or a (social) death sentence for those sent there. From within these spaces, however, it may produce a different kind of power. Black feminist theorist bell hooks argues for “choosing the margin,” acknowledging that “it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance” (20). According to hooks, marginality offers a rich vantage point from which to theorize and enact resistance, precisely because of its place on the ‘outside.’ The margin, then, is “a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives” (20). Abject subjectivity, then, makes it possible to recognize the ways in which respectability is produced by and through these abject subjects and how it is rooted in claims to normative livelihoods. Acknowledging this illusory production of social power also means acknowledging the power to resist and defy it.

I argue that this is why much of the existing scholarship on Grindr fails to radically question the norms that proliferate in a substantial way: the scholars themselves are not theorizing from the place of the margin. Much of the scholarship is produced by people who either have never used Grindr, or have but as users who have not centered the experience of the Block or the grid as sites of anxiety because of their social identities. Senthoran Raj's account of Grindr, which I engage closely in Chapter 3, theorizes from his place within the margin as a South Asian gay man whose subjectivity as 'Other' has been forced upon his body repeatedly through the application. This knowledge gives him a window to examine the ways in which the normative whiteness of Grindr orders engagement with the grid in a violent epistemological system. Leaning into his marginality, Raj can note the complex dynamics of power and privilege at play on Grindr, critically examining the ways in which it inscribes meaning onto bodies. My own experience as a femme, fat body on Grindr that slimmed down and moved to a relatively more 'masculine' appearance also influences my work throughout this project. I have experienced constant Blocking, hateful language, and watched it shift to a different engagement from others when my body and appearance changed. I also learned more about these lived experiences from friends who shared their stories with me, as in the opening vignette of this chapter. Though anecdotal, my positionality as outlined throughout this project informs how I understand the paradigm of respectability and abjection on Grindr.

Further articulating the perhaps strange power to be found in abjection, Darieck Scott critically interrogates commonly held assumptions about the role of abjection in the

constitution of Blackness as a subjectivity and identity in his book *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. Through close readings of mostly canonical African American literary texts, Scott argues that Black power can be found not only through resistance, but also through the pain inflicted on Black men's bodies. In doing so, he "attempts to delineate some of the capabilities of blackness in its abjection by using the figure of male rape to disarticulate blackness from its quest for successful masculinity" (11). The sexual violence that partly worked to create Blackness as a concept and social class, then, is revisited as a way to rearticulate the possibilities at play in the liminality of Black identity. The power of finding pleasure in violence, in submission, then, may be an avenue for strength and overcoming, or even reveling in the abjection enforced upon Black bodies.

*Extravagant Abjection* traces the complexities and paradoxes of what happens in spaces of social death and abjection, and how such spaces offer possibilities for the very alive subjects thought to inhabit them. Power produced within these liminal spaces, for Scott, is "that which is not-power according to the ego-centric (and masculine and white) 'I' definitions we have of power, but which is *some kind* of power, if by power we mean only ability, the capacity for action and creation" (171, emphasis in original). This *some kind* of power, then, opens possibilities for creation, for articulating a new kind of subjectivity or modality of existence. Such a paradoxical or counterintuitive kind of power challenges the limits of dominant, normative power while also enabling 'abject' subjects to reclaim their bodies and rearticulate their meanings—again, a challenge to the performative reiteration of normative power that dominates discourse surrounding

empowerment and resistance. What kind of power, then, may emerge from the kind of abjection produced through Grindr in the ways I have outlined in this thesis?

One potential form of power produced from digital social death may be located in Shaka McGlotten's engagement with optimism in relation to the white supremacist violence that proliferates on Grindr. McGlotten interviews a young Black gay man called Night, who speaks about knowing how his Blackness permeates the sexual desire potential partners have for him. Night recalls one encounter in which he "playfully disrupt[ed] the expectations of a white guy, who insistently wanted to meet ... clearly looking for a big, black stud" (74). When meeting with him, Night wore "slacks, and collared shirt," and spoke in a voice McGlotten describes as "a higher pitched, 'white' voice," provoking confusion in the young white man who sought a stereotypically masculine Black male sexual partner (74). McGlotten argues that in doing so, Night "both differed from and conformed to expectations of black male sexual prowess. Yet his openness in regard to his own racial and sexual identities also enabled him to engage a fantasy of interracial sexual encounter with a critical and playful self-consciousness" (75). I offer this selection from McGlotten's text as an example of how playing with, and disrupting, the demands or expectations of Black gay men's bodies and behaviors can allow for reinterpreting the meanings placed onto their bodies. This subversive action in the face of racist expectations of Night's body was his way of using *some kind* of power to reinterpret his racial and sexual identities, using the abject subjectivity placed on him to engage and imagine something different.

Considering the inscription and reproduction of queer respectability and abjection as sites of both limitation and possibility, violence and creation, order and disorder, this conclusion seeks to ensure that my analysis throughout this thesis honor the complexity of what is. The (re)production of queer respectability is a necropolitical project, but looking to what happens within its ‘negative side,’ the realm of abjection, reveals that social death and marginality may actually offer more strategies for resistance. Queer political organizing that centers around respectability as a central value must instead organize from this subjective lens, using the abject subject’s perspective to acknowledge the failures of state inclusion. Doing so can lead to a queer politic that works toward liberation for all, and dismantling state projects of exclusion, domination, and violence. Looking at what happens in the realm of abjection and within the margins may provide opportunities for seeking alternatives, imagining differently, and fighting for a more equitable future.

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