Strangers in Paradise: notes on the use of dating apps for hookups in San Francisco*

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Abstract

Based on an ethnography conducted in San Francisco between January and August 2013, this paper explores how adult gay men use dating apps to find sexual and romantic partners. The city passed from being a center of the counterculture to a gentrified haven for hipsters and techies in a process that has also transformed its sociability. The search for gay partners has shifted from cruising to hookups, as the use of apps reinforces a progressive selection of partners based on moral criteria.

Keywords: Gay Dating Apps, Gentrification, Cruising, Hookup, Aids, Serosorting.

In San Francisco, in one of my first interviews with users of dating apps, I encountered the criticism that this technology supposedly facilitates fast and risky sex, an observation that was echoed in other interactions. Dan,[1] a young technology professional who lives in an upper middle-class neighborhood of the city, affirmed that he uses the apps only for conversation and to get to know people. He said:

> As I told you, hookups aren't safe in my opinion. Grindr simply broadens the mentality on uncompromising sex. So I decided not to use it that way.
> This should be part of your research. I mean, that's why bathhouses became illegal in this city – it's not safe to have that much sex. But people have been using social media as a new digital bathhouse, as unsafe as the original, and all over town.

Paradoxically, the same user who criticized the practice of hooking-up, a local term for sex without commitment, revealed that he only had sex without condoms. When I commented that his negative judgment about the app and its users did not make sense and that the risk was sex without a condom, he tried to explain:

> The guys on Grindr will let me fuck them without a condom. And these guys have a high risk of being HIV positive, while I am HIV negative and want to stay that way. So it's a bad mix. In fact, guys everywhere let you fuck them without a condom. So I avoid hookups. They're not safe. But on Grindr it's even less safe because sex is so easy on it. That's why I only log on to chat.

The long interview that I did using the app on my tablet raised elements to help understand the use of these apps in San Francisco. There is a clear association between their use and sex

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[1] I changed the names of my informants to maintain their anonymity.

without commitment, which in the United States today is called hooking-up. But in the negative moral judgment of this user it is associated to the old practice of cruising, the search for sexual partners in public spaces such as parks, bathrooms or saunas.[2] In this article, I will present historic and sociological elements that will corroborate that these applications are mechanisms that facilitate hookups, but will question their parallel with cruising.

I will begin by presenting the urban environment of this hub of a new economy focused on technologies. My objective is to reveal deep changes in the economy and the urban structure, without which it is not possible to understand how and why digital media are used today, particularly the mobile media. The increasing centrality of new professions associated to technology has gentrified San Francisco, which had been known as a paradise for "outsiders" in the U.S. imagination, but has become a center for hipsters.[3]

I will then show how I entered the field ethnographically, between January and August 2013, to understand how gays are dealing with these changes. Through co-existence with various interlocutors, readings and observation, I offer some reflections about how the mobile digital media are associated with and give potential to hookups. I also present some considerations about the reality of San Francisco that points to the configuration of a new economy of desire, in which not only sexual and romantic contacts come to be digitally mediated, but in which the criteria for searching for and selecting partners has been sanitized in relation to the past. Finally, I critically return to the reflections of this first user who judges the applications and hookups as morally condemnable.
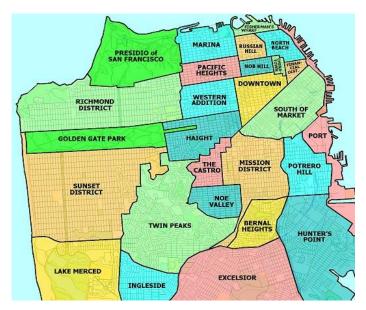
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[2] *Cruising* denotes a practice of looking for sex without a commitment.

[3] *Hipster* is a term that became popular in recent years to designate middle-class youth who – frequently born in affluent suburbs – move to within the urban perimeter of large U.S. cities driving their gentrification, expelling the previous population due to increases in real estate prices and rents.

The passage from the counterculture to gentrification

Historically, San Francisco attracted various alternative groups, particularly after World War II, beginning with soldiers, members of the air force and sailors who were dismissed from the armed forces for being homosexuals (Bérubé, 2010) and, later, became a refuge for intellectuals like the beat generation and one of the centers from which the counterculture irradiated. From the 1940s to the 1980s, the dissident aura of the city attracted residents with alternative profiles and kept away those interested in living what was then understood as the "American Dream," which was intrinsically linked to life in the suburbs, where nuclear families are safely distant from the poor, immigrants, racial minorities and behavioral dissidents who remained concentrated in what they define as "decadent" urban downtowns.

This history created the still widely disseminated image that San Francisco is a type of U.S. paradise for political, cultural or behavioral dissidents. In *The Fabulous Sylvester* (2005), the sociobiography of a music star of the 1970s, queer sociologist Joshua Gamson offers a historic reconstitution of the city's countercultural scene. Gamson affirms that alternative lifestyles spread through neighborhoods closest to downtown, particularly the North Beach region, and began to head to the other side of Market Street: "Around 1965, businesses owned by or aimed at homosexuals appeared on Polk Street and the first gay community center appeared in the South of Market neighborhood in 1966" (Gamson, 2005:48).

Map of the city of San Francisco with its main neighborhoods.
Source: Site of the University of Delaware

Little by little, gays and other queers began to live in Haight-Ashbury until in the next decade, the center of the Sexual Revolution had become the nearby Castro neighborhood, whose aura of liberation spread throughout the city. The relationship between the hippie culture and the rise of the homosexual movement is even geographic, given the proximity between the old hippie neighborhood of Haight-Asbury and the Castro. It is also visibly seen in how the image of a rainbow was transposed to create an alternative flag, inspired by the U.S. flag, and which later became known internationally as the gay pride flag.

In the words of Gamson (2005:108):

> By 1975, San Francisco was for gays and lesbians what Israel was for Jews, only with fewer wars and more parties. It was known as the gathering place of the exiled, the land of milk and honeys. This was the era when the various wings of the gay movement – the ones who wanted to be

accepted, the ones who wanted to make noise, the ones who shouted "Gay Power", and the ones who quietly argued "We are just like you" – all had at least one thing in common: they all advocated coming out of the closet. Not surprisingly, a lot of people did just that; at the very least, liberation seemed to promise less shame, more love, and better sex. It also, of course, often meant being suddenly reviled by nearly everyone who had thought you were straight.

At the same time, San Francisco's homeless population also began to grow, and visibly more than the average of other large U.S. cities. Locals give many reasons for this, including the amenable climate (by U.S. standards), the large quantity of tourists who offer handouts, and state and municipal policies that date to the 1980s. Neighboring states and even former governor Ronald Reagan came to pay bus fares for people living on the streets to go to San Francisco, a politically democratic city with "excessively" liberal customs then considered a refuge for outsiders.

Since the 1990s, however, San Francisco has undergone a deep process of transformation linked to the emergence of a new economy based on technology, innovation and entrepreneurship. Professionals in the region began to move from the cities of Silicon Valley to San Francisco and one-third of U.S. venture capital became located in the region. According to urban geographer Neil Smith (cf. Bernstein, 2010:34), the transformations are explained by the change in the urbanization model that prevailed in the United States after World War II, which was marked by the expansion of the middle class to the suburbs, leaving urban downtowns to the poor and dispossessed. The change in the economy to services, recreation and consumption made these downtown spaces attractive once again both for commerce and for housing for youth linked to the new economy. A new geography thus emerged of centrality and marginality, in which the white middle class returned to the city and the urban proletariat, much smaller in number than in the past, were pushed to the periphery.

The children of the affluent suburbs – many in professions linked to technology – have taken the route opposite to their parents and grandparents and have returned to the city. This return has been marked by a renovation in urban space, a process called gentrification, a term created by British sociologist Ruth Glass and that designates an articulated set of transformations in areas that come to the interest of real estate developers and municipal authorities, which tend to take measures to restore the urban infrastructure and make the area more expensive. This tends to drive out old residents and open space for real estate projects that attract affluent classes (Solnit; Schwarzenber, 2000).

Gentrification is also associated to interventions that seek to eliminate the visible manifestations of deviation and poverty in urban spaces, particularly in the areas recently occupied by commerce and services, which require "safe" and " clean" locations to attract consumers. As in other parts of the world, policing came to be a strategy to expel members of the popular classes from areas that once again had rising real estate values. Despite visible and accelerated gentrification, the incredible quantity of homeless people remains. Any visitor would perceive that although blacks are a small portion of the Bay Area population, and mostly concentrated in the cities on the other side of the bay such as Oakland and Richmond, they form a considerable portion of the homeless living on the streets.

Map of the Bay Area, the San Francisco metropolitan region.
Source: Silicon Valley Blog.

In summary, San Francisco shifted from the counterculture to gentrification, and today, spaces that were dissident have become increasingly mainstream. If in the past the city was seen as a haven for outsiders, its current residents are better known as hipsters, a term that ironically alludes to the urban cultures of the past to refer to middle or upper class people who have moved to areas previously considered degraded and cheap, making them expensive and part of a sophisticated circuit of consumption and leisure.

The typical hipster tries to appear unpretentious, open, capable of living with ethnic, racial and sexual differences, but – as some critics have indicated – their "openness" is based on guaranteed class privilege, based on which they construct a supposedly multicultural perspective, but one that is consumerist and politically conformist. In San Francisco, a portion of them have located at the border between Mission and Castro, therefore, between the traditional Latin and gay neighborhoods. David M.

Halperin reflects on how hipsters have incorporated aspects of queer culture and avalia:

> Instead of appropriating, and queering, mainstream cultural objects, straight hipsterism delights in reapropriating minority cultural forms, seizing authentically queer or dissident 'symbols and icons,' and using them to consolidate its own identity, while exempting itself – through its heterosexual privilege and its hip knowingness – from the social disqualifications that gave rise to those anti-social forms in the first place (2012:395).

Hipsters are descendants of the favored classes who abandon the cities for the suburbs in the mid twentieth century and who, nearly half a century later, return to find relics of the counterculture and assimilate it in an apolitical manner. Despite their conformist character, their existence proves that the lives of much of an emerging generation of Americans no longer revolve around the values and life style of a mass society in which standardized consumption is key, or in an economic model closely related to other social and political ethics that are based more on inflexible family and national values.[4]

Hipsters and people with similar lifestyles have new desires and aspirations and even if heterosexuality is not characteristic to all of them, it tends to be predominant. In terms of lifestyle, unlike their parents and grandparents, they are more inured to leisure, a bohemian lifestyle and consumption habits. No longer that of the masses, but the highly sophisticated and segmented that an urban center like San Francisco offers. Hipsters, therefore, appear to be morally more flexible and less prejudiced than their ancestors, given that they live in contexts that require – to greater or lesser degree – coexisting with people of different ethnic-racial origins and non-normative sexualities.

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[4] About this theme, see my article "San Francisco e a Nova Economia do Desejo" (Miskolci, 2014a).

Nevertheless, the new urban context created by gentrification is not as democratic as it may appear, because among other reasons, it is based on renewed forms of social inequality that involve the emergence and dissemination of mobile digital media. In terms of sociability, they facilitate the formation of selective relational networks. Thus, even in the urban perimeter that is more accessible and democratic, it is possible to coexist with differences while remaining apart from them.

Currently, San Francisco and its metropolitan region (which includes Silicon Valley, famous for technological production) constitute an excellent example of what Scott McQuire calls the *media city*, a city in which the "relational space" created by the digital media gain mass and centrality in social life. In his terms:

> Since relational space cannot be defined by essential attributes or inherent and stable qualities, it assumes significance primarily through the interconnections established between different nodes and sectors. Such interconnections are characterized above all by their variability and impermanence. As Lash argues, older social bonds organized on the basis of spatial proximity are being displaced by communicational bonds which are "at-a-distance" – either communication coming from a distance, or people coming from a distance in order to meet face-to-face" (2008:23).

The centrality of the distanced communicational ties is evident in how the digital media make the city a "new home," because they come to permit, for example, work at a distance, by means of the use of portable equipment such as laptops and smartphones. Moreover, there are the daily interpersonal relations in a city in which cell phone and Internet services are very cheap and nearly universally available in comparison to other parts of the world.

It is amid San Francisco's transition from a refuge for outsiders to a center of a new mainstream social life that is mediated by digital media that my research interlocutors moved

there to face a changing and contradictory cultural scene. Despite the predominantly positive evaluations of the city and its residents, they recognize that between the image of a type of paradise reinforced by tourist interests and the daily reality in which they live, doubts, tensions and uncertainties emerge about the future.

Probably, the majority of those who I met did not remain in San Francisco because of economic difficulties, and I accompanied the moves of some of the people I interviewed to neighboring cities. I also met many who were trying – most of them with great difficulty – to move into the city. I interviewed various gay men who came to the city during a period of hiring of technology companies from Silicon Valley. They included an American from Boston (a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), an Indian, a Brazilian and an Israeli.

Ori, a professional with high qualifications in Israel who had also worked in Denmark, helped me to learn a little about the migratory wave of this type of professional to the Bay Area. In this wave, education, talent and competency are not the only qualifications that open doors at large companies. At the same time at which I accompanied his stress in marathon hiring processes that seemed more like tests of physical and psychological resistance, I met and interviewed an Apple employee of Mexican origin. During one of our interviews, I learned he had connections with rich and politically powerful families in his country and how a friend arranged the contact that led him to the powerful company based in Cupertino.

Ori wound up being rejected at all the companies and returned to Israel. The Brazilian was not even able to participate in various selections and wound up using his stay for tourism. The American from Boston and the Indian were hired, the first as part of an innovation project at a startup and the second by a software company in San José. If for these professional youths from the technology field it is difficult to find a job and establish oneself, it is much worse for those who do not have the same educational and professional level.

Paul, a man from Seattle who immigrated a few years ago to San Francisco and worked as a salesman in a clothing store of an elite brand, told me how, he gradually decided to go back to university, whose high cost required him to reduce his spending and move to a neighboring city. He also said that the majority of those in his circle of friends in the city, most of them gays who came from other parts of the country's west coast, had already moved or were only putting off the inexorable departure from the Castro neighborhood.

People who once composed the predominant profile in the city have begun to become strangers there. Among the people I interviewed, only one who had a high position in a bank and another who worked at Apple were able to finance their own apartment in the near future. The others were able to stay in the city with some degree of difficulty, and watched friends move due to the high cost of living that made San Francisco similar to centers such as New York, nodal points in the new economy which regularly attracts, but also expels residents. It is clear that those who stay have a higher socioeconomic level and not by chance, are mainly tied to the technology field, and are locally called techies.

Entering the field

As the gentrification of San Francisco became consolidated, I moved to the Mission District and began my fieldwork, making contact by digital means. I met more than one hundred men through cell phone apps and conducted in-depth interviews with at least 23 of them. I consider in-depth interviews those conducted for about three hours, which, in three cases were repeated and resulted in an ongoing contact with those interviewed, who became "collaborators" in the study because they allowed me to accompany part of their lives and even their trips through the Castro and other parts of the city.

Unlike my Brazilian interlocutors,[5] nearly all of the Americans I interviewed were out of the closet, that is, they lived their sexual and emotional lives with other men in a socially visible and open manner, which – added to the safety in the city – allowed them to be more receptive and open to contact than my informants in São Paulo.[6] In general, the ethnographic incursion came to articulate observation mediated with face to face interaction in a dynamic that I consider to be better defined – using the terms of anthropologist María Elvira Díaz-Benítez (2010) – as "observação acompanhante" [accompanied observation], given the fact that I did not "participate," I only accompanied the lives of my research collaborators for a few months.

In ethical terms, I sought to present myself from the start as a researcher and kept profiles that explained my condition as a Brazilian sociologist conducting an investigation about the use of mobile digital media in San Francisco. I kept profiles on four cellphone and tablet apps (Grindr, Scruff, Jack'ed and Hornet)[7] and on two sites that link to articulated use with the apps (Adam4Adam and Manhunt) therefore totaling six mobile platforms and two on the Internet (which require a navigator for access). Most of the contacts were initiated by other users, but I also sought to create contacts to expand the spectrum and diversity of my research interlocutors in terms of "ethnicity/race", age, social class, place of residence, physical type, erotic

[5] I am referring here to the study "Desejos em Rede" conducted in São Paulo since late 2007 and financed by CNPq. For a summary of its results, see Miskolci, 2013a.

[6] To be "out of the closet" encompasses a wide variety of ways to negotiate the visibility of homosexuality, which I explore in the article "Negociando Visibilidades" (2014).

[7] All of them are aimed at a male gay public. Grindr is the oldest, released in 2009 – and aimed at a young public that is in good physical shape as is its closest competitor, Hornet. Scruff is segmented for men with beards and by bodies that tend to attract a bit older public than Grindr, who are less interested in bodily techniques such as working out. Jack'ed – at least in San Francisco – attracts a predominantly white young and adult public, a form of segmentation in a city with a vast majority of Asians and Latinos.

segmentation and self-identification (as gays, "masculines", queers, trans, *bears*, *otters*, etc.).

I was able to achieve a diverse and expressive group of interlocutors, even if my body and my corporality had also impeded or made it difficult to obtain proximity with some profiles such as trans people and men with a heterosexual social life, but who secretly look for same-sex partners (a practice called DL, or *on the down low*).

Since the first contacts, I realized that my physical type was better accepted in the context of San Francisco than in São Paulo, where I am frequently evaluated as a "foreigner." Preliminarily, I recognized that because I am white, reddish-blond (in Brazil most people consider me blond, while in the United States most people classify me as a redhead), appear younger than I am and speak English well allowed me to establish good communications.

Little by little, I was able to perceive that because I am white I was seen to be closer in class terms to my interlocutors in the United States than in Brazil and – in a certain way – my corporality is seen as more masculine in the U.S. than in Brazil. I realized this in daily situations when I was called *dude* by other men, something that never happens in Brazil, where my whiteness and corporality create a class/gender profile that distances me from average Brazilian men. Moreover, I found that nationality reinforced my masculinity and, at times, attributed a certain sex appeal to me linked to the American erotic imaginary about Brazilians.

I tried to have face-to-face meetings with all those willing to give interviews, always meeting in a public place according to their schedules. The best and longest interviews took place after their work hours or on a day when they were free, which also allowed me to accompany them on some daily activity such as shopping or laundry (Americans often wash their clothes in automatic laundries outside their apartments).

Of the 23 people I interviewed in person, I had closer and more prolonged contact with three of them, who I present to reflect on their lives in the city, how they use the mobile digital media in

their sociability and their various experiences in romantic and sexual relations with other men. My objective is to articulate, based on the experiences situated, the economic, cultural and technological phenomenon that I have presented and that I also found upon making contact with them by means of the apps: Parker through Jack'ed, Juan through Adam4Adam and Joe through Grindr. The first lives in Noe Valley, the second in Hayes Valley and the third in the Castro, three different neighborhoods, but not very far from each other and with a gentrified profile.

Parker is 24, black, was born on an Air Force base in the American Midwest, and grew up in Sacramento, the capital of California, he said it was a sprawled city of nearly one million people with a very conservative lifestyle. His mother separated from his father when he was young and he was raised by only his military father in a Baptist family; a religion that he distanced himself from during adolescence when he said that he discovered he was gay. He has a degree in accounting. When he told his father he was gay, this created a great distance in their relationship. He then moved to Silicon Valley, in San Jose, where he shared an apartment with friends and began his professional life. He currently lives in San Francisco, works at a startup in SOMA and looks for older partners for a serious and monogamous relationship.

Juan, 29, comes from a city on the southern California coast. Unlike Parker, Juan is not looking for dates and says he is happy with only *fuck buddies* and that San Francisco provides this in abundance. The son of a black mother and white-Mexican father, his racial status is difficult to classify, even for North Americans. His parents separated and he was raised by his mother, but maintained a close relationship with his Mexican grandparents. He explained that his maternal family became distant from his mother because she did not marry a black man, and because she became a Catholic. He has a degree in administration and works in Silicon Valley for a multinational company. He considers the Bay Area an ideal place for the lifestyle he has chosen, but affirms that it is difficult to stay in the city due to the high cost of living.

Joe, 33, is a descendent of Italians, was born in New Jersey, and decided to move to San Francisco, combining the professional opportunity that he found in the city with its open and liberal environment, and affirms that he is focused on long-lasting relations and that the hookup culture left him depressed to the point that he sought psychological help. He now combines therapy with anti-depressives and is trying to recover by expanding his sociability. He said that in relation to friends, he has difficulty finding romantic partners because he likes to stay at home and enjoys more intellectual activities like theater and opera.

My closest collaborators have in common that they are young professionals with university education who have come from other cities in search of work opportunities and also better conditions for their romantic and sexual lives. The fact that they are from other locations is what they say is most common in the region and I also found this upon meeting dozens of people, most of whom had moved to the Bay Area. San Francisco is a city that – like New York – attracts many residents because of its economic, cultural and education dynamism. It has residents from throughout the world, but undeniably, people from other parts of California and neighboring western states predominate. One thing is certain, if the dream had once been to move to San Francisco, today it seems to be to be able to stay there.

Parker said that he has come out to his family and friends, but does not show his face on app profiles. Curiously, he seems to like the app Jack'd more, which many told me is the "whitest" app (at least in San Francisco and at the time of the study). In a certain way, this is coherent, given that Parker told me that he has never had a relationship as he would like to, but that he is trying to find one with white men, older than 30, who generally have more stable economic and personal lives. His most recent relationship was with a white man who lived in the suburbs, who was recently separated from a woman. The photos that he showed me depicted a handsome, athletic man with the style of the "All American guy", that is a middle class man, clearly dedicated to sports, probably

popular in high school and an athlete (a jock) at university. This is a prototype of a well adjusted and socially accepted man.

At the time of our contact, Parker was in a turbulent moment with this man, who was particularly "paranoid" and felt exposed going out in public with Parker because he lived in a very white region and had no black friends. As observed in other recent ethnographies, like that of Michael Kimmel (2008), Parker and other nonwhite men I interviewed usually defined their searches by refusing a hookup and saying that they are focused on a *LTR* (long term relationship). But I also perceived that the rationally initiated intention that they told me defined the search became modified with the contact and as a result of the relationship. One day, while we walked on Valencia Street, he pointed out a man who walked by on the sidewalk saying: "That guy was one of my hookups when I lived in San José". I smiled and asked: "But didn't you say that you didn't [hook up]?". He smiled without responding. I understood that affairs that did not become relationships retrospectively could be seen as hookups, which is even a way to downplay their importance.

Juan, meanwhile, complained that he attracted college guys much younger than himself. On his profile on the apps he only partially shows his face and more of his defined chest. He says that he looks for guys up to 33 for sex, fun and friendship with a special predilection for "bearded *hipsters*". He has lived in the city for a few years and appears to be integrated to local gay life without adhering too much to the Castro circuit. His racially mixed profile appears to eroticize him, as does his athletic southern California style. Like Parker, he seems to look for partners whiter than himself, but without expectations of creating a monogamous relationship. In part, as I discovered after a few months of coexistence, because he came to have a fixed partner for a few years, but found out that this man had been cheating on him regularly through the apps, which Juan discovered when they planned to live together.

Juan had a special inclination for conversations about cultural differences and beyond English, spoke Spanish well, a bit

of German and Arabic. He liked to travel and said he loved Spain and Italy, but had a special admiration for Japan. He said he did not like China and it was clear he had no interest in Chinese-Americans, which he made a point of stating each time he interacted with them. He told me that he had an affair with a Brazilian doctor, who he said was "truly Brazilian": with brown skin, dark hair and green eyes. He repeated the "truly Brazilian" for me because I had a different status in his eyes. The nationality would adhere more to my physical type as a positive cultural element, but without the eroticism that could be associated to it given that – according to Juan, Parker and Joe – I "pass for American".

"Passing for an American" however, had its limitations. Brazilianness was a mutant attribute that at times stuck to me and at times did not, leaving me with a peculiar status in the eyes of my interlocutors. My Brazilian nationality was raised in the discussion almost always as a need to contrast my proximity with them or of the white Americanness with that of other Brazilians. The fact that I am Brazilian approximated me to them despite my whiteness. At the same time, my Brazilianness was de-eroticized in comparison with other Brazilians, who are frequently seen as darker, to have a stronger accent and remembered erotically as (potential) partners.

Parker and Juan said they felt at ease with me even though I am white, because even though I have red hair and green eyes I was different than a white man, closer to blackness and or Latin in their eyes. Jose, in turn, as an Italian-American, considered me "whiter than he is", who was sometimes confused with being a Jew. In common, although never verbalized, I believe that my condition as a foreigner who appeared to be a local made me an interesting and safe contact, given that it was separated from networks of local relations that could cross with theirs. The fact that I was a visiting scholar and not connected to their daily networks of relations had an effect similar to one I observed in my fieldwork in Sao Paulo, making me a "safe" contact, a type of confidant,

someone reliable and informed whose opinions they tended to listen to and incorporate.

Parker in particular, perhaps because he was younger and in a tumultuous relationship, was the one who appeared most to hope to discover something about himself in our conversations and interviews. Juan, in turn, appeared more curious about Brazil and the Portuguese language, than in the opportunity to understand himself through our contact. A bit older, but above all much more secure about his life and his sexuality than Parker, he was more interested in expanding cultural horizons in his friendships. Joe, due to his recent depression and psychological treatment, was clearly drawn to self-examining conversations which – not by chance – led him to associate much of what we discussed with what led him to therapy.

Parker and Juan, in the U.S. context, belong to social groups that were historically racialized, which even reflects the high investment that both made in their bodies by attending gyms 4 to 7 days a week. Parker is tall, muscular, dresses with refinement and drives a BMW. Juan, who is close to 30, commented to me that he was afraid of losing his appeal in the spaces of gay socialization, which he sought to counterbalance through exercise and dieting. His defined physique, athletic lifestyle and California manner of someone who grew up on the coast appears to me to clearly explain why he attracts jocks who are still in college or recent graduates. Joe, in turn, said he has difficulty keeping diets, and did not consider himself disciplined for exercise like most of his friends in the Castro. Without being exactly chubby, Joe has a normal body type, which according to him, in the context in which he lives, makes him not very attractive.

In San Francisco, according to my collaborators, a convergent point of the local erotic regime is the fact that young, white and fit men appear to occupy its center since at least the peak of Falcon Studios, which produced gay porno films that helped to disseminate this model. The fact is that San Francisco is a city with nearly 2/3 non-whites, especially Asians (who are 40% of the population), which makes white men a disputed minority

there. Currently, the pornography industry appears to have lost ground to the exchange of amateur porn over the Internet and even over cell phones. In any case, a few times a Brazilian youth who circulated in the Castro was pointed out to me as one of the best-known porn stars among gays. I had the opportunity to chat with him a few times on the apps and discovered that he was a 23-year-old white man from São Paulo who had been living for four years in the city.

The Internet killed the gay bar – or the sanitization of cruising

The recent social transformations in San Francisco are usually synthesized in a phrase that is incessantly repeated by many of those I interviewed during the seven months that I spent in the Bay Area: *the Internet killed the gay bar*. According to David M. Halperin (2012:440), there was a drop from 113 gay bars in the city in 1973 to only 33 in 2012, something I consider to be associated not only to the new media, but also to the sanitization that took over this sphere of sociability with the persecution of tobacco, alcohol and the rise of the gym as the new center of gay life.

The new digital media only reinforce this new situation in which there is a progressive "deterritorialization" of the previous sociability. Thus, even the Castro has lost its importance and for some of the younger gays has become an old-fashioned neighborhood. Accompanying my local interlocutors I could understand how their lives were connected by the digital media, in particular by means of the smartphone and tablet apps, creating networks for relationships and sociabilities that are independent from the territoriality that marked earlier generations that found their geographic center in the Castro and the gay bar as their preferred meeting point.

Perhaps it would be better to reflect on this "deterritorialization" as something relative, in reality a trend to separate socialization and fixed geographic locations, which led to giving priority to what McQuire (2008) calls "spatial relations." In

this context, what counts most is mobility, something very accessible in American society, in which for decades social life has revolved around the automobile culture. In the case of San Francisco, this is combined with good public transportation that allows reaching the main points of socialization for possible face-to-face meetings.

The contrast between the lifestyle known by gays older than 40 and that found today is recognizable in the statements of many of the men who I met in San Francisco and who do not feel connected to the Castro's gay scene. For them, it is something that is outdated or stereotyped. Richard, 37, a psychologist from Los Angeles, who has been living in the city for seven years in the South of Market neighborhood, defines the Castro as a neighborhood of "gym bunnies", as a way to denominate muscular gay men who live in the health clubs, shopping centers and bars.

The division between the gays of Castro and the neighborhoods such as SOMA (South of Market) appear to point to a division of experience with a strong age and generational base. I found that many users of digital media come to consider face- to-face flirting as rude and associate it with older men who do not know how to "break the ice" in advance by means of a message on one of the apps. Even at a cafe, a bar or in a club, these days most gays grab their smartphones to see what users are close by and online. What is attractive to the new generations and has even been incorporated, creates awkwardness and difficulties in relationships for the older men.

Given a rise of suicides among middle age or older gays, in mid 2013, the local gay community came to create a commission to discuss what was happening, which generated an article on the first page of the oldest and most popular local LGBT newspaper, the *Bay Area Reporter*. According to the article, many representatives of the community complained of isolation and the difficulty of socializing in the bars, where "young men keep looking at their phones". Paradoxically, one of the solutions suggested to

decrease the isolation of the old men was the incentive to use the online social networks.[8]

Based on interviews that I conducted with men between 40 and 67, I would add that the experience of older gay men in San Francisco suffers from more than this technological-generational cleavage, but also with the fact that men over 50 were those who had their support networks most affected by the drama of the AIDS epidemic. They lost friends or companions and also created a sense of "community" in relation to the public health emergency, political engagement and identifications that began to be distant and strange to the new generations, in particular those younger than 40.

Men who became adults at the time of the invention of the antiretroviral cocktail, the dissemination of access to the Internet and the so-called rise of the *Pink Market* have a very different experience of homosexuality than the previous generations. This new scenario has led to the construction of a new image of homosexuality, progressively more associated to the demands for assimilation to the market, equal citizenship and a visibility that was more palatable to American society in general (Puar, 2007; Eng, 2010). The digital media are part of this broader process that generated experiences of homosexualities that are more individualized and mainstream.

The older men comment with nostalgia about the decline of the culture of the bars and cruising, that is, a culture more open to sexual experimentation. According to the reports that I collected among older gay men, the old cruising was characterized by uncertainty and chance. Cruising denotes a drift, a circular route without a defined path or destination in search of a possible sexual partner. When someone appeared, there was a type of cost-benefit analysis based on the scarcity of partners that tended to make attractive contact with people of a different class, age or ethnic-racial identity.

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[8] Available at:
<http://www.ebar.com/news/article.php?sec=news&article=68819>.

Since the end of the twentieth century, the consolidation of what many call hookup culture is said to have originated on U.S. university campuses as a common practice among hetero- and homosexuals. According to Michael Kimmel (2008:201), in straight contexts, the practice of hooking-up was a tactic to put off longer lasting relationships to allow greater dedication to studies and a professional career. It is possible to raise the hypothesis that the arrival of techies and hipsters in San Francisco contributed to its popularization also among gays, who now use the expression hookup much more than cruising.

Whatever the origin of the contemporary form of hookup, since the release of the first dating app, Grindr, in 2009, the practice has strengthened. One of the main characteristics of the use of the apps - which distinguishes it from the old cruising – is that they provide the opportunity to select partners. The new generations find in the apps an economy of abundance that induces the choice of the most "handsome" or "interesting", even for a fortuitous sexual encounter, so that geolocalization only adds the criteria of proximity to the selection process. The apps are direct descendants of other online socialization platforms, particularly sites that allow searching for partners and the nearly abandoned chat rooms. Along this evolutionary line of platforms the possibility for selection remains the main attraction.

The origin of this desire for selection, at least in homosexual contexts, is directly related with the sexual panic caused by the AIDS epidemic. During the period in which the syndrome was seen as fatal and untreatable, it became a common practice to look for partners "out of the scene" because it was believed that men who did not frequent the openly gay places of socialization spaces had a lower chance of being HIV positive (Miskolci, 2013a). The rise of the commercial Internet in the mid 1990s made this search possible, beginning with the use of chat rooms, a nearly "pedagogical" experience that shifted to the next platforms until reaching the applications for mobile devices.

Thus, it is possible to place the origin of the hookup among gays in the process of sanitization of the search for partners offered

by the digital media. This cleansing which is in keeping with the gentrification process in San Francisco, which makes the public space increasingly more controlled and propitious to hegemonic heterosexual sociabilities. In this context, the homosexual sociability increasingly tends to migrate to the online relationship space.

It is not difficult to associate this new situation with the constant complaints of gays older than 50, many of whom express a sense of irremediable loss of space and collective recognition. Most of them had helped to conquer space in the Castro and associated most of their political victories and enjoyable experience of socialization to off-line sociability, but they now see that the character of the neighborhood has changed and their circle of relations has diminished in face of the uncontestable hegemony of another lifestyle. Among the losses stand out the not unsubstantial command of codes for socialization and romantic conquest.

To the eyes of this generation, the universe of online dating can appear arid, even hostile. In the universe of the apps, the apparent abundance of partners is counterbalanced by the context of the romantic and sexual market, dominated by generalized competition for profiles considered more desirable, while the majority encounter various forms of discrimination, rejection and frustration. At the same time that these platforms expand the number of potential partners, they also require the user to present himself and especially to make himself desirable. It is a difficult exercise that involves other technologies that are not only communicational but also corporal, such as the practice of weight lifting, the consumption of dietary supplements and dieting.

The use of the digital media in search of romantic partners inserts the user in a market guided by commercially molded values and ideas, but it is not only a commercial logic intrinsic to them that guides these contacts and searches. It is necessary to remember the context in mutation in San Francisco and how there is less space and less recognition for the establishment of dissident lifestyles and relationships as in the past. Currently, most gays with

whom I had contact appear to have their romantic searches – and even sexual ones – guided by standards that involve the lifestyle and even the aesthetic of the ascendant social classes.

Parker is looking for an "All American guy", Juan for a hipster – which he associated to technology professionals that others would call techies – while Joe looked for a possible romantic partner who is compatible with his educational and economic level. The difficulties that they find involve the negotiation of their non-hegemonic or desired characteristics, like the non-whiteness of Parker and Juan or Joe's somewhat overweight body. They are certainly embodied characteristics that emphasize the centrality of the body in the apps, particularly because images are the main form of expression on them. Personality, humor and charm are unlikely to find an appropriate vehicle on these platforms and are normally better recognized in face- to-face interactions.

For these reasons, it is possible to define the digital medias as means that allow creating selective relational networks within a type of romantic and sexual market, which rose from the so-called Sexual Revolution and which can now only be visualized by means of sites and apps. In the sphere of mediated flirting, the body has significant importance, and is often determinant in the contacts. As Juan and Parker demonstrated, an athletic or well-toned body can make racial frontiers more flexible in the world of dating. Or, in the case of Joe, an overweight body can hamper meeting potential partners.

It was not the apps that imposed these corporal models or criteria for selecting partners. They only make their existence more perceptible to their users, who find different ways of dealing with them: some adhere to apps that are aimed at their age group, body-type or erotic style; others by trying to negotiate their differences or even adopting corporal practices that can place them within the dominant erotic regime. Parker decided to use an app through which he would find partners with the profile that attracted him; Joe sought to negotiate his characteristics on one

with a mainstream profile, while Juan dedicated himself intensely to working-out to guarantee his online desirability.

Amid so many transformations, something appears to remain: the greater number of obstacles for gays to socialize and meet romantic partners in comparison to heterosexuals. The reasons most mentioned by the individuals in the study point to characteristics supposedly specific to homosexual men such as the fact that – like all men – they are educated to be sexual predators. But it is necessary to relativize these assumptions and bring to light the social barriers to homosexual romantic involvement and above all flirting. Among them, I focus here on only two: socioeconomic vulnerability and the moral and health fears related to AIDS.

Despite the political advances and conquests, homosexuality is still largely a negative or subalternizing attribute in the labor market, which tends to be aggravated in contexts of economic crisis as that experienced since 2007 in the United States. The generation that experienced Gay Liberation lived in an economically better time and created or collected the fruits of what is now called the Sexual Revolution. Their rallying cry was "out," to come out of the closet, to admit one's homosexuality to one's family and build an independent and alternative life in San Francisco. Most of the current generation came out of the closest earlier in life and in a less traumatic manner, but strives to insert itself in a hegemonic context by negotiating its visibility with greater fear of losing their independence.

The sense of vulnerability needs to be considered to understand the emphasis on the use of apps for relationships without commitment. At least among my interlocutors in this study in San Francisco, the practice of hookups involved the strategic use of ephemeral relations to remain independent and flexible to the adversities. Work – and not a romantic partner – is the most constant company in their lives.

I gathered evidence that work is considered more essential to them than to heterosexuals, given that most associate their economic independence with the freedom to experience their homosexuality. Moreover, most admitted to me that they could

not count on family support, not even occasionally. To be openly gay for them was both a conquest and a burden, because it involved a type of commitment to becoming completely responsible for their own survival. In the U.S. culture, to lose financial independence is equivalent to being a loser and requiring help from the family is seen as a type of failure.

Even if San Francisco is relatively more liberal and open to homosexualities than other U.S. cities, in the professional sphere, most of my informants report feeling more vulnerable to economic instabilities and even to possible discrimination. Even when they do not hide their sexuality, they say they try to be discrete. This discretion is easier to achieve without a romantic partner or without being in a relationship that appears like a marriage. Yet the condition of being single in search of partners evokes stigmatizing images in relation to homosexual dating and flirting. The geolocalized apps make proximity/practicality a tension-creating element in dating, evoking ghosts from that practice of cruising like those of marginality and HIV contamination.

The fear of AIDS may have lost intensity since the peak of mortality during the epidemic, but there continues to be a type of negotiated and constant relationship with the danger of becoming positive. Many of my interlocutors say that the number of positive men in the city is two in every five gay men, which makes them think that becoming HIV positive while living in San Francisco is only a matter of time. The interactions on the apps – unlike those in a context like that of São Paulo – are intermediated by questions about your serological status, practice of sex with condoms and the date of one's last test, which is a practice that Kane Race (2007) calls *serosorting:* the choice for partners according to their serological status.[9]

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[9] Brazil has a universal AIDS treatment program based on prevention, but also on free access to treatment. In this context, safe sex practices are considered an assumption and serosorting is not a common practice as it is in the US. That is the main reason the interactions on the apps in São Paulo are so different from those in San Francisco, where men do not have free treatment and tend to deal individually with the risk of becoming HIV positive.

Those who are HIV positive use the symbol [+] or variations on it on their profile like the recently popular "*poz undetectable*". I realized that the affirmation about being positive is only less valuable than that of being "undetectable", which shows that the user is in successful treatment and that the virus has not been found in his bloodstream. Those who are HIV negatives tend to use terms like "*neg and DDF*" (to indicate they are negative and drug and disease free) frequently added to expressions that indicate their search for someone similar. Profiles also appear with expressions such as "negative and on PrEP", which means that the person is HIV negative and practices Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis by taking a daily pill that supposedly decreases the risk of becoming contaminated. Those who reveal greater refusal to HIV positives say they are looking for "clean people", explicitly associating the HIV positives to impurity.

Thus, the hookups facilitated by the dating apps are inserted in a new economy of desire, shaped by the gentrification of urban space, economic transformations and the advent of the new digital media. The preliminary results of the ethnography in San Francisco only partially corroborate the observations of Dan that were presented at the beginning of the article. Instead of being a stimulant to risky relations, the apps tend to create filters and selections that sanitize looking for sex. The geolocalization only introduces one more factor to be considered in the selection, proximity, evoking in more impressionable minds the ghost of cruising during the sexual AIDS panic of the 1980s. An aspect whose permanence shows the continuity of the fear and refusal of homosexual sex as a vector for risk and contamination, which can only be redeemed by transmutation into "love."

The paradox of the affirmations of this interlocutor that hookups would be risky, associated to the fact that he has sex without condoms, is only revealed when it is understood that he bases himself on the same logic that permeates heterosexual relationships. The possibility for reproduction and broad and unlimited social recognition of these relations causes heterosexual

men and women to rarely associate unprotected sex with risk and contamination.

From Dan's perspective, it is not only sex without condoms that threatens him, but sex without commitment, which is supposedly "dirty" and therefore morally reprehensible. His "protection" would be the search for a serious relationship, a long term commitment, that is, the type of relationship in which it would be morally more acceptable to have sex without a condom even if, in epidemiological terms, it is precisely in this type of relationship that contamination by sexually transmitted diseases gains potential. Contrary to his affirmation, the hookup is not intrinsically risky while the recognition and the normalization of a type of relationship – in the case of a lasting commitment and its variations such as romance and marriage – could be.

Negative evaluations of the apps – or the practice of hooking-up in general – may associate them to controversial and risky sexual practices, but above all demonstrate the moralizing trend that has marked the recent history of San Francisco, and progressively transformed its older residents, particularly gays, into strangers in a techie and hipster paradise.

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