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Editor’s Note

By M.D.A. Routledge  
(Submission Editor & PhD Candidate)

To say it has been eighteen months of upheaval, grief and sorrow does not adequately describe the global trauma that has been suffered. Even though, throughout the pandemic life has continued on with its usual strains and great joys. People have carried on working throughout, and Goldsmiths students are no different. Being separated from campus and the academic, social and pastoral support that comes along with it in many ways. Students have attended a university they have never seen let alone been able to engage in activities of student life that have become somewhat a rite of passage for many.

Throughout this time, a group of Post-Graduate Research students in the Anthropology Department have been working to create this journal. This work has taken place alongside studying, funding attempts, fieldwork, thesis write-ups, teaching and other employment. The sense of achievement in being able to pull this project together is shared by the entire team. This journal has been created in light of the difficulties faced by student and early-career anthropologists being published in established journals. Additionally, the current system for publication is long and convoluted meaning work can take years to be published. With this journal, the
team are looking to test ways to streamline the process by trial and error to make the unpaid work of running an open source journal as minimal as possible and will only accept submissions from student, PGR and early career researchers as the lead author in an attempt to combat these tensions.

In this inaugural issue, we do not have a topic theme. Rather you will find work produced by Goldsmiths Anthropology Students throughout the pandemic. I list them here to highlight these students work without any exhaustive description or analysis to allow their work to speak for itself. An essay by Jordy Barlow (Y0 BA) looks at gay cruising and social media’s impact on anonymous sex, a conference paper delivered by myself (PhD) at EASA questions the need and impact of separating the practice and implications of sex, sensuality and romance, and a collaborative visual essay from Harry Rodgers (MRes) and Emily Christine Lloyd-Evans (MA) following a larger project in the department looking at Tiktok as a platform for identity recreation. Finally, we have Nena Bisceglia (Y2 BA) discussing the relationship between precarity, political action and the body.

I speak for the editorial board, and all the submitting students, when I say we greatly appreciate your support in reading our newly founded journal and hope you share it widely with your networks. Together we can ensure this continues and gains traction so student and early career anthropologists have more platforms to share their work.
Gay Cruising and Social Media: Has Online Culture Killed the Concept of Anonymous Sex?

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Abstract

Gay cruising has been synonymous with gay culture since ancient times yet its existence in recent decades is seemingly being threatened by the rise of gay social media. This research paper explores the changing sexual behaviours of men seeking men by investigating the relationship between traditional cruising and organised sex via apps and gay websites. Using anthropological research methods and exploring themes of sexuality, the digital and queer subculture my study shows that cruising is a continuously evolving concept.

Keywords: gay cruising, queer, Grindr, sexuality

Introduction

It is March 2021. The UK is amid a full national lockdown, and I am, along with many others taking an afternoon stroll on a rare sunny day in one of London’s many green spaces (see figure 1). This park is one of London’s largest; while notable for its stunning landscapes, it’s also home to a little talked about queer subculture: cruising. I’ve purposely come to this area of London as it’s known to be one of the busiest cruising locations in the world. I also know as I sit here, numerous men are ready and waiting to have sex. I know their name, age, HIV status, the area they live in, previous sexual partners, their favourite sexual position... the list goes on. I know all these thanks to the website Squirt.org, an online platform created specifically for gay cruising. Defined in its simplest form, cruising is the act of men seeking anonymous sex from other men. If that is so, and I have all this information before a meeting, is this still anonymous
sex? My research starts here; I want to know what cruising is in this post-digital era. Have online platforms and smartphones killed the traditional practice of anonymous sex? My results were ambiguous, but I argue that no, this is still cruising, just an adapted version, a cruising 2.0 if you will.

In the 1990s anthropologists turned to consider sexuality in new ways. This can be seen in Vance’s (1991) work where she identifies problems in previous decades in the discipline, of sexuality, in particular queer sexualities, being ignored. She draws attention to new questions about identity, gender politics, and the natural. Around the same time, Judith Butler (1990) published her highly influential book Gender Trouble. By 2007, Boellstorff (2007) recognised that queer studies was still marginal in anthropology. A decade later Boyce et al were referring to a queer anthropology as a necessary subcategory of the field that addresses lived experiences. This can also be seen in Shields (2018) work on Grindr which addresses queer relationships through the digital.

Keeping the Anonymous: Anonymous and Staying Ethical

When conducting research, ethics must be the main priority for any anthropologist, as we are studying real people and collecting potentially sensitive information, especially within my chosen topic. Laud Humphreys (1970), a sociologist who also studied public sex in his book Tearoom Trade, provided an interesting case study of how not to present my research with his unethical sharing of personal information which could identify participants easily. I knew choosing to study the cruising community would create obstacles as the community is mainly anonymous and notoriously secret. Ongoing lockdown restrictions due to the COVID-19
Pandemic also made in-person meetings extremely difficult. I’ve taken inspiration from the work of Daniel Miller (2016) and his social media ethnography, which uses traditional anthropological theories and adapts them for the study of the online world. Accordingly, I began to focus my research on the relationship between cruising and the rise of gay social media apps. As anthropologist Christian Phillips (2015) mentions in their study of gay social media, ‘gay men pioneered social users of the internet and were among the first to search the corners of cyberspace for sex partners’ (pp. 71). With more people than ever now having access to smartphones and the internet, I believe the relationship between anonymous sex and social media is a crucial concept to study.

I will refer to Grindr numerous times over the course of this research paper, as it was one of the prominent platforms used to conduct my research. Users know Grindr as a ‘hook-up’ app, usually meant for short term sexual relations. As Grindr houses intimate details it is essential to note any participants’ identities are entirely anonymous, and full permission has been given to include details of conversations made through the app. Another anthropologist whom I’ve taken inspiration from is Andrew DJ Shield (2018), who researched LGBT immigrants within Copenhagen and their use of Grindr:

‘most Grindr users expect discretion and privacy, and thus I avoid personally identifiable information. Direct quotations from profiles cannot be readily linked to individual profiles since Grindr texts are not searchable and web-based engines like Google’. (pp. 153)

Cruising is typically associated with gay men who previously used the activity as the only way to find other gay men for sexual relations. The changes Phillips identifies are crucial in the context of how gay men make relationships. The rise of digital media platforms allows for easier access to LGBTQ+ virtual spaces permitting gay men to meet other men in circumstances other than cruising. Arguably the most infamous of all LGBTQ+ social media is Grindr. In the survey I conducted, when asked which gay social media app you used most frequently, 52.5% said Grindr, with Scruff in second place with 15%. Grindr, launched in 2009, has firmly cemented a place within gay culture. It is a geographical location-based social media app, launched specifically for gay men to meet other gay men within their local area, usually for sexual intent.

Interestingly, Grindr and cruising do share many parallels as the primary use is for a short no strings attached (NSA) interaction. Through my observations of...
Grindr interactions, I can see the maximum separation between a Grindr hook-up, and a random cruising meet up is the planning and preparation that happens beforehand. Traditionally with Grindr, the etiquette would be a short greeting, picture exchange, and arranging where the meet up will occur. I have included a photo (see figure 2) of an interaction between two Grindr users; names and pictures have been hidden for the users’ privacy and full permission has been given.

Cruising 2.0

In my anonymous survey I asked, ‘Have you ever had an NSA sexual encounter through a gay dating app?’ 90% of my responses said yes. However, only 33.3% said yes when asked the same question, but in relation to cruising a public place instead. My research is telling me that there is a definite difference between the two types of meeting. One participant left an anonymous response, ‘My experience has been that cruising was more for older generations that came of age before the online meeting became common’. Linking to Christian Phillips’s 2015 study and the birth of new human relationships, I would argue that this generational difference is due to the rapid adoption of the internet into societies and the globalisation of LGBTQ+. Queer lifestyle has become more apparent, thus leading to more than one way for men seeking men to meet each other.

Another notable finding was when asked, ‘do you think an online hook-up is socially acceptable?’ 97.5% said yes. Interestingly, only 67.5% responded yes when asked, ‘do you think cruising is socially acceptable?’ I believe the lower percentage here to be due to the age ranges of participants within the survey, as the most common age was between 18-29 (55%). One anonymous user said:

‘I don’t think cruising is becoming obsolete. It may be less prevalent among very young people, but I still see it happening around me. Also, with Covid lockdowns and the closure of places where people would meet for sex – gay saunas, sex clubs etc, also the fear of getting infected by strangers in your home – cruising areas around me have become incredibly crowded’.

(Anonymous respondent 2021)

It seems that age is a common factor in determining who is likely to cruise. However, since the pandemic cruising activity has increased. This could be due to lockdown rules which specify home visits are not allowed. Apps like Grindr usually involve a home visit, while Squirt is aimed towards anonymous public meet ups.

Brandon Andrew Robinson and David A. Moskowitz (2013), two sociologists who researched the eroticism of online behaviour of men seeking men, said: ‘the Internet has become a crucial medium for many people to explore their sexuality, especially for men seeking other men for sexual purposes’ (pp.1). I found this to be the case in my data, especially in terms of the gay social media website, Squirt. Robinson and Moskowitz add, ‘the internet’s accessibility, affordability and anonymity have allowed men seeking men to experiment with sexual identities and behaviours’ (pp.1). Squirt does precisely this; it allows users to experiment with cruising and eliminate many dangers involved with traditional cruising. Users can review particular areas or comment if any homophobic activity has been noted in the area. This is important as attacks upon LGBTI+ people are still extremely common. Interestingly, in my survey, only 2.5% of participants answered to frequently using Squirt. However, I argue that the lower number is because Squirt is a website one has to pay a subscription fee for, while most other social media platforms are free.
As mentioned earlier, the preparation with how someone would plan their meet up seems to be the critical difference between cruising and a hook-up. Squirt does allow users to pre-plan their cruising meet ups; however, from my observation of the website, the planning is more aloof. One would leave a comment saying that they would be in an area for an afternoon, nothing too specific as anonymity is still part of the act. Users can choose to use real names on the site, but most users use pseudonyms. Squirt is an excellent example of what I mean when speaking of a cruising 2.0; we can link it to Lee Humphrey’s (2018) theory of media accounting. Media accounting traces the media we leave behind on whatever platform we are using. For example, on Squirt if a user writes a comment, that’s evidence of them being there and using the platform. However, Humphrey argues that this isn’t a new concept, ‘Media accountings are overlooked practices that reveal the ways we have incorporated media into our everyday lives for hundreds of years’ (pp.115). There is evidence of cruising dating thousands of years; people would leave markings on public walls to claim an area as a cruising location (Espinoza 2019); we can compare this to leaving a comment on a website. I suggest that a website like Squirt doesn’t lose its cruising credibility just because it is an online platform. It is an adapted version of cruising, and similar to how Instagram is seen as the twenty-first century version of a photo album.

Conclusion: Cruising is Here to Stay

While my responses from users are mixed concerning cruising, I wouldn’t argue that anonymous sex has been killed by online culture. I do believe cruising culture to have lost momentum within younger generations due to the broader acceptance of LGBTQ+ people across the world, but there certainly still is a surviving culture; it just may look different to how it did 50 years ago. The cruising community is adapting just like the world is, and I’m sure this won’t be its final form; for as long as there is sexual desire, I imagine there to be a desire for anonymous public sex.

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Intimate Snapshots: TikTok, Algorithm, and the Recreation of Identity

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Abstract

As the Covid-19 pandemic gripped the world, many became physically isolated and disconnected. During this time TikTok became the most downloaded app of the year, quickly becoming a global sensation. This article offers an initial exploration of two key themes relating to the app and begins situating what made the app popular during an unprecedentedly tumultuous period. To achieve this, we consider algorithmic intimacy and representations of identity as a starting point for deeper engagement with TikTok and what makes it unique to other social media platforms. This article first explores the ways in which the TikTok algorithm captures and reflects forms of user identity through the For You Page (FYP). This is then explored in relation to the forms of intimacy, which are enabled through the algorithm both in relation to user and platform and user relationships with other users and non-users. This article describes innovative and unique collaborative ethnographic methods, which make the space between user and screen methodologically viable. Where more conventional anthropological methods would struggle, this collaborative approach also draws attention to potential ethics of care toward researchers operating in times of pandemic and the feelings of isolation and anxiety, which frequently accompany the ‘lone ethnographer’.

Keywords: Algorithm, Digital Methods, Collaborative Methods, TikTok
Introduction

As the Covid-19 pandemic gripped the world, billions were forced to renegotiate their relationship with the world around them. They were forced to discover new ways to work, socialise, forge new relationships, shop, find entertainment, learn new skills, and everything in between, all without being able to leave their homes. Though this article will specifically address Covid-19 lockdown conditions, these avenues of communication are also relevant when considering marginalised, oppressed, and displaced groups that experience violence and lockdown-esque conditions in different contexts. Examples can be found in those living through the 2021 Myanmar coup, Black Lives Matter protests, and displaced or immobile diasporas across the globe.

As drastic lockdown restrictions were imposed to varying degrees worldwide, people began seeking out new apps aiding connections between distanced and displaced people through the digital realm, with Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, Zoom, and WhatsApp all receiving millions of downloads. However, none of these apps received as much attention as TikTok. Originally conceived as an app for synchronised dance videos, it quickly became understood as ‘the app of lockdown’ and received 850 million downloads in 2020 alone (Koetsier, 2021). TikTok enticed users with a hybrid of community, creativity, connection, and entertainment. Resonating with millions of new users, the platform provided a distinct opportunity for individuals to begin re-establishing and curating senses of shared identity, intimacy, and locality in a global network, all mediated by the TikTok platform and its algorithm. This platform offered a snapshot into the everyday lives of the billions of people confined to their homes and began to ease, or at least, sequester, feelings of isolation and loneliness. This occurred with a distinct sense of urgency as lockdowns and the uncertainties which accompanied them swept the globe. What is it that made TikTok...

Figure 1: For You Page (FYP) (Screenshots by Author, 2021)
a uniquely suitable mediator for the lockdown blues? How did people begin to curate their own sense of identity through the app? In this article, we set out to begin answering these questions through our ethnography of the app and its many users.

Apps such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter provide home pages which are comprised of content directly from those that the user follows. This content comes from accounts which are consciously sought out, or stumbled upon, and are actively invited to stream content to the user's home page. TikTok differs substantially through placing greater emphasis on discovery and directing the user to their For You Page (FYP) when the app is initialised (Fig. 1). Although a stream of videos from creators which are followed can be accessed, it is the FYP that the user is constantly redirected to that sets TikTok apart. The FYP is where the TikTok algorithm, an advanced recommendation system often simply referred to as 'The Algorithm', suggests a constant and never-ending stream of videos for the user. These videos are not actively chosen and there is little perceived control over the content displayed. The algorithm provides content, which is said by TikTok (2019) to be 'curated to your interests' to 'inspire creativity and bring joy'.

These terms provided by TikTok offer a starting point for considering the supposed intention of the algorithm and for comparison to the experiences of our interlocutors. The videos presented by the algorithm are sometimes incredibly niche, coupled with exceptionally low view counts and containing hyper-specific content. It is often said that the algorithm taps into personal and intimate dimensions of the user. How the algorithm generates content for the FYP is a subject of frequent discussion and theorisation on the app and by our interlocutors, with TikTokers constantly questioning whether the app is listening into their conversations or using data generated from other websites and social media platforms to provide this tailored content. This article offers an initial exploration into how the TikTok algorithm is responsible for a 'refraction of identity' and how this recreation of identity enables, or impedes, feelings of intimacy both to the algorithm and to other people.

Methods of Collaborative Research

This research is entirely enabled through a collaborative methodology, one which provided us with our own community and support throughout the pandemic and can be considered to be meeting similar needs as those sought out by TikTok users. Comprised of undergraduate and postgraduate anthropology students, lecturers, associate lecturers, and artists, the TikTok Ethnography Collective (TEC) at Goldsmiths provided us...
with the support, training, reflective space, and ethnographic material to begin our own explorations of a digital landscape, which neither of us had prior familiarity. Despite being separated physically, we have been able to conduct research together. Many of us are still yet to meet in person and have only met digitally to discuss findings, host conversations, and to engage in writing prompts designed to spark new ideas surrounding ethnographic engagements with TikTok. The work presented here is from the perspective of two early-stage researchers who have pooled their ethnographic resources with the support of a collective. This article represents both individual research and our role within a larger group ethnography.

We foreground this methodology which challenges the problematic ‘lone researcher’ trope within anthropology, a trope which was particularly unhelpful during lockdown conditions. The experience of conducting isolated ethnography is one which has long been challenged as a masculinised and potentially harmful experience for the researcher. Anthropology has traditionally favoured a form of research which is only possible for a very specific type of person living in very specific, and often, privileged circumstances (Günel, Varma and Watanabe, 2020). The result of this is significant stress, anxiety, and inaccessibility, which impacts the mental health and wellbeing of those conducting anthropological research, whilst further marginalising those who are unable to engage in this mode of working (Weston, 2018). The Covid-19 pandemic further highlighted the need to challenge this tradition, as alternative methods must be considered when forced into isolation, or when the mere presence of a researcher poses a substantial health threat. Considering the impact of lockdown and the limitations of solitary ethnography, the need to enable collaborative projects which aim to promote feelings of cohesiveness and sociality is realised. We are not necessarily suggesting an eradication of this anthropological tradition, but prompt consideration for potential mitigatable harms and the limitations which may be overcome through collaborative methods. We are engaging in a true ‘patchwork ethnography’, one in which we have pieced together interlocutors, research time, reflections, and ethnographic findings to overcome imposed limitations (Günel, Varma and Watanabe, 2020).

Throughout this article, the term ‘interlocutors’ will be used as an inclusive term for those we worked with; a mix of friends, partners, members of the TEC, and TikTok personalities, which were discovered serendipitously through our FYPs or in-person encounters. The voices included are just as expert as our own, but it is worth differentiating between those who are working on the project as members of the TEC and those who temporarily joined us for conversations and to share reflections. For sake of clarity, those who are members of the research collaborative have (TEC) appended to their name. This mode of research has resulted in unique perspectives that could not have been found in solitary ethnography. This article provides additional insights into this mode of working and foregrounds the potential within digital ethnography, where working together we were able to map many different digital worlds and situate our own algorithmic representations and experiences in the context of others.

The Algorithm and Identity

The algorithm of social media seems to be a standard tombola. The algorithm generates videos, seemingly at random, that serve to elicit a response from the viewer. Initially, the TikTok algorithm draws on your age, language preference, location, gender, and device, and begins to incorporate and assign value to user interactions, such as liking, commenting, and watching videos in full or repeatedly (TikTok, 2020). The algorithm then uses this data to curate a feed of videos which will ensure engagement from the user. The algorithm also disperses diverse content styles within the feed and provides videos which may not be the usual content the user engages

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with, but have proven popular with people who share similar interests or demographics. Academic discourse surrounding algorithms has convincingly shown that they can function as a distillation process of societal biases (Noble, 2018). Once immortalised in code, these assumptions begin to be reflected and immortalised within algorithms, hidden behind the common misconception that an algorithm can only be impartial; that numbers, big data, and code are always free from prejudice. Recently the Twitter algorithm was exposed for having a saliency bias towards individuals with visibly lighter skin and slimmer, younger looking faces (Kulynych, 2021). Algorithmic bias leads to the perpetuation and naturalisation of structural inequality, discrimination, and violence hidden behind a thinly veiled guise of neutrality (O’Neil, 2017).

Through working with our group of interlocutors, we began to unpack the lived experience of those engaging with the TikTok algorithm. The interlocutors were invited to engage in exercises, such as taking an ‘ethnographic scroll’ of TikTok, and to share their thoughts, feelings, and reflections afterwards. The ethnographic scroll was an exercise we engaged with throughout the project. It involves noting down, or reflecting upon afterward, the content which was shown on a typical scroll through TikTok (see Fig. 3).

For many of our interlocutors, as demonstrated in the following sections, the algorithmic generation of content was seen as a process that captured and revealed many different aspects of user identity. In browsing TikTok, we may begin to uncover the traces of our own identity, traces which are detected by the algorithm and repurposed into a new iteration of identity in the form of videos generated. In the context of pandemic, the algorithm was a window into other lives and served as a portal to the outside world and to new people and experiences. To enable this connection the algorithm relies on interpretations of the user and how they interact with the platform to provide content which may captivate them.

Due to the co-author’s existing research commitments, many engagements with TikTok have previously taken the form of seeking out Witchcraft communities on the platform through tags such as #witch and #witchtok. For this particular ethnographic engagement, the aim was to engage with the FYP organically. Without a topic in mind, I set out on my own ‘ethnographic scroll’.
Before long, I found that my page was overrun with videos of a darker nature and tone, significantly more serious than the FYPs of my friends, interlocutors, and partner that I had observed. There were videos assigning different ‘toxic traits’, mental health issues, and monsters to different zodiac signs, videos depicting stressful life situations and how the viewer would react, and videos which were tinted with dark humour and dark content. The key difference between my experience and that of others is found in prior engagements with #WitchTok. Through viewing those videos, I had inadvertently influenced my algorithm. The algorithm had decided for me – that I was only interested in the gloomier side of TikTok. It had made a connection to assumptions much older than the technology which enabled them, that Witchcraft is to be associated with fear, mystery, and ultimately distrust. It had algorithmically distilled and reflected the societal distrust of the women seeking out a WitchTok community (O’Neil, 2017).

In considering how the algorithm begins to pass politicised and biased judgements on user activity, we can begin situating feelings which accompany having to confront what the FYP reflects about judgements made relating to identity and how this may be interpreted and misinterpreted by the algorithm, ourselves, and others who view our curated FYP. The video below (Fig. 5) serves as an example of an activity we engaged with and reflected upon. This resource brings to light the extensively diverse nature of content on TikTok, and how this content begins to make sense when the algorithm begins to be curated and tailored to the user.

The FYP serves as a visual representation of how the app perceives a multi-faceted identity and splits it into countless video iterations. As Elena (TEC) writes:

‘Videos of revolution mingle with videos of food being cooked, songs being sung, and people being pranked. There are pieces of my friends in my videos – I see my sister in the videos of horses and fancy French food, I see my friend in the videos of Tamil food and Sri Lankan villages, I see my family in videos of Ukraine and the former Soviet Union’.

Much like a rainbow, where a combination of reflection and refraction creates an optical illusion of colours separating and therefore altering perceptions of light, the algorithm creates a remarkably similar illusion. As Elena highlights above, aspects of identity seem to be separated and displayed as such, captured in each video presented. This forms an intelligible ‘whole’ that takes the form of the FYP. This newly perceivable ‘whole’ identity may be mistaken, by the user or an observer, for an accurate representation of the self, despite being merely an illusion which provides an obscured and incomplete picture.

Each video begins to form a patchwork of identity which may be pieced together and made whole by the user when viewing their FYP as a coherent stream of videos. This patchwork is never made whole by

Figure 4: Refraction of self through tinted (Photos by Author, 2021).
the algorithm, however. The algorithm is incapable of understanding the user as anything but a sum of their parts, as countless snapshots of data, to enable brief moments of captivation. The algorithm is not one which connects and understands identity in a holistic manner, as a person would, but instead scrutinises activity, passes judgement, and can never fully comprehend. These disjointed data points of identity become further misaligned with the user when the context of engagement can never be understood by the algorithm. Through viewing isolated facets of personality, interest, and identity, the algorithm only provides a partial view of the user. As the above example of engagement with #WitchTok demonstrates, the algorithm cannot detect if engagement is motivated by a research topic, simple curiosity, or is in fact a core part of a user’s identity. Without this context of engagement, there is a constant risk for misinterpretation and misjudgement. The algorithm, unless explicitly told through the ‘report’ function, cannot discern if the user felt happiness, joy, sorrow, or fear when viewing a video. Returning to TikTok’s aims, to inspire creativity and joy, this is a concern which cannot be overlooked.

Through these miscalculations and separations, the algorithm creates something that resembles not a reflection, but rather, a refraction, of identity (See fig. 4). As though looking at an object underwater, identity becomes slightly skewed, misshapen, miscoloured, warped, and obscured, but still discernible. The identity crystallised by the algorithm is seen by James (TEC) as a ‘fraternal digital twin’, one which obscures their true identity and creates a sense of unease towards allowing someone to observe their FYP. This warped representation of self is a point which was raised frequently throughout our ethnographic encounters in relation to sharing the FYP with others.

The Algorithmic Relationship and Intimacy

There are several aspects of intimacy, which are present in TikTok engagements. Firstly, notions of intimacy between the user and the algorithm are present. Secondly, there are engagements between the different communities of TikTok users and the attempts to achieve algorithmic recognition as a group member. This final section aims to explore these dynamics and further contextualise the feelings which accompany being interpreted and reproduced by an algorithm. Along with previously discussed ethnographic activities, an additional opportunity was presented to share a screen recording of an ethnographic scroll (see fig. 5). Through this, we begin to explore the feelings which accompany sharing an FYP, and our algorithmic representation, with other people.

Throughout this project it was impossible to escape the ‘relationship’ dynamic present between our interlocutors and the algorithm. Georgia (TEC) suggested that the relationship shares most similarity to a romantic partnership. Despite only using TikTok for several weeks, she felt she had been forced into a very specific space by the algorithm, that of spiritual and psychological TikTok. There was a phrase which Georgia used that resonated with many of us and prompted serious consideration: ‘How do you break up with your algorithm?’ This is not a simple task, as the user has little direct control over content. The opportunities to change an algorithmic relationship are limited. The user can ‘cut their losses’ and create a new account, or uninstall the app and take a vow of digital celibacy. For our group, though, this was not an option. We had to look inwards and begin changing our own behaviour and begin speaking in the language of data points. We had to learn to speak with our algorithms. The app required us to begin acting with more intention, seeking out and engaging with the type of content we desired to see and ignoring that which we did not.
Just like any relationship, this one requires maintenance. Both parties are required to provide and extract simultaneously in an act of compromise. The platform must extract relevant data and provide captivating content, while the user must provide this data and extract content. Only when this relationship is maintained and the two parties meet their obligations to one another, may engagement with TikTok feel harmonious. Harmony between user and app being the supposed ideal. Feelings of identity, which are open to misrepresentation, as discussed above, not being adequately reflected in the FYP, results in some users latching-on and attempting to further cultivate and captivate their algorithm, while others simply withdraw.

Cultivating the algorithm requires specific attention being paid to the type of videos being interacted with or created by the user, as being essential to influencing what was reflected in the FYP. There were constant examples of people attempting to ‘steer’ their algorithm towards certain communities of TikTok, such as WitchTok, PrisonTok, QueerTok, PersianTok, VeganTok, and of course, AnthroTok. Each community helping the algorithm provide content more similar to that of fellow TikTokkers with overlapping
interests. This was an act of voluntary pigeonholing to influence the algorithm's creation of a refracted and fragmented identity, but an identity that some control can be enacted upon in the tug-of-war between algorithmic and user control. As Georgia (TEC) mentions, it was common for users to become trapped in a specific subset of TikTok. There were frequent comments, conversations, and videos, surrounding becoming trapped in the different ‘Tok’ areas, usually accompanied by a plea for ‘LeftistTok’, ‘FeministTok’, or ‘ProVaxTok’ to ‘save them’ and engage with their videos to begin pulling them back to more familiar digital terrain. Users saw engaging with content they liked, by liking and leaving comments, as a way to steer their algorithm in a direction they chose. Our interlocutors demonstrate an acute awareness of the algorithm by deploying different methods to influence and circumvent the algorithm. This is also visible in censoring certain words to avoid being ‘shadow-banned’, and having content hidden from the majority of users. Potentially ‘problematic’ words are self-censored and intentionally obscured or coded to avoid detection.

The algorithm never always behaved how the user wanted. Attempting to avoid FYP stagnation, the algorithm occasionally displays a video separate to curated or assumed interests and is simply there to ‘interrupt repetitive patterns’ with a more ‘diverse’ range of videos (TikTok, 2020). This was experienced in two distinct ways by our interlocutors. When the algorithm suggested a curveball video that contained content resonating on a hyper-specific and personal level, our interlocutors often theorised this newfound intimacy, between identity and algorithm, must be the result of the app secretly gathering data from an unknown source, such as listening in to everyday conversations through their device, reading their emails, or accessing their search history. If the algorithm misjudges and provides content which evokes dissonance, it is understood that there is more work to be done to achieve a harmonious relationship between user and algorithm, as demonstrated above.

![Image of TikTok comments](image.jpg)

Figure 6: Comments on a TikTok video (Hasina Fahim (TEC), 2021).

Revealed in many of our ethnographic engagements, there is a certain stigma and often a fear of judgement that accompanies sharing your FYP with others. The ways in which this is felt reveals a vast diversity in the way people engage with the platform, as well as how they handle judgement from others. One key difference tended to take the form of how much ‘cultivation’ work had been done. James (TEC), who previously spoke of misrepresentation by the algorithm, felt as though it was hardly a representation of them at all and that the initial misinterpretation of their assumed demographics, particularly relating to gender, ensured that their FYP created a ‘false sense of who I am’ should
it be shared with others. In contrast to this, Isolde, an avid TikTok user, expressed the complete opposite and that she could ‘rely on the algorithm’ to ‘present videos that match my interests’, none of which are a source of embarrassment. This was taken further in an understanding that some content shown is ‘a little niche and someone else may find it strange, such as murder mystery or “satisfying” videos’ but that she would happily share her FYP with others to give a greater insight into her political views and allow her to share videos through this engagement which are on important subjects, such as pro-vaccine or feminist content.

The majority of our interlocutors experienced something in between. Feelings of uncertainty were common when discussing the prospect, or practice, of sharing their FYP with other people (Fig. 5). There was a frequent concern that a rogue video may shock viewers and reveal a part of their life they did not wish to share or would lead to false impressions. The intended audience varied and elicited different responses. Many felt they would be comfortable sharing with a close friend or partner, as they have personal contexts outside of an algorithmic interpretation. There was hesitation to share with acquaintances, colleagues, or publicly, without anonymisation. The reasons being those mentioned above; a fear of misjudgement or revealing too much. Through the process of collating multiple FYP feeds, (Fig. 5) comes an acute awareness of how it feels to be on the receiving end of an algorithmic interpretation. I hesitated to engage too heavily with each feed, intentionally I avoided watching entire feeds until the collation project was almost completed and individual feeds became contextualised with other FYPs. This offset the intimacy a little. Viewing someone else’s FYP felt like standing so close to someone that you can almost smell their breath. You are made acutely aware of your relationship to them in that moment. Being the observer of an FYP is not as uncomfortable with a friend, or partner, as those surprising videos are usually detectable as a glitch in the algorithm. With a stranger, however, establishing what is a true marker of identity, and what is not, is challenging. This provides a clear differentiation between sharing, or observing, a Twitter or Instagram feed and a TikTok FYP. Due to the algorithmic interpretation of the user, there is a more intimate dimension to sharing this digital space due to the common perception that the TikTok algorithm is one which knows the user perhaps better than they know themselves.

This perception is enabled through the significant user count of TikTok, specifically the amount of time users spend engaging with the platform, which during 2020 averaged at 42 minutes per day for UK users (eMarketer, 2021). If the algorithm could not provide a captivating page, then it could not sustain the interest of users. This perception enables feelings of unease and discomfort in our interlocutors sharing their FYP with other people. It is not necessarily the fear that some ‘rogue content’ will be displayed, but that others will assume this content is in fact an accurate reflection of themselves. There is a fear of facing judgement for videos which were never chosen. In sharing our FYPs with fellow researchers, close friends, or family, the fear of judgement appears cemented more in the idea that someone will perceive me as my FYP or that the algorithm represents an ‘extension of who I am, rather than the research and learning resource I use it as’. This was, once again, evidenced in Emily’s engagements with WitchTok and the videos, which became intrinsically linked with her TikTok identity.

Through sharing the FYP with others there is potential to enable a deeper connection, one which was essential throughout lockdown conditions. Similar to how videos offering snapshots into people’s lives prompted a shared intimacy between users, as Yathu (TEC) states: ‘I felt most intimate with the platform during the first wave of lockdown…it felt intimate to be invited into people’s homes [through TikTok]’, there is also the potential of intimacy through sharing our algorithmic selves. Intimacy is found by Emily (Co-author) ‘in the moments where I find myself lying on my bed with my partner sharing videos and watching the same screen’ or when a video
is shared with friends. ‘Those I shared it with laugh with me; I feel deeply connected to them at that moment’. Perhaps this is how TikTok promotes intimacy. It designs algorithmic patterns of data, which bring people closer together in an increasingly isolated world and allows them access to a portal to the rest of humanity.

**Conclusion**

This article is intended to offer introductory insights into the potential TikTok holds for anthropological study, providing greater insight into the lived experiences of many different users, belonging to a myriad of communities, whilst also furthering understandings of the digital. TikTok provides potential for exploration and situating intimacy and identity in the context of social media and digital modes of communication. Within the pandemic, TikTok became an important space for people searching for a greater sense of community and connection.

Despite how the algorithm is designed to feel like a friend, becoming acquainted with you organically over time, it never can. The algorithm only understands data points which are pieced together, forming a misrepresentative and obscured understanding of the user. The algorithm is ultimately designed to promote engagement in a bid to generate revenue. Considering the reported earnings by TikTok for 2020, £24.7 billion, the algorithm clearly does this exceptionally well (BBC News, 2021).

This work represents an early stage for an ethnography of TikTok and of digital platforms, which rely on an algorithmic understanding of the user. We have demonstrated some of the benefits of working within a collective, and how uniquely suited this form of ethnographic engagement is for digital anthropology. As indicated in the introduction, TikTok is relied upon not only by those in lockdown conditions. The app provides more than just a window to the world, but also a space to share lived experiences with that world, for millions of globally marginalised people. Though not the focus of this article, it is important to mention that many of the ‘Tok’ communities serve as spaces to share information, stories, and everyday experiences for marginalised groups. This is of great importance to the TEC and will continue to be explored.

When used alone or alongside existing ethnographic engagements, TikTok may provide particularly unique insights within social science and humanities research. We hope this article prompts serious consideration for TikTok and that readers will consider creating their own account to seek out their own virtual communities and reckon with their own algorithmic selves. TikTok is much more than just a dance app, it is the app of lockdown, a space for marginalised groups to express themselves, and a unique opportunity to explore the everyday and imagined lives of its millions of users.

**Authors’ Contributions**

Harry Rodgers (*Primary Author*) structured, wrote, and edited the majority of the text. The visual components were also created or captured by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

Emily Christine Lloyd-Evans (*Co-Author*) was responsible for intellectual input throughout and was greatly supportive throughout the creation of this body of work.
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Bibliography


I am a Bisexual, Panromantic, Queer, Kinky, Polyamorous/ Relationship Anarchist. You?: Is it time to turn the idea of sex = romance on its head?

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Abstract

With increasing platform given to demi, grey and asexual people, those with short-term loss of sex-drive, and growing numbers of non-monogamous/ non-exclusive sexual relationships, is it time to divorce the acts and concepts sex, sensuality, romance, and exclusivity from each other? In compulsory monogamy, sexual and sensual bodily contact is expected to be present and exclusively within sexual-romantic relationships, whose aim is to travel the ‘relationship escalator’ towards a narrowly defined category of commitment. When this sexual and sensual bodily contact is not present, there is judged to be a problem with that relationship: its compatibility, its health, its potential for longevity, and often its reproductive potential. However, not only does sexual and sensual bodily contact not have to be present within a lifelong romantic connection but it can also thrive and be healthy outside of it. The current framework of sexual contact leaves those without sexual desire or those against sexual exclusivity within realms of shame or oddity, even in spaces of sex positivity, which re-ingrain the connection between sex and commitment. How can we begin to separate these concepts and take seriously the experiences of these ‘others’? And what other practices or concepts are brought into question?

Keywords: romance, sex, non-monogamy, BDSM, LGBTQIA*
This paper comes from a point of enquiry (and data) brought to focus and provoked through my previous BA research, current MRes and upcoming PhD research around institutional compulsory monogamy and queer polyamory. I will open with a quote and details of a recent TV show (Sex Education, 2020) exploring asexuality, then I will go onto looking at the intersectional nature of sex, romance, and the body through the lens of trans women’s post-gender confirming surgery experiences. Then I will move to non-normative relationships and sensual lives of polyamory, Bondage, Dominance & Sado-Masocism (BDSM), and the wider LGBTQIA* communities to start investigating the elements of social institutions and conceptualisations needing to be addressed in order to divorce sex, sensuality, and romance from one another. The concept of divorce here is employed purposefully due to marriage being at the centre of conceptions of intimate acceptability.

‘Sex doesn’t make us whole. And so, how could you ever be broken?’
(Sex Education: Season 2 Episode 4. Netflix. 17th January 2020)

The Netflix series, Sex Education (2020), has made discussions of sex more candid in a number of ways. From discussions of sexual practice, sexuality and sexual orientation of early adolescence (a group considered by law to not have maturity to think of sex in safe and consensual ways) to questions of kink and lack of sexual desire. For the teenager, Florence, the character’s opening quote is directed towards their lack of sexual desire, which had left them feeling confused, left out, and ‘broken’. Their initial conversation with the show’s main protagonist, Otis, had left them feeling no better due to Otis’s verdict that Florence had yet to find that desire. However, after speaking to Jean (Otis’s mother) who is a sex educator and psychologist, Florence knows that they are entirely normal because not having sexual desire does not make them lacking as a person. They simply may be asexual and that does not make them broken. And just to throw a spanner in the works straight off… not all asexual people are sex avoidant.

With increasing platform given to demi, grey and asexual people, those with short-term loss of sex-drive, the inner working of kink communities and growing numbers of non-monogamous/ non-exclusive sexual relationships, is it time to entirely divorce the acts and of concepts sex, sensuality, romance, and exclusivity from each other?

Within Season 2 of Sex Education (2020) there is seemingly a contradiction to the advice given to Florence. When the Headteacher’s wife, Maureen, comes to Jean for advice on their marriage, and its' lack of sexual fulfilment, the initial advice is to take her sexual enjoyment into her own hands. However, this leads to Maureen asking for a divorce without much interrogation into what that implies in long-term monogamous sexual-romantic relationships. Once again, seeming to reinforce the idea that sex is required to keep a romantic relationship going. There are numerous reasons sex can leave a person and a connection with stress, including many medications that have a significant effect on sex-drive, desire and enjoyment, rather than solely experiencing the loss of a romantic connection (NHS, 2020).

How can we begin to separate these concepts and take seriously the experiences of these non-normative sexual ‘others’? What other practices or concepts are brought into question through this separation?

I have opened this paper with a short overview from a television series. Fiction tells much about real life experiences and the kinds of conversations that are going on in at least some sections of societies. It has the power to show alternative histories, presents, and futures to those that would never have seen them otherwise. Margot Weiss (2006) gave us a great investigation of normative structures and processes through BDSM romance film ‘Secretary’, which was...
so well and widely received. The cis-hetero-monogamous mainstream will accept what looks most like themselves even if it deviates in some ways. For example, with kink, it must adhere to the foundational elements of society: binary gender determined at birth and the reproductive nuclear family. Popular culture takes the pulse of social thinking, but it also reinforces the normative structures. Giving attention to asexuality is not mainstream but when characterised by a white, cisgender, teenage girl with good academic achievement, it adheres enough to acceptability for it to be heard. However, these characters can also give understanding and hope to those that exist far outside of those structures. These stories can help those growing up to know they are not alone and can start to change those structures themselves.

So, if work is perpetually done to maintain the secure place of normative structures in society, what will it take to undo such fundamental concepts that weave together sex, sexuality, sensuality and romance?

At this point, I will note that this paper is predominantly a series of questions, queries, and enquiries. In many ways, for many people, this is untrodden territory at least in its explicit form. I do not have answers and every time I discover another experience shared by another it is more questions that come rather than answers. My current MRes and fast approaching PhD research oscillates around the question: How do Queer Polyamorous People understand and produce ‘liveable lives’ (Butler, 2004) and imagined futures? It is this question and research that has spurred the enquiry of this paper, no less than my own experience of working through conflicting needs and desires that do not fit into the frameworks of society.

In the institution of compulsory monogamy, which predominates across the West (Willey, 2016), sexual and sensual bodily contact is assumed to be present and exclusively within the ‘relationship’, whose aim is to travel up the ‘relationship escalator’ towards a narrowly defined category of commitment. When this sexual and sensual bodily contact is not present, there is judged to be a problem with that relationship: its compatibility, its health, its potential for longevity, and often its potential to produce children (Edelman, 2004). It is blamed for infidelity, unhappiness and failure. However, not only does sexual and sensual bodily contact not have to be present within a lifelong romantic connection but it can also thrive and be healthy outside of it for a multitude of people, without that person being damaged or perverted as dictated by normative moralising.

The current framework of sexual contact leaves those without sexual desire within realms of shame or oddity, much like those that do not feel the need for sexual exclusivity even in spaces of sex positivity, which re-enforce the uninterrogated connection between sex and commitment (Winston et al, 2019). Even for those that experience sexual desire in some way and are monogamous, the pressure (explicit or implied) of the integrated nature of sexual acts from sexuality, romance, sex, and gender to body confidence can have a damaging effect on the self, in terms of confidence and acceptance, as well as their connections with others.

In Juno Roche’s (2018) search and discovery for connection to her neovagina, she moves through these kinds of connections, though not in such an explicit argument as I am making here. Gender performativity, the body, the mind, sexual desire, and performance are inextricably linked and act upon each other resulting in often mixed emotions and experiences for the person. The lack of a body inclusive of desired genitals, and therefore, the specific sexual sensation and enjoyment that connect gender and physiological characteristics, requires a journey of discovery and acceptance that is different for each person. For many trans and non-binary people, body dysphoria is either not present or is not connected to gender performativity, therefore, the complex and confusing playing field of sex is brought into focus through these social constructs and physical manifestations. Roche goes
on to question their own sexual identity, romanticism, and community engagement through the discovery that their neovagina in a way that fulfills the desires that they had previously fantasised about for years. Whilst she still experiences sexual desire, it does not flow forth from or upwards from her created vagina as she had been told it does from ones received from birth.

Once discovering the reality of her neovagina, it seemed obvious to Roche that she would function differently to the stories she had heard and her own imaginings. Coming to terms with what that meant for herself and her potential relationships, there was a road ahead filled with decisions and exploration. Within normative terms, some of these decisions would foreclose others. Herein lies the issue at the foundation of my query. All aspects of social life and physical experience are interwoven and intersecting, however, the way in which sexual, sensual, and romantic experiences have been condensed, creates and requires a limiting of options and ways of being in the self and in the world. This control has much to do with the strict moralising of sex and family, created through Christian heritage that naturalises and normalises monogamy, heterosexuality, cis-gender persons and reproductive sexual engagement (Carter, 2008).

People outside of this norm have always existed. Through the 1969 Stonewall Riots and the huge amount of work from the LGBTQIA* communities, some of these norms have been extended. Although, they have been extended more for those that continue to follow the standard expectations and structures of society through gender, monogamy and reproductivity that reinforce the condensed categorisation and implicit connection of sex, sensuality and romance (Duggan, 2003).

One of the common refrains for those that identify with or practice polyamory is that ‘it is not about sex’ regardless of whether or not they experience a desire for sex or engage in sexual activity. This usually comes in response to others probing into their sex lives as a result of finding out they are not sexually or romantically exclusive. With the exception of The Ethical Slut (2009), most polyamory books follow the ‘not about sex’ trope if they bring it up at all. There has been discussions on podcasts like Multiamory and from academics such as Kim TallBear as to whether this position continues the Western Christian sex-negative and moralistic pattern (2018). However, this would not explain how sex is widely spoken about freely (either with regards to engaging with or discussing the lack of desire and sharing personal boundaries around it) and shared within many non-monogamous communities. It is instead predominantly a position taken toward those on the outside to avoid the prurient and often demeaning nature of sexual inquiry within the mainstream that constructs actions as good or bad.

It will not come as news that most if not all discussions within a Western context come within the form of a binary. Sex is no different (Braidotti, 1994). Poles have been created between the sex-negative and positive which requires that if you are not one you must be the other (Winston et al, 2019). However, for those that do not experience sexual desire or engage in sexual experiences, within frames recognised by biological or psychological studies, surely this binary is not relevant? This question no less comes to the fore with those that do experience sexual desire and engage in sexual activity.

BDSM sensuality is a perfect example of this. It is portrayed in the film Secretary (2002), just as it is in BDSM ethnography, such as Beckmann’s The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion (2009). Kink and BDSM, for many, is predominantly separated from sexual acts: it is sensuality. Not only are there asexual people that are not sex avoidant, as I mentioned earlier, but there are those that are still and engage in kink and BDSM. Although as Weiss begins to show, BDSM in the mainstream becomes acceptable within a reproductive monogamous relationship that includes sex. When each aspect of a person’s intimate or family life is spoken, there are normative assumptions that must be present for them to avoid discrimination or even dehumanisation; to gain acceptance as a person and member of society. These assumptions create miscommunication, expectations and obligations
that are not consented to.

Many, if not all of us, will have heard the phrase ‘Assumptions make an Ass out of you and me’. Whilst this is a fairly widely used phrase, it does not stop the huge amount of assumptions made from a social structure. Regardless of what polyamory book you pick up, there will be a section about analysing specifically what you want from a connection and then how to communicate that to others: Do you want sexual connection? Romantic ones? What do you need from them? What does sex look like to you? What can you compromise on and what are deal-breakers? How do you want to live in your home? Who is there with you, if anyone? Those that exist within marginalised communities such as LGBTQIA+ have had cause to work through confusion and similar questions created by their self being in conflict with society, with what they are taught from birth.

From these journeys, self-discoveries, and through community, numerous identities have been formed: a/grey/demi-sexual, a/grey/demi/bi/pan/hetero-romantic, kinky and vanilla, Trans, Non-binary, Queer, Androgyne, genderqueer/fluid/non-conforming, polyamorous, ambiamorous, etc., and within those, numerous designations for kinds of practice that make explicit demands for how to live and to be recognised. No longer does saying ‘I am gay’ disclose much about how a person lives in their intimate lives any more so that saying ‘I am in a relationship’.

So, is it time for these divorce proceedings to come to a close, and for everyone to make explicit their list of ‘selves’ relevant to connection and community engagement? To bring explicit agreement and consent into all connections? And bring into focus the integral position of sex, sexuality, sensuality and romance in all aspects of society in order to thoroughly interrogate the control and limitation to liveable lives from the family, benefits systems, housing, architecture, border control, asylum systems, healthcare, education to name only a few.

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These Squares are Our Flesh: Embodied Spaces of Appearance

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Anthways, 2021 © Nena Bisceglia

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Abstract

This essay merges text and images to investigate the corporeal politics of assembled bodies and the political role of affective relations. Drawing on the theory of Judith Butler and Hanna Arendt, I discuss the relationship between precarity, public space, and political action as encapsulated in the body, and particularly called into question by movements that emerged globally in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash. I explore how disposessed bodies in the square embrace their existential interdependence and become responsive to each other, proposing alternative ways to collectively sustain bodily precariousness. Immersion in these uprisings is guided by three selected audiovisual pieces — ‘Tahrir: Liberation Square’ by Stefano Savona, ‘Gravity Hill Newsreel’ by Jem Cohen, and the anonymous, collaborative ‘Gezi Park Documentary’ — proposing a non-discursive, sensorial narration of what happens in the square that challenges the idea of politics as necessarily made of speech acts. Lastly, I consider the affective power of images to challenge dominant narratives and amplify popular alliances.

Keywords: embodiment, protest, precarity, visual anthropology
THESE SQUARES ARE OUR FLESH

Embodied spaces of appearance
‘Ash-sha’b yurīd isqāṭ an-niẓām!’
A voice shouts.

‘Ash-sha’b yurīd isqāṭ an-niẓām!’
A chorus of voices chants.

‘Ash-sha’b yurīd isqāṭ an-niẓām!’
Repeats a single voice again.
On an autumn night in Zuccotti Park, the words are transported by an ensemble of voices spreading all over the surface of the square where a meeting is held. The echo progressively reaches all the participants.

Figure 2.1 – 2.3: Gravity Hill Newsreels (Cohen, 2011)
It’s 9pm in Istanbul. The banging of pots and pans boldly resounds from the street, accompanied by buildings lights alternately switching on and off. The cutting clatter of cookware reminds the city that the people cannot remain silent and still in face of Erdoğan’s authoritarian regime.
From Tahrir Square to Puerta del Sol, Syntagma Square and Zuccotti Park, from Santiago to Gezi Park, from Gaza to Hong Kong and Minneapolis, in the last ten years thousands of bodies have stood side by side against the attacks to conditions making their life possible: food and shelter, the right to work, accessible urban space, clear air, affordable healthcare and education, protection from injury and destruction. If their complexity and the specificity of their aims are by no means reducible to a single account — the challenge to authoritarian regimes, anti-democratic governments, explicit contestation of neoliberal capitalism and austerity, militarism and dispossession, unequal rights of citizenship, opposition to accelerating precarity — a red thread between the social movements crossing the streets and the squares of the globe can be identified.
In Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly (2015), Judith Butler observes the emergence of a politics built around bodies: in a performative manner, people claim material support for the life of their bodies through the physical presence of those very bodies in the square. Bodies expose their vulnerability as a form of resistance and enact dwelling forms of public space that acknowledge interdependence on other bodies.

Cairo’s Tahrir Square in winter 2011, from which the Egyptian revolution spread, the Occupy Wall Street Movement in Zuccotti Park peaking in the autumn of the same year, and the Occupy Gezi one in Istanbul’s Taksim Square held between May 2013 and August 2013 are three of the main events moving her inquiry.

‘Tahrir: Liberation Square’, ‘Gravity Hill Newsreel’ and ‘Gezi Park documentary’ are three audiovisual documentations of these events that will guide an exploration of the performativity of bodies in assembly.

The first is a film by the Italian filmmaker Stefano Savona providing a day-to-day narration of the January revolution in Tahrir Square where no voice is heard but the one of the square.

The second is a series of 12 short films capturing the faces, sounds and spaces of Zuccotti Park and other key sites of the Occupy Wall Street Movement.

The third is a nine hour documentary divided in three episodes, consisting of cell phone video footage, snapshots, fragments of TV news collected by an anonymous author to create a collective archive of the uprisings.

Diverse in format, these three audiovisual products provide a narration of uprisings that differs from the discursivity of traditional documentaries and mainstream media, captures political claims from the square and expresses them through sensoriality.

Resonating with notions of corporeal politics of assembled bodies in the streets as conceived by Butler, they also offer an invitation to grasp the affective power of images to broaden popular alliances.
PRECARITY

Figure 4.1 – 4.6: Tahrir: Liberation Square (Savona, 2011)
Through the screams and sweat recorded by Savona in Tahrir Square, a portrait of the protesters is drawn. The ‘people’ define themselves through their needs — bread, freedom, rest, work— and chanting the comprehensive claim that ‘life is too hard’.

They scream their demand for support to those they identify as responsible for it. They expect support. The hard lives of people in Tahrir are precarious lives that are inadequately sustained by the institutions and structures external to the individual. Precarisation is a biopolitical process through which social value is differently ascribed to lives: thus the living conditions of certain bodies are systematically neglected through exposure to injury, violence, and progressively, death (Butler 2009, 2015). Induced and reproduced by political and economic institutions, precarisation condemns people to a state of insecurity and hopelessness wherein their lives are made abject and disposable (Mbembe 2011:80). Precarious lives are subject to ‘economies of abandonment’ that institute an ‘unequal distribution of life and death, of hope and harm, and endurance and exhaustion’ (Povinelli 2011:3) according to which lives that are not functional to the order of value can be swept out of existence. The people in the square reclaim the value of their abandoned lives, lives that call for their legitimate needs to be supported against the neoliberal rationality of individual responsibility and self-sufficiency.
Their claims are performative: the same bodies who need food, employment and labour rights, freedom of speech, protection from police brutality, are the bodies who cover the surface of the square. Bodies are simultaneously the ground and means of protest. Assemblages of precarious subjects also powerfully put into question the idea of politics as a space of freedom from necessity. In The Human Condition Arendt argues that physical needs are confined to the ‘private realm’ of the household — oikos — where biological necessities like food, shelter, and sex are satisfied. Only once necessity is met, one can enter the public space where freedom is exercised through politics amongst equals: the inability to provide for the needs of the body marks the boundaries of the political sphere. For Arendt bodily survival cannot be a form of political action but only a precondition of it. Observing the people filling Tahrir and other squares Butler criticizes this view. Echoing one of the most popular slogans running through the streets of Egypt during the revolution: ‘Aīsh, huriyya, ‘adāla igtimā‘iya’ (‘bread, freedom, social justice’) she asks: ‘What about the possibility that one might be hungry, angry, free, and reasoning, and that a political movement to overcome inequality in food distribution is a just and fair political movement?’ (Butler 2015: 47).
If precarity is a politically induced condition, it is built upon an existential, ontological state that inherently defines all lives. Human life comes into being as precarious by definition, in a condition of unavoidable finitude and constant risk of destruction by will or by accident. Its persistence is not biologically guaranteed by any means (Butler 2009:25). Lives are subject to precariousness as ‘the condition of being conditioned’ (pp. 23): existence and persistence of lives necessarily depend on conditions that support their ontological finitude. These conditions correspond to institutions and relations of support that need to be created and renewed through social life. When political orders fail to address precariousness, precarity emerges as a maximization of precariousness manifested as starvation, displacement, poverty, arbitrary violence affecting certain lives. If precarity characterizes certain populations, precariousness ‘is not a feature of this or that life’ (pp. 22), it generates all social living as built on the implication to have one’s existence ‘always in some sense in the hands of the other’ (pp. 14). As ontologically precarious and vulnerable, bodies are simultaneously exposed to a potentially destructive externality and reliant on exterior others and infrastructures that can minimize destruction. Acknowledging that one’s life is dependent and interdependent, identifying bodies as discrete and completely distinct from one another becomes questionable. The body ‘contains multitudes’: it is defined by the multitude of relations that make its own life and action possible (Butler 2014: 5). More than an entity, the body appears as a relation that encompasses environment, infrastructures and institutions held by other bodies, bodies that might be distant, anonymous and unknown yet nevertheless essential.
To be perpetually exposed to others and to have our survival bound up to them does not simply condemn us to a state of living uncertainty.

A body that is vulnerable to exteriority is also one able to enact affective responses to the world. In affect, the possibility to acknowledge interdependence lies carrying a political potential. Through affect, the body ‘is pulled beyond its seeming surface-boundedness by way of its relation to, indeed, its composition through, the forces of encounter. With affect, a body is as much outside itself as in itself — webbed in its relations — until ultimately such firm distinctions cease to matter. (2010, Seigworth and Gregg quoted in Blackman 2012:1).

Being vulnerable allows us to feel pleasure, rage, suffering, hope through encounters with other bodies that ultimately can ‘undo us as bounded being’ (Butler 2015:110). It is in affect that the possibility to address the unequal distribution of precariousness resides: invites to join the square are invites to be responsive, to be affected by the lack of support, unmet needs, suffering that we might not experience but who target the bodies we are tied up to.

Responsiveness is the ability to recognise that ‘we are all fingers of the same hand’, and that ‘if your neighbours are poor, you are poor’, it is the ability to perceive and embrace our condition of interdependence and to turn it into a way of acting, organising and living in concert.
In movements against precarity, assembled bodies do not simply employ public space to come together, become visible and make their claims. Public space is not simply entered as a given: it is its very character to be disputed and fought over (Butler 2015:71).

This aspect emerged with the Gezi Park movement. Soon turning into multiple protests addressing an anti-democratic, authoritarian government, the Occupy Gezi movement began as a reappropriation of one of the few green zones left in central Istanbul threatened by the building plan of a shopping mall. The bodies stood up in the square against the selling off that same square as property for private investors, for their right to fresh air and accessible, common space.
Figure 10.1 – 10.3: Gravity Hill Newsreels (Cohen, 2011)

Figure 10.4 – 10.5: Gravity Hill Newsreels (Cohen, 2011)
Figure 11.1 – 11.3: Gezi Park Documentary (GeziDoc, 2014)

Figure 11.4 – 11.6: Gezi Park Documentary (GeziDoc, 2014)

Enough already with the buildings. Instead of having tens of flats, let’s have gardens in which our children can play.

[The demonstrators planted trees in Gezi Park...]
But they did not simply reclaim their right to squares by occupying them: they permeated urban space with their necessities; they transformed it to satisfy them collectively. Bodily assemblies ‘reconfigure the materiality of public space and produce, or reproduce, the public character of that material environment’ (ibidem). In Tahrir, Zuccotti and Taksim, space was made public by sharing free food on a street with whoever stands next to you, by lying tired bodies on the asphalt, by exchanging books, sitting on the ground to teach and learn, by planting trees where a park will be uprooted, by cleaning and taking care of the place that is hosting you. Occupation of public space is also a way to bring into being the world you imagine to live, in a prefigurative manner. It is a laboratory for the organisation of ways of sustaining the precariousness of life alternative to its unequal distribution, and demonstrating that ‘another world’ — one in which interdependent bodies meet and respond to each other — ‘is possible’. 

Figure 12.1: Gravity Hill Newsreels (Cohen, 2011)
PUBLIC SPACE

In 'Gravity Hill Newsreels', footage of the city is overlaid with the voices and sounds of the square, the place and the people merge. Many of the newsreels open with images of the architectures of New York City that are gradually brought back to the square through its ambient noise. Shifting the focus from people’s faces and bodies to the buildings that surround them, the bright screens and their messages that take the square, the pavement that is stepped on, Cohen’s camera dwells on space inviting us to reconsider it as a relevant actor of the protest. Movements are ‘dependent on the prior existence of pavement, street and square’ (Butler 2015:71): no acting body can move without infrastructural support. A revaluation of the materiality of political action also includes space — to walk on, gather, stand — as integral part of action.
‘On a different planet’: the space of appearance

If space fits into action as street, square, ground, infrastructure sustaining a body, the space of politics is not reduced to physicality. In her theorisation of political action, Hannah Arendt (1958) identifies the political space of the polis as non corresponding to the city-state in its physical location, but the organisation of people arising out of acting and speaking together (pp. 381) as a space lying between people. Political space is not simply the space where political action happens, but one that is produced through political action itself. The space of appearance is where, ‘I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but to make their appearance explicitly’ (pp. 382). Through assemblage, people become conscious of their presence amongst other people and formulate action through this mutual appearance.

Reflecting on the meaning of ‘Occupy Movement’ in Taksim Square, Zeynep Gambetti (2014) observes how the name captures a double relation to space of the resistance, both investing and divesting space:

‘On the one hand, the aim was indeed to ‘occupy’ or to appropriate space, that is, to stay there, to stay put, to settle and inhabit. On the other hand, there was a constant movement between spaces: crossing the Bosphorus that splits Istanbul into two, riding the metro to reach Taksim, going from one neighborhood to the next, following the trajectory of the clashes to help fellow protestors, going back and forth between field hospitals, supply shops and other sites of bodily sustenance.’ (Gambetti 2014:90)

Political space is not fixed and tied to location, it moves wherever the plural action of bodies moves in concert. Wherever people choose to gather, it can be recreated.

Figure 14.1 – 14.2: Tahrir Liberation Square (Savona, 2011)
NAKED AND DEFENSELESS LIKE A TREE

Each man and woman here are free like a single tree and brothers and sisters like a forest.

Their roots like river and the roots run deeply into the ground.

Each of them is naked and defenseless like a tree.

They don’t want to feed on the dirt and breathe the air...

They may have different opinions, vote for different parties, and support different teams...

But all of them love their lands, wish to breathe fresh air, and hate tear gas and pressure.
Contrary to Arendt’s conceptualisation in which the subjects of political life are Greek men in a society excluding women, slaves and foreigners, in uprisings against precarity political space is created not by equal and free men but by those who are often erased by public life.

As the artist Okan Bayülgen asserts on a summer night in Taksim Square included in the Gezi Park documentary, the people are naked and defenseless like a tree. Nakedness and defenselessness, however, are asserted as a revolutionary potential. By assembling, the people use the vulnerability of the body itself as the prerequisite of political exposure and action. Precarious lives are not ‘bare’ lives (Agamben 1998) whom sovereign power has stripped of every right and confined in a passive condition of exclusion. They are lives who ‘mutualize endurance’ (Gambetti 2014) and choose to act through their bodies despite the dispossession and violence systematically acted upon their bodies.

Vulnerability is put into resistance when it challenges police violence with cardboard armour or when bodies become barely visible under a storm of tear gas, yet provocatively call for more.
The mobilisation of vulnerability acquires further political power when spaces of appearance are created in spaces of negation. The sites of Occupy Wall Street are part of the financial district of Lower Manhattan: the people occupied the symbolical and effective epicenter of the global financial crisis of 2008 that exacerbated and shed light on the sharp disparity between the ‘1%’ and the ‘99%’. Despite your neoliberal greed attempting to kill us, we are still here, we are still visible and reappropriating our space, say the people in Zuccotti Park, ‘we have not yet been disposed of. We have not slipped quietly into the shadows of public life: we have not become the glaring absence that structures your public life’ (Butler 2013:196). Through appearing precisely when and where people are effaced, the sphere of appearance breaks and opens in new ways.
POLITICS AS NON DISCURSIVE

Assembled bodies also challenge the idea of politics as necessarily made of speech acts. If for Arendt politics happens ‘wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action’ (1958:383), in the square ‘the people are not just produced by their vocalized claims’ (Butler 2015:19), but by each of their actions, including non-action. The visual sources I have selected grasp and translate into images this non-discursivity of politics.

Figure 18.1 – 18.2: Tahrir Liberation Square (Savona, 2011)

Figure 18.3 – 18.4: Tahrir Liberation Square (Savona, 2011)
Figure 19.1 – 19.2: Gezi Park Documentary (GeziDoc, 2014)

Figure 19.3 – 19.4: Gezi Park Documentary (GeziDoc, 2014)
Figure 20.1: Gravity Hill Newsreels (Cohen, 2011)

Figure 20.2 – 20.6: Tahrir Liberation Square (Savona, 2011)

...and I thought I wouldn’t find anyone here right now...

Figure 20.2 – 20.6: Tahrir Liberation Square (Savona, 2011)
The camera walks through the crowd and even though some faces might appear more often than others, it does not focus on any main character. Spoken political claims are not the core. When they are present, they are often expressed through forms that involve multiple senses: they are chanted, played with instruments, danced, clapped, they are the banging of pots and pans in the street. They run through snippets of small, casual conversations and encounters. They appear to have the same relevance as the sweat on people’s bodies, their deep gazes, their smiles and laughs in singing, their standing bodies, or their sharp screams coming out of blurred images of a tear gas attack. The voice of the filmmaker is never heard and there are no prepared interviews. Cohen’s Newsreels are ‘small, direct observations’ that express ‘solidarity without propaganda’. In the words of Savona, ‘Tahrir: Liberation Square’ leaves to ‘literature and journalism’ the task of speaking of the ‘details’, capturing ‘something more fleeting and ephemeral that only cinema can fixate and collect’, the moments in which freedom appears in its pure state when a group ‘acts with one voice’.

APPEARING TO EACH OTHER

‘I’m sure your eyes are getting full while watching the documentary. While I was preparing, the situation was no different. Maybe I have watched it hundreds of times, but each time my eyes filled with tears.’, states the author of the Gezi Park documentary.

Quoting Shouse, Tina Campt argues that ‘given the ubiquity of affect, it is important to take note that the power of many forms of media lies not so much in their ideological effects, but in their ability to create affective resonances independent of content or meaning’. Photographs and videos can ‘move us’ to affect and to be affected, shifting us from one intense experiential state to another, arresting us in ways that diminish our capacity to respond or provoking us in ways that augment our capacity to engage (2017:16). Mirzoeff adds a further level to the space of appearance created by allied bodies: next to the embodied, kinetic one, this also has a ‘potential latent form in mediated documentation’ (2017:34). Embracing a wider meaning of ‘seeing’ as the ‘point of intersection between what we know, what we perceive, and what we feel — using all our senses’ — in visual materials lies the potential to multiply responsiveness to others.
A visual medium enlarges the surface of the square, beyond the square: ‘through video it is possible to engage socially, even while not being there in the square, in the flesh… It’s about being with someone with mediation, not despite mediation.’ (Coleman 2013, quoted in Treske 2015). When collective uprisings break out the power of images often emerges through their denial expressed as censorship or mediatic silence. For the first days of the Gezi Park movement, no mediatic channel covered the events. The Turkish filmmaker Andreas Treske describes the first videos of Gezi diffused on social media as creating a ‘ground zero feeling’ (2015:176) simultaneously with ‘a feeling of togetherness with the demonstrators’.
Feelings of togetherness, emotions provoked by images can disturb the alignment of bodies against other bodies as desired by authorities (Ahmed 2014).

Gezi Park Documentary encompasses this potential, proper of images emanating from the space of appearance (Mirzoeff 2017:40), and not simply about it. While President Erdogan and the pro-government press perpetrated the imaginary of the people in Gezi as çapulcu — aggressive looters — images recorded by people with their cellphones and cameras of teargas attacks, beatings and shooting by the police contrasting with portraits of communal life and peaceful demonstration challenged the dominant narrative, widening the call for responsiveness.

Figure 24.1 – 24.2: Gezi Park Documentary (GeziDoc, 2014)
Through assemblies, precarious lives stand up for and through their bodies against the uneven distribution of finitude. They appear to and encounter other bodies, and embrace interdependence with them. Together, they shape space to propose alternative modes of dependent living and they refuse to be wiped out of public life by putting vulnerability in resistance. Images can transmit the politics of assembled bodies through sensorial documentations showing how political action does not have to be discursively articulated but can be silent, singing, playing, standing, or staring. By capturing and diffusing what happens in the square, they generate affective experiences that have the potential to enlarge the space of appearance and invite more bodies to responsive unboundedness.
Bibliography


