

Of Grindr, Homotopias And Homosexual Discursive Sites
in Alberto Fuguet's *Sudor*

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Two years ago, I was reading Alberto Fuguet's gay themed novel, *Sudor*, and found interesting the constant use of dating apps conversations in his novel to convey ideas about homosexuality. A few months later, Hazte Oír (Make yourself heard), an anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ Spanish organization, rented a bus that drove around Santiago de Chile for one day showing the slogan: "Los niños tienen pene. Las niñas tienen vulva. Que no te engañen." ["Boys have a penis; girls have a vulva. Don't let anyone fool you."] ¹ That same day, Movilh, one of the most important Chilean LGBTQ groups, rented another bus. This time, the slogan was "Hay tantos niños que van a nacer con una alita rota. Y yo quiero que vuelen compañero." ["There are so many children that are going to be born with a broken wing. And I want them to fly, comrade."] This is a quote from Pedro Lemebel ²'s manifesto "Hablo por mi diferencia" (I speak for my difference). At that point, I noted that literature and social media were becoming interrelated in Chilean gay literature. That rose a couple of questions: In what ways do literature,

¹ All the translations are my own.

² Pedro Lemebel (1952-2015) was an openly gay Chilean writer, performer, and activist. He fought against Augusto Pinochet's far-right cruel dictatorship. His urban chronicles rely on sarcasm and wit to depict Chilean popular culture from a queer perspective. He still remains a symbol for the LGBTQ Chilean community.

film and social media interact when it comes to promote discourses that foster diversity and inclusion? And what are the elements that conform those discourses?

Since mid 20th century, male homosexuals have been looking for places and spaces in which to feel safe and to freely live a sexuality that does not conform to the heteronormative model. At a conference in the Circle of Architectural Studies, in 1967, Michel Foucault assured that we are at a time when we experience the world as if it were “a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.” (22) With the advent of the internet and the smartphones, chances of creating connections within the homosexual community and weaving their own skein increased, encouraged by the emergence of virtual spaces such as dating websites or cell phone applications, such as Grindr. This app was launched in 2009 and is mostly used by gay men. It utilizes the mobile device’s GPS (Global Positioning System), which allows users to locate other users nearby. Once online, Grindr shows a grid with profile pictures of the users that are connected and how far away they are. Tapping on a picture allows the user to read information about that specific user, as well as it gives the option to chat, send other pictures or send a tap³.

³ Grindr was launched in 2009. In the beginning, the online dating application was geared towards gay men although that has changed through the years and now it includes bi, trans and queer people among their users. The current version allows users to specify their stats —age, height, weight—, their gender, sexual role, and their HIV status. Besides chatting and sending pictures, users can also tap other users. The tap feature, represented by a flame, consists of three options: ‘hi’ icon, to greet the other user; a flame icon, generally used to point out the other user’s hotness and show interest; and a purple evil face icon, for those who are looking for sex right now.

In 2012, Tinder came out as a Grindr version for heterosexuals although it is also used by homosexuals.

As Jean-Claude Kauffman asserts in his book *Love Online*, with the turn of the millennium the use of online spaces became a "normal and legitimate way of finding a sexual partner – long term or otherwise." (5). The ethnographic work of Rohit Dasgupta in India about the use of dating websites (such as PlanetRomeo) or sex/dating apps —cell phone applications used to look for dates or sexual encounters between gay men (such as Grindr)— concludes that the virtual intimacy that emerges within those spaces plays a fundamental role in establishing the queer masculine subjectivity in India, beyond the legal and national discourses in which the Indian government places the queer community. Moreover, Dasgupta affirms that the intimacy created within those spaces, "the language of its expression is still a 'privileged knowledge' that is only understood by those to whom it is directed." (43) In that same talk, Foucault coined the concept of 'heterotopia' to designate spaces inherent to the same society but that serve as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." (24)

This paper is a theoretical approach to the opportunity provided to homosexuals to conform a space of their own by resorting to the Internet and dating applications intended for gay men. I examine how Alberto Fuguet's *Sudor* (2016) opens up a possibility for heterotopias, especially the so-called heterotopias of deviation –"those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (25)– by inserting Grindr conversations as a narrative tool in his novel. Drawing on Foucault's heterotopia and Edouard Glissant's idea of opacity, I contend *Sudor* shows that, by resorting to specific language and

jargon, gay men turn Grindr into a safe space where they consolidate a multiplicity of identity discourses. I call this space ‘homotopia’, a discursive site that is only intelligible for LGBTQ people, providing them with an opportunity to validate discourses that contest heteronormativity in Chile.

To this end, the author includes Grindr conversations between the gay protagonist and other gay men in which they employ specific categories that define different types of homosexuals, either by their physical appearance or by their sexual preferences. This classification is certainly influenced by heteronormative. Butler, following Foucault’s argument, notes that “[i]ntelligible” genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.” (23) Since some of the categories used on Grindr conversation remain intelligible to the majority of the population, regardless of their gender and sexuality, the homosexual characters in the novel who use this application are perpetuating heteronormative behaviors, assuming that ‘masculine’ homosexuals will be the ones who penetrates during sexual intercourse while the ‘feminine’ one will be penetrated. However, the range of categories utilized in Grindr goes far beyond the ‘masculine’/ ‘feminine’ binary. Furthermore, the vocabulary used in the mobile application exceeds its denotational meaning and resignifies by contextualizing it within the virtual space that Grindr represents, thereby rendering it opaque for heteronormative space dwellers. In his *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant discusses race and identity and defends the utility of opacity as a formative and distinctive element of the identity of the other. He also delves into the role of language in the literary text: "The literary text plays the contradictory role of a producer of opacity. Because the writer, entering the dense mass of his writings, renounces an absolute, his poetic intention, full of self-evidence and sublimity. Writing's relation to that absolute is relative; That is, it actually

renders it opaque by realizing it in language. The text passes from a dreamed-of transparency to the opacity produced in words.” (115)

My analysis of *Sudor* suggests that the use of this specific language provides homosexuals with an opportunity to constitute a multiplicity of identity discourses within this homosexual virtual space, which I denominate ‘homotopia’. I argue that this alternative discursive site allows gay men to think of themselves as empowered non-heteronormative subjects, whose intelligibility is shared only by members of the homosexual community and where sexuality becomes a binding factor for those homosexuals.

Sudor focuses on the life of Alfredo Garzón Alf, a 41-year-old man, homosexual and editor for a publishing house, who is asked to be a cicerone for Rafa, the son of Rafael Restrepo Carvajal, a famous Latin American writer. The young boy is accompanying his father in Santiago de Chile, where both have traveled to present their book together. During the four days in which most of the novel takes place, Alf will establish a very special relationship with Rafa, while he continues looking for sex with other men with whom he contacts on Grindr.

Before I move on to analyze *Sudor*, I think it is worth going back to Foucault's words to clarify the concept of heterotopia. In his talk, the French theorist uses the metaphor of the mirror to define this concept: “The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there.” (24)

Think of a cell phone when it is powered off. The screen is a mirror in which the self of the normative space is reflected. But at the same time, after clicking on the Grindr icon, the visualization of the users' profiles, including that of the person who is using the application, serves as a gateway to a different space beyond where non-normative identities and sexualities are conformed. In this virtual space is where a heterotopia of deviation takes form. Foucault resort to actual and common spaces to give examples of this kind of heterotopias, such as nursing homes, psychiatric clinics or prisons. Other cases he mentions are "the famous American motel rooms where a man goes with his car and his mistress and where illicit sex is both absolutely sheltered and absolutely hidden, kept isolated without however being allowed out in the open." (27). It is not unreasonable to include Grindr in this category, insofar as the behavior of individuals using this application moves away from the standard established by the heteropatriarchy. However, Foucault's constant reference to heterosexual acts in order to define heterotopias prompts me to come up with a term that best suits the homosexual community, especially the male one since they are the majority of Grindr users. For that reason, I call them 'homotopias.'

Didier Eribon's comments on the latest interviews given by Michel Foucault about the gay community point out that "Two ideas are always collapsed together in these interviews: first, the idea that a sexuality that is common to a separate group of individuals is capable of uniting them in a shared "culture"; second, that emotional ties between men can exist in the absence of any sexual relation." (331) I agree with Foucault's argument that both ideas are part of the gay

community⁴. For reasons of argumentative clarity, I will discuss these two ideas separately. As for the former, if we assume that Grindr users in *Sudor* identify themselves as member of the gay community –something similar could be seen in the real world, albeit with nuances given the multiplicity of identities the term ‘queer’ / ‘cuir’– the common culture they share is amalgamated by the specific jargon they use. A language they understand but which is opaque for those outside this community, allowing them to strengthen the formation of a ‘homotopia’ as a discursive site. The narrator in *Sudor* elaborates on that idea: “Alfredo lo tiene claro: lo mejor de Grindr es la parte literaria: eso de imaginarse al personaje y cómo es el lenguaje lo que transforma el intercambio de información prosaica en flirteo hasta derivar en una conversación.” (266) [“Alfredo has it clear: the best of Grindr is the literary part: that of imagining the character and how it is that language transforms the exchange of prosaic information into flirtation until it results in a conversation.”] The following example from the novel shows a Grindr conversation between Alf and ‘Extranjero’, another Grindr profile:

EXTRANJERO

Serio, masculino, discreto, pasivo, busco similar, amigos con ventaja para morbo y lo que salga. Express no es más que dejarse llevar.

C’est la vie.

⁴ I resort to the term ‘gay community’ since it is widely accepted in Chile and it is easy to understand for someone outside the field of Queer and Sexualities Studies. However, I acknowledge the term triggers a much broader debate about what parameters establish a community as well as the use of the term gay.

Alfredo le responde: *foto cara?*

Y otro: *edad?*

Y otro: *cerca, muy cerca, dónde estás?* (268)

[FOREIGNER

Serious, masculine, discreet, bottom, looking for similar, friends with benefits for fun and whatever comes up. Express means to just let go.

C'est la vie.

Alfredo replies: *face pic?*

And another: *age?*

And another: *Close, very close, where are you?*]

The answers from 'Extranjero' are in the next paragraph:

47. Muy buen estado. Tú?

Sudado? Calor. Caliente.

Sta María-Recoleta. Torres. Tú? (269)

[*47. Very good shape. You?*

Sweaty? Heat. Hot.

Sta María-Recoleta. Towers. You?]

The description of 'Extranjero' contains enough information for Alf to figure out what that profile is looking for in addition to getting an idea of the person he is talking to, for the language exceeds the denotational meaning of the adjectives and nouns in that exchange.

‘Serio’, ‘masculino’ and ‘muy buen estado’ refer to a physical appearance that conforms to the parameters of hegemonic masculinity that are associated with virility and the male beauty canon established by the market (in this case, a muscular man). ‘Amigos con ventaja’ insinuates sex with no strings attached, while ‘lo que salga’ opens the possibility to something more than just sex, as long as the sex is good. Lastly, ‘express’ implies looking for sex right now. The intelligibility of this Grindr conversation proves crystal clear to the gay community while it becomes opaque to the rest, reinforcing the ‘homotopia’ as a discursive and identity site.

The second of these two ideas seems to break the heteronormative discourse that links promiscuity with homosexuality. However, doing this has the pernicious effect of subsuming homosexual practices to the heteronormative hierarchy, seeking to invisibilize these practices and to remove them from public space. Grindr users, on the contrary, make his desire to transform the textual exchange into an actual sexual relationship, consolidating the distinctive features of the homotopia. This attitude is manifested in one of the dialogues in *Sudor* between Alf, the gay protagonist, and Vicente Matamala, his straight friend Vicente:

¿Qué haces?

Tindereando.

Mal, Vicente.

Lo sé. ¿Te digo algo? Puta, Grindr me parece más digno, Alf, más directo.

Es que entre hombres somos más dignos, directos, básicos.

Aunque les guste el pico.

Quizás por eso: sabemos lo que queremos, vamos al grano. Hueón, somos hombres, somos más animales. Me parezco a ti, sólo que tiro más. Son las minas las que cagan el juego.

La dura. Sí. Sería ideal que todo fuera sin tanto rodeo, sí. Más honesto. ¿Follemos? Sin tener que engrupir y salir y conversar. (149)

[What are you up to?

Tindering.

Wrong, Vicente.

I know. Can I say something? Dammit, Grindr seems more honest, Alf, more direct.

I guess, between men, we are more direct, basic.

Even though you guys like dick.

Maybe that's why: we know what we want, we get to the point. Dude, we're men, we're more like animals. I'm just like you, but I fuck more than you. Women are the ones who screw this sex game.

Definitely. Yes. It would be great if this went without beating around the bush, yes. More honest. Let's fuck? Without having to flirt and go out and talk]

While this conversation follows the pattern of heteropatriarchial discourses –women should give themselves for men sexual impulses, homosexuals are promiscuous– Alf's proud and dignified attitude confronts those discourses, discourses that are weakened due to Vicente's submissive and defeated position in front of Alf.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that new technologies, especially the fast implementation of cell phone applications as a tool to contact other homosexual men, has generated an alternative to heteronormative space from which the gay community can consolidate a dissident discourse

through language and an unapologetic visibilization of homosexual sex. This is what I have called ‘homotopia’. In this other space, which might well be placed between the official discourse and its counterdiscourse, as Eribon suggest, is where the possibility of experiencing an empowered homosexual subject arises: “The entire thematic of subjectivation, of practices of the self, of the stylization of life, of the construction of a gay culture, belongs to the second movement, to the heterotopical gesture, to the idea of establishing a divergent relation to the system of subjugation.” (314)

Grindr appears in Fuguet’s novel as the possibility of escaping from this system of subjugation through a process of subjectivation that is based on dissenting practices of the homosexual subject. Although some heteronormative behaviors, attitudes and discourses have been transplanted to this virtual space, the creation of a language that is opaque to those outside the community facilitates –and here I mean the possibility of mediating, not the meaning of simple– a ‘gay culture’ and at the same time, offers resistance from within the system of power relations. In *Sudor*, Vicente Matamala, Alf’s straight friend, moves in with him temporarily, entering a space whose practices he doesn’t know. To some extent, Tinder mirrors what Vicente does in the novel: in 2012, the app replicated what Grindr was already doing, making it the straight Grindr and not the other way round, as it is broadly believed.

In order to support my argument, I am including a paragraph of an article written by Francesc Morales, a gay Chilean filmmaker, in *The Clinic*, a Chilean online newspaper. In his article, he imagines what the Grindr profiles of some Chilean conservative politicians would look like:

Sebastián Piñera⁵: El hater. No extranjeros, no gordos, no plumas y no viejos. Es el perfil de la aplicación que siente la necesidad de criticar a todo lo que no sea parecido a él. Los extranjeros nos han traído muchos centímetros de beneficios y él no es capaz de verlo. Le cuesta ponerse en la posición del otro hasta que se da cuenta que le puede traer algún beneficio. Es capaz de mandarte un inbox criticándote, pero semanas después se da vuelta la chaqueta y te manda un toque. Se dice que una vez puso en Grindr que quería contactar solteros que creyeran en el amor. Le escribieron tres. Los tres eran feos (TheClinic.cl)

[Sebastián Piñera: The hater. No foreigners, no fat guys, no fems and no old guys. This is the type of profile that feels the need to criticize whoever is not like him. Foreigners have brought many centimeters of profits and he is not able to see that. He has trouble putting himself in someone else's shoes until he realizes he can get some benefit. He may send you an inbox criticizing you, and then weeks later he changes his mind and taps you. Rumor has it he once wrote on Grindr he wanted to contact single guys who believed in love. Three guys texted him. The three of them were ugly.]

After its publication, Morales' article received a few comments in the space enabled on the newspaper's website. One of the users who wrote a comment is unaware of what Grindr is.

⁵ Sebastián Piñera (1949) is the current President of Chile. He is a member of Renovación Nacional, a liberal conservative political party. He was previously in office from 2010 to 2014, and he is among the wealthiest man in Chile.

Another user responds: “es como el Tinder gay” [“it is like the gay Tinder.”] As I mentioned before, Grindr was launched as a cell phone application in 2009, three years earlier than Tinder. Although most of the heterosexual users of Tinder perpetuate the idea that Grindr is a copy of the heterosexual model, the reality tells otherwise.

Two other users comment on the language Morales employs in the article. One user says: “A lo mejor esto es divertido en el ambiente gay. Lo que es yo, no entendí niuna weá” [“Maybe this is funny if you’re gay. But I didn’t understand shit.”] If anyone who does not belong to this discursive space wants to understand what is going on, that person would have to learn the implications and references established in this other discursive space. Another user’s reaction confirms the unintelligibility of the Grindr jargon:

No entiendo mucho, o más bien casi nada de lo que habla mi querido francesc, porque lo que relata está escrito en un secreto idioma gay, habla sobre situaciones gay que solamente suceden a espaldas del resto de nosotros, en recónditos e inaccesibles lugares gays, dónde [sic] se reúne la indescifrable gente gay. Y eso es lo bonito. La temática gay es parte de la temática humana, Y como tal, irrumpe en un diario que es de todos, porque la homosexualidad es de todos (theclinic.cl)

[I don’t understand much of what my dear francesc says, almost nothing, because it’s written in a gay secret language, he talks about gay circumstances that only happen behind the rest of us, in remote and inaccessible gay places, where indecipherable gay people meet. And that is beautiful. Gay subject is part of the human subject, and so, it irrupts into a newspaper that belongs to everyone of us, because homosexuality is a part of everyone of us.]

Both comments reinforce the sense of opacity of the language created in Grindr. However, the last one also acknowledges the power that both the language and their particular experiences give gay men. As Eribon asseverates, “We are not, for all of that, condemned to be trapped by power, conquered by its ruses, powerless to escape from its knots and its nets. If the act of dissenting is always relative, if victories are only partial, local, and uncertain, fragile and provisional, that doesn’t mean that we are always the losing party. The mythology of all or nothing needs to be set aside. We can, by way of a never-ending critical effort, alter the limits imposed upon us and expand the possibilities for freedom.” (334) Hence, the last of the aforementioned users’ comments seems to indicate that dissident discursive spaces, such as the homotopia that Grindr provides, can break the limits imposed by the heteropatriarchy on non-normative subjects and get rid of the ‘losers’ label, by inserting in mostly normative spaces.

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