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Couchsurfing and the marked body: the emergence of queer identity in a hybrid collective

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ABSTRACT

This research uses theories of identity, sociality, and mobility as a framework through which to examine the features of the Couchsurfing community and introduces the term hybrid collective as a theoretical concept. Using the notion of the hybrid collective, Couchsurfing is situated on spectrums of hybridity that include online/offline, global/local, public/private and group/individual. This work investigates themes of hospitality and globalisation through mediated space online and offline, and a primary concern is the emergent issue of queer identity that surfaced throughout ethnographic fieldwork including in-depth interviews and participant observation – particularly focusing on gender and sexuality for Couchsurfing members and how these identity attributes encourage or inhibit members moving through digital and geographical spaces.

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With 12 million members representing over 200 countries, Couchsurfing (often stylised as CouchSurfing) is an international hospitality network allowing travellers to connect to potential hosts, visitors and travelling companions globally as well as locally. Couchsurfing is not the only such organisation but currently boasts the highest and most geographically widespread membership. Members can search profiles by location and specify features like gender, handicap accessibility, smoking preference and more in order to determine how well a host could accommodate their travel needs or preferences. The idea is that a traveller can find a place to stay at no cost* and also enhance their overall travel experience through interpersonal connection. Unlike the transactional and profit-driven structures of sites like Airbnb, Homeaway, and VRBO, Couchsurfing began as a volunteer-run social network and not a business. Molz and Gibson (2016) assert that the online networks of Couchsurfing form global communities united by 'the belief that world travel ... and the generosity of hospitality can spread tolerance, friendship and world peace at a grassroots level' (p. 66). As documented in this research, many Couchsurfers express the belief that travel experiences can be enhanced beyond typical tourism through participation in hospitality networks and the subsequent encounters that result from membership.

The creation story of Couchsurfing begins with founder Casey Fenton and a small group of friends in California who had come up with a more desirable way to

*After completion of this research, Couchsurfing began charging members 15 USD per year, as of May 2020.

Table 1.

Basic demographics		N = 390
Average Age	30	
Median Age	32	
Gender	Male = 63%, Female = 36%, Trans = 1%, Other = < %1	
Sexual Orientation	Straight = 82%, LGBTQ = 16%, Other = 2%	
Geography	responses from 5 Continents, 55 Countries	

see the world, by engaging with all their pre-existing social networks in order to find new connections and potential hosts and companions for international trips that they were planning. While the pragmatic aspects of this endeavour were somewhat obvious (i.e. young people who wanted to stay with friends of friends instead of paying lodging costs), the idea spawned a digital platform that quickly expanded. Initially discovering Couchsurfing as a college student – like the founders – who wanted to travel on a budget, I soon realised that Couchsurfing is a unique case of digital-era networking combined with community-driven principles of sociality and hospitality. Couchsurfers are engaging in social capital building that is available to them as a result of this intimate, interpersonal connectivity. Particularly recognisable within organised, local city groups, the network seems to be built and strengthened over time through member knowledge, cooperation and mutual appreciation and interest in a given city, town or neighbourhood that functions as a Couchsurfing hub.

Initial contact is made through the website using an interface that operates much like other social media networks, except that there are some built-in verification parameters that include members vouching for one another and leaving public profile comments attesting to aspects like hospitality and trustworthiness. Gibson's (2016) understanding of hospitality networks aligns with the mission statement and vision listed on the website that positions Couchsurfers as desirous of international networking, educational exchanges, collective consciousness, tolerance, and cultural understanding so that there is already an assumption of a sense of common worldview with other members. Learning more about Couchsurfing and becoming experienced with in-group behaviours, I conducted years-long, transnational ethnographic fieldwork – carried out primarily and variably in the city groups of Philadelphia (United States), Munich (Germany), and Osaka (Japan) while living as a local member in each location – also consisting of interviews and interactions with members in and from cities across the world.

Drawing on earlier work studying online community by Castells (2001) and other scholars on networked society (Hassan, 2004; Wellman, 1999), Couchsurfing can be understood as an international hospitality network that also presents a more complex and overlapping view of virtual and physical space. Couchsurfing displays some characteristics of what Gee (2004) called affinity groups, but the multiple spaces of flow within this collective present a novel component. Examining the intersections of virtual and physical spaces and the practices that occur within these spaces reveal not only what the collective at large looks and acts like but also some formulations about its members. First, this work introduces the term hybrid collective to describe Couchsurfing and outlines the conceptual usefulness of the hybrid collective terminology. This concept addresses both the sociality and the fluidity of Couchsurfing by situating it on spectrums of hybridity that include online/offline, global/local, public/private and group/individual. Secondly, while

this work is part of a larger project examining local city culture as one space in which to interrogate the relationship between individual and group identity, this current research focuses on emergent, ethnographic insights that surfaced throughout in-depth interviews and participant observation – particularly that of queer identity and mobility in Couchsurfing. This work provides evidence for the usefulness of the term hybrid collective in explaining the framework of Couchsurfing, and the ethnographic fieldwork interpreted here specifically highlights narratives of gender, sexuality, and the queer experience for Couchsurfers.

Theorising the hybrid collective

The practice of Couchsurfing is at the crux of a complex set of cultural components. First, the notion of hospitality is set clear as a central purpose of the website. Under the context of hospitality exchange, Couchsurfing engages with elements of community, identity and culture among its members. Using data from a volunteer sample of members and drawing from early emergent themes to complement the ethnographic components in this work, a survey helped gauge basic demographics and assess attitudes and opinions. Because of the nature of the Couchsurfing community and limited access to member data and distribution channels, this is a volunteer-based response system, and the sample was not randomised. However, the end responses did result in a rather widely representative demographic set. Table 1 illustrates the basic demographic features of the respondents.

Results of this survey were used as prompts within the long-term ethnographic work exploring member performances and perceptions of community, identity, and culture, and the data also provide evidence for interaction between affordances of technology and mobility. Examining the interplay between collective and individual subjectivity with these identifiable social forces produces a more holistic understanding of Couchsurfing as an exemplar of what I have dubbed a hybrid collective.

Initially, the hybrid collective framework was set across four spectrums: public/private, collective/individual, global/local, and online/offline. Throughout the course of the project – and especially after Couchsurfing changed to a B-Corporation – a fourth spectrum of hybridity emerged: corporate/grassroots. Arguing that Couchsurfing is a hybrid collective does not indicate that the organisation itself successfully strikes a balance between these two opposites but rather that there are dialectical tensions present that apply to each of the spectrums of hybridity outlined here. For Couchsurfing to be effective, there is an element of collective cooperation, but born out of a culture with a strong individualistic leaning. The result is that individualism comes into conflict with necessary cooperation of an assemblage. Similarly, the influence of network globalisation is obvious in the affordances of such a platform, but there is also a strong current of local community identification and input. Finally, Couchsurfing is in many ways about fostering in-person, offline connection yet also depends on the online interface and must therefore recognise the scope of virtual interaction and computer-mediated communication. Rosen et al. (2011) find that in-person interaction fosters trust in Couchsurfing members and then that trust is reinforced through virtual engagements.

Much online community scholarship in the twenty-first century has focused on positive or negative aspects of Web 2.0 in the context of individual identity and group inclusion/exclusion, but less work has examined identity in the sense of hybridity or the implications

for identity management when moving concentrically through online and offline spaces. This research interrogates individual identity for members of the hybrid collective through specifically recognising experiences related to gender and sexuality. Building on online community literature and also considering examinations of mobility networks such as what Bialski (2012) refers to as technologies of hospitality, the concept of hybridity includes technology as one aspect of the identity-based practices. In order to examine individual subjectivity in Couchsurfing – functionally a vast series of networks connected through interests rooted in travel and tourism – the mobilities paradigm along with queer theory is a lens for understanding communication and interaction surrounding member identity. Mobility is situated within a broader theoretical body of investigations of space and place that can drill down through a more in-depth framework of identity.

The relationship between identity and space/place is the conception of self in relation to *where* one is, *how* one exists in a place, and the movement through space, to consider one's place in the world and how and why one moves through the world. For the purposes of conceptualising the hybrid collective, the theoretical examination of queer theory adds to the discussion of collective intelligence and dissects how individual members make sense of their positions within the collective. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) have shown that there are complex interplays between conceptions of place and identity at the individual, psychological level; their place attachment studies offer evidence that individuals use place to 'create, symbolise and establish new selves' (p. 217) and also that place can play an important role in continuity of self concept. Building on the work of Castells (2000) and Papacharissi (2011) in relation to the presentation of the self (Goffman, 1959), identity is dialectically connected to conceptions of space, both physical and virtual. Urry (2007) suggests that physical/virtual place continuity has implications for overall movement and that activity in each of these spaces, and across them, affects movement in the other to the point that the interaction between the two forms is as important as examining either as an isolate.

For queer theorists identity and movement have long been linked, though rarely framed through mobility, and much of the extant literature on sexuality and movement has been charted through gender studies. Clarsen (2014) asserts that sociopolitical movement has been investigated in highly complex, structural ways based on how certain groups and individuals are permitted or restricted in various spaces and then calls for further examination of gender in historicising mobility. Additionally, Clarsen asserts that the very narratives researchers are able to construct around gendered mobilities can 'serve as resources for articulating alternative visions and suggest ways to bring about change' (p. 100). While Clarsen's work does not necessarily differentiate between cisgender and transgender experiences, this position also points to the lack of recognition in sexualities for mobility studies.

Oswin (2014) answers that need by allowing that the study of global flows in relation to LGBT issues has advanced politics of difference perspectives. Specific discussions of heteronormativity and homosexuality are less prevalent, but Oswin highlights a small sector of scholarship that focuses on capitalism as a force of heteronormative reinforcement, the effects of which can be seen in the restrictions of queer space. Through a post-colonial examination of gay cruises, Puar (2002) offers one of the most detailed case studies of queer mobility. Puar's account, while focused on the tourism industry and gay consumers, recognises the lack of widespread research connecting mobility research and

queer theory. Jen Jack Giesecking's (2020) forthcoming book *A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes and Queers* promises a 'queer historical geography' of the intricate queer spaces that exist within the wider urban landscape of New York City, and this singular, queer mapping project is representative of the opportunities for innovation in queer mobilities scholarship. According to Oswin (2014), bridging queer theory and mobilities has the potential to spotlight the differential manifestation of mobility, and the intersection of queerness and mobility is precisely the kind of 'social differentiation . . . in which mobilities scholars have shown interest' (p. 91). Like the work of Puar, Oswin, and Giesecking, the current project seeks to further the innovate critical queer scholarship by bridging queer theory and mobilities and by developing the hybrid collective framework that can be applied to specific, depth examinations such as the case of Couchsurfing.

Fluidity and fixity

As social notions evolve to acknowledge sexual and gender identities beyond the binary, the relevance of conversations around place and identity within the context of the hybrid collective so too depends on the recognition of fluidity. Hetherington (2002) insists that metaphors of fluidity are crucial to understanding the economics of mobility in a global society. Beyond the usefulness of fluidity as an abstract analogy for conceptualising an increasingly global world, fluidity highlights the changing relations between individuals and the structure of the society in which they live. Bauman's (2013) liquid modernity perspective discusses identity as distinct from but connected to the pressures of bureaucratic society. Because one of the prominent features of the hybrid collective is the dynamism of interaction and consumption that takes place between individuals and across communities, the necessity of fluidity is central to understanding Couchsurfing. Like Usher (2002) and Breslow (2013) who have argued for place-based notions of identity that are less stationary than previous work, the hybrid collective mediates the individual view of sociality and, subsequently, interacts with previously established cultural and social norms around fixity and practices of hospitality.

Cultural nuances of hospitality are not nullified by membership in the hybrid collective but rather are active in its members' conceptions of their own subjectivity. D'Mello and Sahay (2007) suggest that individuals who are empowered to move through national borders conceive of themselves as having hybridised identities and as less bound by stable conventions of their native lands; Couchsurfing as a hybrid collective offers precisely this kind of affiliation through membership. Uzzell (1996) claims that individual relationships with environment (which they typify as place) are dynamic, while Urry (2007) focuses on notions of stasis and the tension between mobility and immobility as a central concern of the New Mobilities Paradigm. McCabe (2014) frames the tourist as exemplar of the contemporary figure of movement, one that 'epitomises all that it means to be mobile and all that it means to be modern' (p. 349) in a global society. Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2000) envision space as an imaginary set of divides that can only be qualified through the interactions that take place at their boundaries. The tourist, as an identity, is a figure through which space can be qualified, and tourist identities are performed in a way that gives different meanings to different spaces.

Fluidity and movement are linked through various scholarly understandings, often through nomadism as movement and as the very opposite of stasis and structure. For Derrida (2005), identity actualisation through hospitality is incompatible with a static lifestyle and interpretation of identity as fixed, as readable through some tangible moment of presence. For D'Mello and Sahay (2007), on the other hand, there can be a type of settling that takes place while still exercising an awareness of the benefits of the networked self. The identity of Couchsurfer must be dissected under the premise of voluntary movement; that is to say that they are not operating under the types of forced mobility applicable to groups such as refugees and some immigrants, for example. This focus on the voluntary mobility is important, as Couchsurfers who have adopted this conception of the traveller identity are afforded the privilege and perception of freedom to travel, as opposed to the notion of 'sedentary metaphysics' (Cresswell, 2002, p. 11) which ties an individual's identity to more planted roots and a fixed sense of place. Couchsurfers, however, are not free from political pressures of the body. In fact, as Bauman (2013) points out, this paradox of freedom, identity, and movement often means that individuals are more subject to shouldering personal tensions as they enact various practices of global consumption. Joining the introduction of the hybrid collective with Bialski's (2012) notion of technologies of hospitality, the following sections of this paper will address some political tensions that differentially affect Couchsurfers as functions of their individual identity politics and consumer characteristics.

Bialski (2012) argues that when two people connect through a technology of hospitality they touch off a process of intimate engagement by which strangers 'become familiar' and each actor begins to consider their role. Couchsurfing as a technology of hospitality reflects the collective social and political flow of people and ideas. The scope of mobility as a theoretical lens applies to more than merely movement. It is movement – through physical and virtual space of people, goods, ideas and movement within societal strata – intimately linked to individual self-concept, creating interplay of space, place, and identity. Through mobility practices and hospitality interactions, Couchsurfers engage in identity reflection and meaning-making within the community. McCabe (2014) problematises how different aspects of the tourist identity can lead individuals to 'dis-identify' (p. 347), and exploring the hybrid collective through various means of identification and disidentification offers what Breslow & Allagui (2014) call 'a social theory where both the subject and the nature of subjectivity are increasingly theorised in fleeting terms' (p. 210).

On my first Couchsurfing trip to Europe, a German host and participant referred to himself as 'not a tourist but a traveller,' highlighting the negative connotation towards the tourist label that is common in Couchsurfing and also representing the difference in perception between fixed and fluid lifestyles. Though Wearing et al. (2009) warn of the less useful distinctions between tourist and traveller, it is important to recognise Couchsurfer interpretations of these terminologies in the process of their own identity management. McCabe (2014) outlines both the negative and positive connotations attached to the tourist identity throughout contemporary global society. Not only is it increasingly more complicated to point out who is and is not acting in a way that can be categorised as a tourist identity (Bianchi, 2009) but also which mobile subjects are self-reflexively rejecting the tourist trope, such as in the emergence of backpacker culture. For many in the Couchsurfing collective, tourism is understood as a commodified and therefore less desirable travel experience. Building on MacCannell's (1973) notion of staged

authenticity and consumption of typical tourist sites, services and products, Couchsurfers generally see themselves as either uninterested in these types of experiences or as more savvy at recognising 'real' experiences and avoiding the staged authenticity of the tourist trap. Alternatively, for some, 'traveller' is simply a neutralised word that the community members use to describe themselves, against culturally loaded terms. A tourist is an interloper in a foreign land, with the act of tourism itself noteworthy because of the tourist's consumer-based identity. Tourism is a special occasion, a visit to a place that is not home. For many members, Couchsurfing is not a special occasion but rather an identity practice, a way of being in the world.

Breslow (2013) claims that the traditional nation-state model reinforces the notion of fixity, of identity as tied to static fixtures, but that 'this regime of stability ... spatial fixity ... is coming to an end' (p. 3). Interpretive work and extensive qualitative inspection of Couchsurfer behaviours and discourse provide evidence that many Couchsurfers see this as both a desirable goal and an applicable condition of their collective membership and lifestyle. Both global and mobile culture, and the dialectical interplay between the two, has contributed significantly to the end of the fixed nation-state, as Castells (2001) offers the spaces of flow model to illustrate the increasingly mobile and networked society that now encompasses the nation-state. These theoretical and philosophical perspectives offer one lens through which to examine the resonance of this viewpoint for certain types of mobile subjects and to understand how they connect this viewpoint to their own behaviours and beliefs. Kien (2009) notes that national space is now already international due to the uncompromising effects of globalisation. Beyond Kien's assertion that globalisation is neither entirely benevolent nor detrimental, the subject of mobility, particularly in the context with an international collective such as Couchsurfing, must also take into account factors of globalisation. Perceived, fluidly mobile identity is a choice for some but also represents a lack of choice for others. The power dynamic between local culture and globalised disruption is a main concern of how identity is structured.

(Im)mobility and the marked body

This analysis considers the impact of the hybrid collective on identity maintenance and management (and the theoretical implications thereof) within the reality of networked sociality. McQuire (2012) argues that city spaces have been transformed as a result of democratising technologies that provide individual and collective agency ... by redistributing the power of time and of public space. Though membership in a hybrid collective such as Couchsurfing can indubitably alter one's perception of sociality and individual subjectivity, such a series of network connections by no means erases some consistent issues of hegemonic influences on mobility and the subsequent affects on those individuals who operate outside of more normalised self-concepts. This ethnography reveals that Couchsurfers are quite self-reflective about public space and often describe an increased sense of personal autonomy, particularly when conceiving of their own abilities to travel and navigate the cityspace.

As Sheller and Urry (2006) point out, the paradoxical arrangement of this contemporary mobility is such that agency often relies on a 'deeper dependence on complex technological systems' (p. 7). For queer Couchsurfers and other LGBT citizens, then, questions of marginalisation are even more pertinent for those who do not have common and

consistent access to various communication technologies. Like Frith (2012), who takes a critical stance on inequity wrought in hybrid society, experiences outlined through Couchsurfing consider the impact of various identity markers. In particular, this research yields insight on how women, non-native English speakers (or non-English speakers), and queer-identifying members of Couchsurfing experience unique challenges in the navigation of their position in the hybrid collective. Beyond issues of perceived discrimination, theoretical examinations of stigmatised identity and impact on mobility support empirical examples and interpretations of Couchsurfing ethnography.

Lyon (2008) highlights many political issues around identity and mobility, largely from a physical or face-to-face standpoint, and much work on immigration and sites of mobility can be applied to tourism and hospitality, both online and off. Lyon mentions the 'data double', or all the digital ways a person's identity can be quantified and stored. Not only is Couchsurfing information part of its members' data doubles but it is also a uniquely representative profile of an individual's identity and mobility. While this research was not initially designed to focus only on gender identity and sexuality within the hybrid collective, emergent themes throughout the ethnographic work resulted in insight about mobility and identity in non-normalised subject positions. The subsequent discussion highlights selected experiences of participants in order to recognise differences in conceptions of space and place. In my own experiences as a solo traveller and gender-queer/non-binary Couchsurfer often read as female, I have frequently encountered multiple views of discourse surrounding gender, sexuality and safety issues while surfing, hosting, and socialising with other Couchsurfers.

As the principles of ethnographic work require acknowledgement of the researcher's own identity, the fact that I am gender nonconforming, white, able-bodied, and English-speaking affords certain privileges as well as evokes vulnerabilities of these statuses while interacting in Couchsurfing culture. Many conversations with other surfers developed around the subject of single women, trust, and safety. During one interview, I compared experiences with a male surfer close to my age, also white and American, who hosted extensively and has many positive references and connections on his profile. Despite his positive reviews, he had never successfully managed to secure a host for himself through the Couchsurfing network. He and I had visited several of the same cities (London, Prague, Berlin), sent out requests to some of the same hosts, and compared similar styles of communication sent through the Couchsurfing system. I secured a host in each of these cities (and many more) while he did not receive a single affirmative offer. Ethnographic interviews and survey results reveal consistently across the years that there are more members who are only interested in hosting female-identified surfers. The three most common situations that surfaced under this condition are female surfers who feel more comfortable hosting other female surfers, male surfers who feel more comfortable hosting female surfers, and male surfers who host female surfers in the interest (or at least possibility) of attraction, flirtation, romance or hookups. Furthermore, the Couchsurfing profile interface now allows space for 'other' when selecting gender, but when I joined there were only male and female options. I encountered few other surfers who identified as genderqueer, gender non-conforming, or non-binary, and most, trans surfers expressed the desire to pass (as cisgender). These early discoveries inspired more conversations about the intersection of hospitality and queer identity and issues of who feels safe with whom and in what spaces.

Couchsurfing ethnography and member identity

As noted previously there has not been a great deal of research focusing on the intersections of gender identity and sexuality in travel, specifically in terms of global mobility culture. Of the research that exists, much of it comes from the perspective of the tourist industry and focuses on demographics, marketing and demographics of consumption. Lepp and Gibson (2003) offer a study of perceived risks in tourism and provide statistics that support 'an awareness of an increased vulnerability as a result of being female' (p. 612). This statement could essentially be applied to the everyday state of existence of being female and/or inhabiting a female body, but Lepp & Gibson go on to say that this increased awareness and vulnerability 'did not stop them [females] from travelling' (p. 612) but did cause femme tourists to develop strategies for how they would travel in order to reduce their risks to an acceptable level.

From an auto-ethnographic perspective, being a solo traveller caused much evaluation and self-reflection. On my first trip to Europe as a Couchsurfer, I had no baseline for comparison of the ease or difficulty of finding hosts. In Central Europe in the busy summer travel season I was able to secure hosts in each city I visited – all busy, major metropolitan locations. I did have to send several requests for most cities but always received a positive response and eventually found hosts. Ethnographic interviews, like the example previously described, revealed that this was not the experience of some other surfers, more frequently so for non-white surfers and those who do not speak English.

Due partially to the busy summer travel season and relatively low number of Budapest hosts compared to surfers, I received the most number of 'decline' responses when I was planning to go from Vienna to Budapest. One response suggested the Last Minute Request Board in the Budapest city group, and after I could not secure a host through the individual request method, I posted on the board and received several responses and offers from hosts. The first member who eventually hosted me in Budapest was a middle-aged, single father with two young daughters. My host was a native Hungarian and very active in the local Budapest Couchsurfing group; his daughters, around the ages of four and six, spoke nearly no English. When I first arrived at my host's home, he was already hosting another surfer (disclosed to me in the offer). Alex, an early 20s American male student who had been studying abroad and travelling around Europe, and I made fast companions, as Couchsurfers are wont to do; we spent time exploring Budapest together over several days. When Alex moved on, I remained at the host's place for several more nights, and his young daughters joined us later in the week. I spent days walking through a street fair and eating at their favourite local spots with the family, sharing meals in their home, playing with the girls and marvelling at our ease in communicating despite not sharing a common working language. My host told me that he did not really like going out late but imagined that I might want to and offered me advice about local happenings 'for the young'; after he and the girls would go to bed, I would go out alone to experience Budapest nightlife, using the spare key I had been given to quietly let myself in and tiptoe back to my air mattress in the wee hours of morning. I left Budapest with an amazing recipe for Hungarian goulash and the memory of what remains to this day one of my most wholesome and culturally invigorating Couchsurfing experiences.

This experience in Budapest represents many of the concerned and critical responses from others that are centred around the potential dangers of such practices and/or similar

situations that seemed to go awry. This narrative is not meant to insinuate that there are no real risks or to silence concerns and fears of others but is meant to relay my own experience and to offer an entry point to a discussion of individual perceptions of mobile identity in the context of this ethnography. In the beginning of my Couchsurfing experiences, I never quite understood my identity as a potential catalyst for immobility or as a mobility advantage; as the ethnography unfolded, however, it became both of these. My identity conceivably opened doors for me, literally, that may not be opened for other surfers. At the same time, I realised that many female surfers (and those who might read as femme) looked upon these open doors as potential portals to danger and that some had experiential interactions that justified these fears. In addition to the accounts of questionable behaviour, I learned through my participants, one active Couchsurfing forum details negative experiences, and while some detail innocuous miscommunications and humorous cultural differences, there are also stark descriptions of attempted violations.

A large percentage of my hosts across five years have been male, and I have encountered other members, both male and female, who are only interested in hosting women. Most cited safety as the main reason, though a few mentioned comfort and cleanliness. If a host views me as less dangerous because of reading my identity as female, is this a privilege of mobility? Certainly, if a host views me as more vulnerable, the answer is no. My first extensive conversation about this topic was during an interview with a gay male surfer from Belgium whom I was hosting in Philadelphia. After he disclosed to me that he had found my profile and decided to send a request because of my membership in the Queer Philly group, we discussed in great detail the notion of safety, comfort and, ultimately, mobility for LGBT-identifying individuals in Couchsurfing. This harkens back to Hetherington's (2002) assessment of mobility and the marked body – identified as the female body, bodies of colour, or bodies of lower socioeconomic statuses. Adding to these designations, I argue that the queer body writ large (including trans, non-binary, genderqueer, gender fluid, and gender non-conforming bodies) deepens the notion that all marked bodies are subject to experiences that impact their conceptions of their own identities in relationship to where they are in the world, geospatially and socially, and how queerness shapes (im)mobility.

In interviews and ethnographic observations both online and off, I encountered repeated instances of LGBT-identifying Couchsurfers expressing frustration, enthusiasm or simply interest in discussing the politics and pragmatics of belonging and participating in Couchsurfing. Like many social networking sites and online spaces, Couchsurfing opens possibilities for connection between LGBT members but also creates more spaces where encountering homophobia is a possibility, not just through fear of online harassment but also in the vulnerability of revealing enough personal information that could lead to violence in the offline world (Gibson et al., 2013). The LGBT community writ large has an interesting relationship with mobility, as there is a storied history between queer groups and individuals and the spaces where they are allowed to exist and move through. Gibson, Alexander & Meem detail urban areas such as San Francisco's Castro, L.A.'s West Hollywood and Oxford Street in Sydney that gays and lesbians, in particular, have 'claimed as their own' (p. 362). Like othering space, mobility can be conceived through explorations of difference. Cresswell (2006) argues that a more holistic examination of mobility theory requires the recognition that movement 'occurs in a context of social and cultural difference within a systematically asymmetrical field of power' (p.

220). Again, the idea of claiming certain spaces and places due to being ostracised and pushed out of other spaces is a rich element of the historical struggle for LGBT rights. The Stonewall Riots, global Pride marches, and other public forms of protest demand recognition through establishing sense of place. Throughout the course of this research, legislation around same-sex marriage has evolved, most notably with the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges decision in the Supreme Court of the United States granting same-sex couples the fundamental right to marry. Prior to this decision, same-sex partners were frequently travelling to states permitting same-sex marriages. This type of forced mobility creates further tension challenges the concept of 'home'. When individuals live in a state that does not recognise their union, forced mobility becomes a concern and even more so for those who do not have the privilege and resources to travel and/or relocate, similar to Creswell's view that mobility can often highlight unequal distributions of power and resources. Kien (2009) further claims that space is most useful as a framework under the acknowledgement that it operates 'in negotiation with the dominating force' (p. 60).

Similar sociopolitical issues that affect travel and mobility are often discussed in the Queer CouchSurfers group, one of the largest and most active worldwide forums on the Couchsurfing site with over 30,000 members. The Queer Couchsurfers forum provides a virtual space where members socialise and address local and global topics of interest and concerns for queer travellers and queer citizens writ large. The group description is 'for bisexual, gay, lesbian, queer, poly, pan, asexual and transgender folks looking for a safe haven' (Couchsurfing.com), which addresses the desire of this subgroup and those members who are seeking safe spaces as they travel and/or are identifying themselves as hosts who are willing to offer safe spaces. Observing and participating in years of interactions through this group – both in the virtual forum and offline at meetups – has yielded in-depth understanding of LGBT-identifying Couchsurfing members. Growing out of the main Queer Couchsurfers group, a trend developed in the Philadelphia Couchsurfing community and other city groups a few years ago in which members began to create digital badges that could be featured on their profile to signify their alignment with different causes. For example, one badge indicates that a user is committed to the personal safety and well-being of all surfers who come to their homes, including specific women and LGBT members. Several gay surfers whom I hosted found the badges useful and pointed out the difficulty of gleaning from someone's profile if they are LGBTQ or an ally. The Couchsurfing profile does not list sexual orientation or sexuality as a fill-in form along with other demographic information, so aside from a feature that allows members to search for different keywords listed in the profile information, there are no other ways to match members based on this kind of compatibility. Because of trepidation around differing lifestyle views, especially as a function of varied cultural norms, another member told me that they felt more comfortable going through LGBT-oriented groups in order to find hosts.

To revisit Lyon's (2008) discussion of the politics of identity and identifiers, queer Couchsurfers are both limited by the lack of official site communication about LGBT status and also potentially protected. One advice thread demonstrates this tension:

User 1: From the gay guy perspective, did you crash with straight guys or gay guys (or girls), and were all your hosts aware of your sexual orientation, and how did that all play out?

User 2: ... I LOVE Couchsurfing! Im definitely an adept. Still to this day tho, I've never disclosed my sexual orientation to anyone, hosts or surfers. I wish i had/could but I just cant bring myself to do it!

While some members have complained that there is no way to sort by LGBT profiles or to readily identify yourself as such, other members express their desire to keep this information private unless they choose to share with other members, due to fear of stigmatisation. A recent change in the Couchsurfing site design is that Couchsurfing sub-groups to which a user belongs are no longer displayed publicly on user profiles. While you can still join groups, the only way for others to discover your group membership is by also being a member of the same group. This is one less method of identifying and of being identified. One respondent expressed dislike for this change because it 'creates a safety issue for LGBTs in that we cannot identify queer friendly folk'. Another gay respondent also says that the 'removal of list groups from member profiles was a retrograde step' in terms of the site itself anticipating and responding to user needs.

Within survey respondents, 72% of LGBT-identifying members say that they generally surf alone. From initial interviews, I postulated that LGBT members may be more likely than average to surf with others because of safety concerns, but this casual hypothesis was not supported in the survey results. Across all members, 65% say they generally surf alone, so LGBT-identifying respondents of all genders are actually *more* likely to surf alone than the average across the general population. LGBT respondents often made comments concerning sexual activity and unsafe practices within Couchsurfing. One queer-identifying surfer describes their experiences receiving unsolicited messages on the app:

I started to receive creepy messages asking me out, saying they hoped they would see me at an event but i wasn't there, saying they wanted to 'take me to the countryside to get to know me'. It has been so uncomfortable i cannot post publicly, cannot even think about surfing, and cannot attend CS events. Maybe Australia is just full of rapey assholes, maybe CS has changed. I think it is a bit of both. CS certainly seems way more rapey than before. Too bad, it was not about hooking up before ... now full of creeps.

(non-straight, female, 30)

When the topic of flirting, hookups and other iterations of intimacy arise, the most widely shared sentiment is that Couchsurfing should *not* be used for the explicit goal of hooking up with other members but that sometimes such things do occur. Further, members frequently say that if any intimate or physical relations are to happen, the host should never be the initiator. This reinforces other expressions that emerged through ethnographic interviews that – in the spirit of hospitality – the responsibility should be on the host to see that their surfer feels safe and comfortable. Two other respondents, a bisexual female and a bisexual male, also mentioned the frequency with which male Couchsurfers attempt to initiate sexual encounters with their surfers. The bisexual female said that she is sometimes afraid of using Couchsurfing because of previous experiences in which male hosts tried to have sex with her; the bisexual male said, 'There is a high percentage of men looking for hookups more than joining in the ethos. Fine, I guess, but people should be aware of it.' Like those mentioned above, most participants address improper etiquette around hooking up as particularly unwelcome or unwarranted when initiated from host to surfer, and several participants also talked about being more comfortable initiating or

responding to advances at public Couchsurfing meet-ups and when the involved parties are not currently in a host/surfer exchange.

Conclusions and implications for future research

While there are increasing numbers of travel products, publications and guides designed and marketed towards LGBT crowds, sociocultural implications of these niche commodity market offerings on the mobile identity of LGBT individuals remain largely uninvestigated academically (Southall & Fallon, 2011). Puar (2002) adds that more in-depth examination of identity through the politics of mobility for queer travellers could reveal ‘how global tourism affects local sexualities and how local sexualities are perceived by global tourism’ (para. 9). As is the nature of the hybrid collective, the local/global hybridity is in constant and sometimes clashing interplay at sites of hospitality, and this notion could be applied to specific sub-groups or cultures, especially alternative and minority voices such as those in LGBT subject positions and in interactions with other marginalised traveller statuses and identities.

Existing scholarship on networked, queer communities often focuses on marginalised youth, and the hybrid collective perspective can expand the view of critical queer scholarship in mediated communication by connecting to wider applications such as Ballard’s (2019) queer criticalities and digital futurity and Forstie’s (2020) spatial examination of LGBTQ communities in urban areas. While this paper focuses on sexuality and gender identity, insights emerged throughout the ethnographic process that deal with other elements of Couchsurfer identity and perception – including race and ethnicity, language, religion, disability, and socioeconomic status. Future work may interrogate perceptions of intersectionality among Couchsurfers and how these different statuses are synthesised by and among members of the hybrid collective.

Consistently throughout the ethnographic process, conversations about non-normative identities and mobility around travel link back to discussions of (anti-) consumerism, global capitalism, and alternative consumption. Couchsurfing was initially positioned as an alternative consumer practice in contrast to what many of its members saw as the highly corporatised (and therefore less authentic) travel industry. Recent examinations of user-generated content on social media sites look at an even more recent wave of similarly anti-consumer behaviour and networked culture jamming, such as Wood’s (2020) discussion of ‘anti-haul’ videos on YouTube. While Couchsurfing becoming a B-Corporation has arguably shifted the organisation to have more in common with corporate entities and the newer group of travel products and services such as AirBnB, VRBO, Homeaway, and similar brands, the formation and dynamic history of Couchsurfing traces a path of the ebb and flow of consumer identity in the networked era. By using Couchsurfing to theorise the hybrid collective, this framework can be further applied to other contemporary forms of sociality and to understand the complex ways that identity interacts with sociality.

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