

The Virtual Life of Sex in Public

In this chapter, I examine various scenes of intimacy's failure, juxtaposing recent mass mediated sex scandals with ethnographic research I conducted in Austin, Texas, a city famous both for its high technology aspirations and for its cruising culture. I speculate on the ways various discourses on sex in public and virtually mediated eroticism try to capture and frame different iterations of "sex in public" as failures: the inability to achieve idealized forms of erotic belonging is variously expressed as expectancy, deferral, lack, and as an inability to arrive, achieve, or actualize normative forms of belonging.

Located in both specific places and larger circuits of public culture, the chapter tracks the ways the practices and discourses that congeal around sex in public position it as a form of virtual intimacy, that is, as a diminished or pathological form of contact whether it happens between two people or many. Whether practiced by communities of men in Austin, Texas, by putatively straight Republican senators, or by the American "Everyman" of Dateline's *To Catch a Predator*, the erotic or affective acts that jump into public consciousness as perversion, scandal, hypocrisy, and predation operate as both the limit of and the ground for normative models of relationality. That is, in these often-spectacular public failures, the architecture and trajectory of heteronormative aspirations—the chase after and promise of a life realized in the image of the monogamous couple—are arrested and interrupted by those aspirations' queer excesses. At the same time, these failures operate to police the possible forms intimacy might take; they

are none-too-subtle reminders about what's inside and what's outside ideal relational forms (the couple, the family, the nation).

In much of what follows, the ways in which sex in public is so persistently diminished works in parallel with the profound sense of pleasure that is taken in witnessing the failure of other people's intimate lives, especially when these failures are tied to virtual or online spaces. Our fascination with these various scenes and scandals is thus also perhaps tied to the fascination we have for a failure that is more fundamentally constitutive of intimacy itself. Insofar as intimacy defers or delays concrete epistemological certainty (does he *really* love me? what about in ten years?), it fails to actualize the fantasy, aspiration, or dream that makes it vital. This is true even for those forms of intimacy, including concrete forms of sexual practice, that appear undeniably real. Sex, as any good slut will tell you, doesn't have to be connected.

Indeed, the only surety here is that failure and liveness are in some sort of relation, and the near certainty of failure is part of the vitality, too. But we also watch for the promise of the norm's transgression (as Bataille puts it, "In the transgression of the prohibition, a spell is cast")¹ and the promise that there's something beyond transgression itself—not just sexual or relational utopias, but things we haven't even thought of yet. Within the larger framework that looks askew at most forms of sex in public as deeply flawed, or at intimacy itself as something that reproduces the possible but never the certain, there is then still a seed of hopefulness that might rescue sex in public or intimacy from cynicism or anti-relationality. This leads to a kind of foundational, and paradoxical, claim, namely, that from the perspective of the mass public, the virtualization of sex is seen at once as evidence of intimacy's degeneration while also keeping alive the hope for sexual possibility and difference. Virtualization is, on the one hand, tied to online or digital culture; on the other, it has to do with forms of sex that are deemed nonnormative or failed, sex in public key among them. Yet the disavowals of these forms of sex are also evocations that open up the possibility of difference, of things other than the norm. Although they are stigmatized, and in the case of same-sex sex in public doubly stigmatized (queer and public), they are nonetheless offered as one among other possible avenues for erotic fulfillment. And, regardless, even as particular acts are imbued with positive or negative values, the force of intimacy's potential keeps us coming back for more.

DISAVOWING SEX IN PUBLIC

Felix and I sat down in the chilly Japanese restaurant and ordered sake while we waited for Frederick to arrive. I'd met Fred before, and was eager to talk to him about my research on public sex. Felix promised me that Fred had some great cruising stories. Felix, of course, had his own stories, though we rarely talked in detail about what happened those nights I dropped him off near the gay bars to find hustlers, something that was easier to do in San Antonio than in Austin. In San Antonio, the cluster of gay bars near Main Street and McCullough, along with many of the adjacent streets, saw a lively traffic in drugs, hustling, and casual hookups. Perhaps because of its size or because it was generally considered to be a more conservative city, San Antonio's gay culture seemed especially alive—edgier, rougher, and more diverse. And while, by the mid to late 1990s, San Antonio's adult businesses had, like Austin's, also moved to the periphery of the city, the gentrification of its downtown has remained partial and incomplete. And though it is not a city known for its public parks like Austin, as a large and sprawling metropolitan area, cruisers had long put San Antonio parks to uses they had not been intended for, something I first learned about on a gay message board in early 1998.

When Frederick arrived, I was impressed, as usual, with how put together he looked. Mahogany skin, crisp dress shirt, shaved head, hip glasses. You'd never know he was sick. Even after his health really started to fail, he always seemed energetic, upbeat. And he was smart, too, finishing his PhD in psychology and already doing clinical work.

Frederick was in many ways a perfect object choice—an attractive, intelligent, professional black man. Yet he was also off limits. His "sickness"—the creeping power of the HIV virus—had already incapacitated him a few times. Thus, his current appearance belied something else, an incipient form of bodily breakdown against which my own desires crashed and went no farther. We never talked about it directly, about how this possible, probable failure of his body constrained his ability to actualize the vision of intimacy he'd articulated. The virus compounded the failure of intimacy; he failed to attract me. Eventually, too, he failed to live.

We ordered more sake and food, and we talked. I'd hoped Frederick would tell me stories about the public sex scene in San Antonio, to complement or complicate the more focused research I was conduct-

ing in Austin. At the same time, I was beginning to wonder whether stories about sex in public, along with the various attempts to manage and police it, didn't share qualities across different geographic spaces. In San Antonio, like Austin and most other large or even modestly sized cities, public sex was part of ordinary life and held an important place in many men's sexual histories, as did the efforts to police it. Public sex materialized in particular ways in specific locales; it was also an epiphenomenon critical to the formation of and ongoing coherence of same-sex erotic networks.

Frederick didn't disappoint:

One day I'd gone running in Eisenhower Park in this cute little running outfit. I'd run along these trails and see who was out and about, get the lay of the land, you know. And once I'd gotten the better part of my run done, I'd slow down and loop back by the guys I thought were hot. A lot of these guys would be there on their lunch hours or on breaks. And since this was before they closed [some of] the military bases, there were a lot of soldiers and what not, too, though they weren't in uniform, you could still tell by their hair and how they held themselves. Sort of stiff, you know?

This was a good day—I sucked off one guy in the bathroom and another in the bushes, and I was, you know, going to make another loop when I heard this noise, and I look up and there's this helicopter. Somehow, I get it in my head that it's there for me, so I start running. And I swear it follows me! I'm convinced they're coming for me, so I keep running until I thought I was going to die. I'd never been worried about it before, but after that I couldn't help but be paranoid.

Not long after, Fred learned he'd sero-converted, and after that it was a "public service to take myself out of commission." Narrating the excitement of the chase and the fear and grief that accompanied the knowledge that he'd become HIV positive, Fred's stories illustrated the differing meanings of "public" or publicness that emerges in the narratives of cruisers and others. There was the public of intimate strangers seeking contact in city parks; the public sometimes referred to, colloquially, as "the Man" that sought to police its own boundaries; and the public of friends and lovers that made up his larger queer

social world that was at least in part a virtual public comprised of people he hadn't met or loved or fucked yet.

When I asked him, excepting pursuit helicopters, if he missed the sorts of intimacies public parks afforded him for so many years, he answered confidently, "not at all." In fact, to my surprise, he repudiated it. He said that while he didn't know whether he'd sero-converted because of public sex, he saw public sex as part of larger pattern of risk, irresponsibility, and above all else, a deeply troubled conception of and approach to intimacy. "It was fun," he admitted. "But it was wrong, too."

Though decidedly less ambivalent than some, Fred's repudiation of sex in public echoes other narratives, including those of Austinites I interviewed, and the conservative figures and the *TCAP* episode I discuss below. Indeed, very few people seemed eager to defend the intimacies that fall under the rubric of public sex. It sometimes seemed as if the refusal and rejection of sex in public had as much to do with a sense of hopelessness and impossibility, a sense that sex in public could never be "the real thing," as with anxieties about being outed or exposed to diseases. It was as if some force or congeries of them (the virus, capitalism, human nature, homophobia) had slammed shut the door to other possibilities and spaces of social and sexual belonging. At first glance, Fred's repudiation seemed tied to these beliefs, which while recognizing public sex as a common, indeed ordinary, part of life and the sexual histories of many, nonetheless framed it as an *a priori* failure of intimacy that deserved surveillance and punishment.

I pressed Fred. Well, if those forms of sexual intimacy that people experienced surreptitiously in public spaces were somehow insufficient or inadequate, what were the better alternatives? His response challenged me. Beginning from a *feeling* both affective and epistemological, he narrated both a deeply individual response and an ethical philosophy orientated to a larger social world.² "Almost definitely monogamous. *Closeness, sharing.* And I can be patient now." Fred made clear his model of intimacy was monogamous, but was this the same sort of monogamy demanded by heteronormativity? Was heteronormativity even an appropriate term for what Fred had so earnestly articulated? And to what degree was my reluctance to call it heteronormative affected by his illness and death, by my desire to do justice to his memory? At first glance, his apparently simple philosophy adhered to a normative script of intimacy, especially in the ways it articulated a vision of life, sex, and relating that begins from a place of wholeness

rather than an often unconscious sense of inadequacy or lack. Yet, Fred hadn't simply appropriated wholesale tacit or mass-mediated conceptions of togetherness. Indeed, he rejected the notion that the couple form alone could be sufficient in satisfying his intimate needs. In this and other conversations held over the following year, he elaborated a web of relations, fragile, tenuous, and shot through with conflict as well as love. Explicitly drawing on black traditions of family, he imagined a partnership, extended kin networks, friendships, and gay social worlds as constituting something more vital. Intimacy wasn't something to be captured, but something to be experienced as the pressure, ephemerality, and multiplicity of desire.

Reflecting back on this conversation after many years, I realized that this is what Fred needed from relationality to live with himself and others, and more, to thrive. I am still challenged by this vision of belonging, a notion that itself deserves further, if brief, elaboration. In the context of an intimate partnership, belonging might have to do with the feeling or experience of mutual possession and recognition that gives one's identity and the relationship itself meaning. But in a larger social field, belonging is made of the affective or material ties and obligations that link the individual to others. While this second sense of relationships also encompasses a kind of ownership (for example, in the ways one belongs to a family, a community, or nation), I am most interested in the ways it produces or enforces feelings of closeness and distance. So what's challenging about this form of intimacy as belonging is that it involves pushing against the conception that one is self-sufficient. Instead, one answers to others and the explicitly and tacitly agreed upon conditions of the group. Feeling at home, one also has to keep house.

Fred hadn't simply accepted the notion that intimacy would succeed only in the monogamous couple form, or that his queerness needed to adhere to Andrew Sullivan's assimilationist and neoconservative articulation of the "virtually normal," in which the virtual refers to a kind of passing, an assimilationist "almost so."³

I admired and respected Fred, yet at the time I longed for the very sorts of encounters he described and disavowed. His response resonated in me as something constructed and true, honest and sentimental, traditional and revolutionary. After our first conversation, I studied some of the local gay message boards and listservs for clues about the park he had mentioned. Eventually, I spent the better part of a day trying to find Eisenhower Park, wandering through its dusty

and largely empty trails without stumbling across a single person, not knowing what I might have done if I had. As in the collective queer memory that valorizes gay sex in the '60s and '70s, in the trucks and on the piers of New York, or in the ground floor bathrooms in the University of Texas Tower, I wanted to recuperate public sex as a grand, if largely disappeared, communal experiment. Someone I couldn't simply label and dismiss as conservative or an assimilationist contested my nostalgic and celebratory reconstruction of these intimate publics.

Even here, recounting this narrative, I am wary of the ways it seems to capture intimacy as something achievable given the right tool kit (self awareness, therapy, Oprah). What I am wary of, then, is the way this story seems to establish a concrete and positive content to the possibilities represented by "virtual intimacy," thereby offering a disappointing closure to what otherwise remains a more open and contested field of articulations and propositions. It's important, then, to point out that while Fred articulated an "answer" to the problem of virtual intimacy, that is, to the problem sex in public posed for him, this answer itself was in fact a deferral, a promise to himself and not an effect or a result. That is, on the most basic level, when his family and friends gathered to honor him and the webs of belonging he'd elaborated between them when he became very ill, there was no dutiful partner at his bedside. The success of his dream did not rest in the realization of the ideal couple form but in some other, tactile *and* ineffable form of relationality.

Closeness, sharing. Fred said this to Felix and me with the intensity of a revelation.

AUSTIN SEX PUBLICS

The stories men told me about public sex in Austin were varied, yet they shared a few common themes, even when they described very different orientations to sex in public, and increasingly, the role online spaces played in their lives. Whether men were for or against public sex, they frequently framed these practices in the context of one sort of failure or another.

In Austin, there was, throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s, a very active public sexual culture that centered around without being wholly dependent on university life. With many active tearooms, bathrooms used for public sex, the sprawling University of Texas complex and the adjacent "Drag" (Guadalupe Street between 21st and 32nd

Streets) attracted cruisers from around the country, as did the city's lush parks, a rarity in Texas. As a college town, and Texas' premiere liberal oasis, Austin was a central hub for the production of slackerdom and had, barring episodic crackdowns, a correspondingly lackadaisical sexual culture where, as it was put to me, "it was always easy to get laid." Steven Saylor, narrating his own relationship to Austin, says something similar, noting that even after AIDS had had a chilling effect on sex on the coasts, Austin was still rich with opportunities.⁴

During the period of my research, Austin still saw lively activity in its parks, though this waxed and waned with the interest of police and irritable residents, who sometimes complained they could see men cruising from their front porches. The University of Texas also contained an active sexual geography with a handful of sites—gyms and public bathrooms—that saw regular use. By 2002 and 2003 these had also attracted a regulatory gaze and the usually subtle attention of campus police and administrators whose efforts resulted in, among other things, glory holes being covered up and stall doors removed from especially active bathrooms (thus denying cruisers the modicum of privacy that public sex demands).

Yet even as stories about sex in Austin often highlighted the relative ease with which erotic encounters could be found across a range of urban and later online spaces, many if not most of the narratives were marked by loss and failure, whether characterized as nostalgia for disappeared places such as the porn theater on Congress Avenue, or the still painful wounds of losing friends and loved ones to AIDS. Some of my interlocutors told the stories of their erotic lives as tales of lost innocence: small town boy goes to the big city (even though Austin isn't that big) and falls into a world of drugs and herpes. And for some the sense of loss came later, after spaces like the Cinema West porn theater were shut down; or how, four years of therapy and three different kinds of antidepressants later, they were still alone.

The following brief ethnographic snapshots evoke a few of these narratives. The stories echo those of other men I spoke with in Austin and across the country as the visible political challenges to local and state varieties of homophobia increasingly dimmed and queer visibility became increasingly tied to the gentrification of neighborhoods and public debates about mainstreaming (marriage and military service). "Queering" gradually had less to do with a politicized attitude than with branded style.

Brad peppered many of his monologues on art, politics, and NPR with references to his dead partner, Terry. Terry was an artist, wild. If Brad took half a hit of acid, Terry would take three. Brad took care of Terry when he got sick and the illness was drawn out, melodramatic. A salon: over coffee and cigarettes in Brad's yard, our mutual friend Lynne and I would draw or paint while Brad spun one story after another, heart-felt if often unfinished polemics on politics, relationships, memories, and the dead. When our salon became difficult or awkward, as it increasingly did, it was because the world of the dead, a world to which Brad seemed inevitably drawn, a world of belonging and relationality marred by absences, unwilling or incomplete closures. Our own little world could not always bear the weight of the missing other.

Jasper fantasized about buying the chairs from Cinema West having heard they would be auctioned off after the police finally shut the porn theater and Austin institution down. When he first moved to town, he and his friends would hang out on South Congress near the theater. There were gay nights, too, but even when there weren't, queers gathered on the upper balcony. "I had a lot of good memories in those chairs." Yet the street traffic alarmed the nearby residents of Travis Heights, a then rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. And politicians likewise disliked the way the theater was a "blemish" on the avenue, the road that served as the gateway to the state capitol. Finally, in 1998, after years of intense pressure from city officials, police stings, harassment by moralists, speculation by real estate developers, and the efforts of some area residents, Cinema West was forced to close after twenty-one years of showing straight and gay pornographic films. Jasper never got his theater seat; turns out the sale was a rumor.

Shane lived alone, worked hard, and had stopped going out. But he showed me pictures of when he did, when he cruised Zilker Park, before he had to start going to funerals every week. These pictures showed a charismatic, smiling young man, arms draped around friends. Shane took me on a tour of Austin's disappeared queerspaces. We drove to the waterfront near the leather bar, the Chain Drive, to Pease Park, to Mount

Bonnell, and to Zilker. It was exciting to visit these spaces and to realize they held such erotically charged histories. Shane recounted stories about tricks, lovers, and fabulous parties. But by the end of our forays, we were tired and a little melancholy. Everywhere we'd gone had been empty.

Though "community" might bring together these different figures and their stories, "sex public" works just as well, especially given the central role sex plays in many of the men's narratives. Most of the men I spoke with about sex in Austin's public places described the way it was, for years, central to Austin's everyday queer geography.

Although there were many fond memories of encounters in public parks, bathrooms, or saunas at the university, very few were willing to defend those practices. Most of the men I spoke to situated sex in public in relation to some larger pathology, such as internalized homophobia or a fear of intimacy rather than describe it as a practice that brought men of different backgrounds together.

Public sex was also framed as part of a developmental narrative in which it had once been central to someone's sexual life but that, after getting in trouble or out of hand, or getting coupled, was abandoned in favor of other, less risky pursuits. And of course, many men shared the sense that public sex was something that only other, more abject people did. Finally, some felt as if even if there was nothing inherently wrong with public sex per se, the secrecy, shame, and risk of exposure transformed it into an altogether too dangerous endeavor. As in my discussion with Fred, very few of my interlocutors saw public sex as something to be celebrated or indeed as central to Austin's larger queer sex publics.

The ways in which online intimacies were embraced and disavowed echoed many of the stories about public sex that had been told to me. Gay men's contacts and encounters with one another were increasingly mediated by the queer space of the screen. And this increasingly ordinary mediation of belonging and sex through virtual means was met with no small amount of ambivalence.

I met Calico, like many of my informants, online. And though we talked intermittently for some time before we met in person, his story was fairly typical: life was better before its virtualization. When I met Calico for coffee to talk about virtual intimacies, he emphasized this point; he wanted to talk about that other gay life, the real one.

I was never online until a few years ago. I came to school here in 1981 back when gay life was really starting here from my perspective. Historically—I was here from 'eighty to 'eighty-seven and was out and in gay life—a lot of things influenced that lifestyle. Parallel things were happening as society was opening to gay life—like AIDS.

Gay life was much better then. You did things outside because the Internet wasn't around then, you didn't have that resource. You had to go to bars to find people. And they had much richer environments in terms of the diversity of people. But I didn't participate sexually because of the fear in the culture, I didn't know *where* or *how* people were getting it [AIDS].

Like so many others, Calico expressed his feelings about Austin's virtually mediated sex public in ambivalent terms. Yes, it was a means to connect, but other, older forms were better, even if they were fraught with risk. This is especially evident in Calico's story in which his nostalgia for a pre-Internet gay life is simultaneously marked by a failure to connect sexually. The emergence of ostensibly disembodied forms of communication engendered by online message boards, chat rooms, and so on retroactively enable a "a fantasy of bodily proximity or presence."⁵ For Calico, life before the Web seems saturated by greater closeness, even if this did not translate into erotic encounters.

The virtual activates each of the above stories about sex and publicness, albeit in different ways. Austin's sex publics are both concrete and overlaid with a dense affective geography. That is, even actual spaces, such as parks and public bathrooms, are deeply tied to the past, to memories, and longing. And however ordinary these practices had been for the men I spoke with or for Austin's broader public culture, they were also implicitly and explicitly positioned as outside of other, more staid forms of closeness and belonging. Sex in public, then, is failed because it is a virtual form of intimacy, grounded in feelings and memories, in shame and loss.

A KXAN NEWS UNDERCOVER

It happens nearly everyday. It is blatant. It is brazen.

—KXAN News, "Sex, Parks, and Videotape"⁶

Although the above transcript excerpt suggests that Austin's KXAN News recognized the everyday character of sex in public in Austin parks, they still treated the sex happening at Bull Creek Park in 2006 as somehow extraordinary. Modeled after the popular NBC show *To Catch a Predator* (TCAP), KXAN decided to put Austin "perverts" on notice by going into the park with undercover cameras and then threatening to air the mug shots of the men Austin police later arrested. This threat is in fact an attempt to counter the danger the men frequenting the park instantiate with their transgression of sexual and identitarian norms. As much as the Austin Police Department and the news station hoped to regulate the use of public space, managing the boundaries of who constituted that public was equally important: "Many of these men are married with families. News Thirty-Six is coming back. If we find repeat offenders, we may not use that discretion."⁷

Although they don't explicitly mention it, this manufactured sex panic clearly owes much in its concept and execution to *To Catch a Predator*: an undercover operation into the sexual underbelly of contemporary culture that explicitly and implicitly elevates normative sexuality and resurrects the figure of the pervert from earlier moral panics. In a familiar repetition from earlier sex panics, perversion is twofold: men are having homosexual sex in a public place, and these men are married.⁸ But the news channel does not only resurrect the specter of the pervert; it also resurrects the tone of an earlier era in which perverts, then "homosexuals" or "sex deviants," were exposed by the media to a public gaze that effectively imposed a social death sentence, evidenced by firings from jobs, ostracism, and no small number of suicides. These days, being caught can still carry severe penalties, as some states expand the scope of the crimes for which people must register as sex offenders. And while, to my knowledge, no deaths resulted from the KXAN sting, there were also none who protested the production of these men as twenty-first century sex deviants, or the almost extralegal management of their behavior by a local news station.⁹

While the KXAN story uses the undercover strategy of *TCAP* and explicitly mentions online sites such as Squirt.org and Craigslist.org as tied to the problem of public sex, the story is nonetheless quaintly ahistorical, evidencing both amnesia about an earlier wave of stings in 1996 in which more than two hundred men were arrested around Austin parks, and conjuring the figure of the innocent potential victim of lewd and indecent exposure. Like most sex panics, the KXAN news story, along with the earlier *Austin American Statesman* coverage of the

1996 stings, depends on two interrelated and familiar assumptions: that sex out of bounds represents a threat to the public order, and that, in particular, this threat risks the innocence of unwilling witnesses, hikers, dog walkers, neighbors, and above all, children. From the KXAN story:

Nick has been walking his dog in Bull Creek for nearly twenty years.

He says perverts having public sex in the park has overtaken the beauty. He's worried something worse could happen.

"What's really bad is seeing school buses that pull up here everyday and you know that it's going on right here, and the school bus is oblivious and you see thirty to forty to fifty kids," Nick said.¹⁰

The implication is clear: the boundaries of the sex public created by the men in the parks risks moving out of the underbrush and potentially incorporating new and even more inappropriate objects of desire. Children who were supposed to commune with Austin's natural beauty may be unwillingly pulled into a sexual jungle of bent desire.

This threat is, of course, virtual, triggering anger at the usurpation of public space and anxiety about the safety of children. In part what makes the threat potent is the juxtaposition of a world of nature, the famous Austin green belts of streams, trees, and hiking trails, with sexual acts between men. The former is beautiful, the latter, unnatural, ugly, and dangerous.

Technological contingencies aside, "Sex, Parks, and Videotape" bears more than a passing resemblance to stories that circulated in *The Austin American Statesman* a decade earlier when men were arrested at various parks around Austin, including Bull Creek, during a months-long series of stings. Both stings took place during the era of political correctness, and both are therefore careful not to tie their discourses of perversion too closely to gay identities. As in an editorial that appeared in the *Statesman* in 1996, the KXAN story makes a real effort to decouple perversion from homosexuality. As the 1996 editorial put it, countering claims of entrapment by some gay men,

Despite protests from some in the gay community, the recent arrests for lewdness and indecent exposure in Austin's Pease Park were not about homosexuality but criminality.

Public sex in a city park is a crime, and it doesn't matter whether that sex is heterosexual or homosexual. All city residents have a right to expect their parks to be free of crime, and that includes the crimes of lewdness and indecent exposure.¹¹

Almost ten years later, KXAN likewise conjures a phantasmatic public sphere that includes ordinary law-abiding gays and lesbians (it's all of us, everyone, versus the perverts), noting,

It is predominantly men having sex with men. But let's be clear, this is not a problem exclusive with Austin's gay community.

"No, absolutely not. A lot of the people that we've arrested are professionals. Many of them have ben [*sic*] married, have children," APD Sergeant Gerardo Gonzalez said.¹²

Though its tone differs significantly, the story reproduces the famous and controversial findings published by Laud Humphreys in *Tearoom Trade*, namely that the men who sought out sex in public with other men were often married and rarely self-identified as gay.¹³ Humphrey's work, like Kinsey's earlier studies, suggests that sexual behavior and desires are altogether more fluid than the identity categories that attempt to contain them. The perversion of these men, then, has less to do with the specific acts in which they engaged, than in their transgression of the ostensibly stable lines of identity that puts their proper place at home, with their girlfriends, wives, and innocent kids. By transgressing the norms of identity, belonging, and sexual acts, these men fail to properly belong to the public of which they are a part. And, correspondingly, there's a desire to punish these transgressions (of public and private spheres as well as categories such as gay and straight), a desire that is expressed in the ways all forms of sex in public are positioned as failed forms of intimate belonging. By articulating sex in public as an improper use of public space and a flawed model of sociality, the management and policing of these spaces and practices can be read as an effort to manage the virtuality of both sex and publicness. Both are constituted by excesses: sex by the unconscious or, at least, by the incommensurate or incoherent co-articulation of desire, identity, and practice; and public space by the presence of hidden geographies of desire, largely invisible to the larger

non-cruising public. Another way of putting this is to say that much of the larger public demands that cruisers accept the limits (indeed constitutive failures) of normative intimacy, and punishes them when they refuse to accede to this demand by threatening to expose them as (non-gay) queers and perverts.

The threat of the virtual cuts across multiple domains and registers. KXAN threatens exposure; the sex public threatens to incorporate its unwilling witnesses; and virtuality itself threatens to become excessive. If the danger of sexuality rests less in what people actually do than in what they *might* do, then the failure to cinch the virtual's actualization risks wildness, people gone wild with the multiplying pleasures of their bodies.

FALLS FROM GRACE

Maf54 (7:48:00 p.m.): did you spank it this weekend yourself

Xxxxxxxxxx (7:48:04 p.m.): no

Xxxxxxxxxx (7:48:16 p.m.): been too tired and too busy¹⁴

The last decade hasn't been kind to conservative homophobes. In the second half of 2006, lurid Instant Messages between Republican congressman Mark Foley and underage congressional pages were leaked to the press. And in November of that year the Reverend Ted Haggard was outed by masseuse and escort Mike Jones, who had had an ongoing relationship with the New Life Church founder. And then, in the summer of 2007, Idaho senator Larry Craig, who had famously called Bill Clinton a "very naughty, nasty boy," threatening to spank him during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, was arrested in the Minneapolis airport after allegedly soliciting an undercover policeman. Each of these men had a record of marginalizing queer desires, bodies, and politics in direct and indirect ways. Foley worked extensively to expand definitions of sexual offenses, especially online; Haggard supported the preemptive Colorado ban on gay marriage; and Craig was likewise an ardent supporter of a federal ban on gay marriage, as well as vigorously pursuing the expulsion of Barney Frank from Congress for his ties to a hustler who briefly operated a prostitution ring out of the congressman's apartment.

Foley and Haggard are implicated not only in forms of sex that fall outside of normative purview, but forms of sex whose impropriety

is intensified by their electronic mediation. For Foley, this has to do with the ways his particular behaviors took place largely in digital contexts as well as the first appearance of the story on the blog stops-expredators.com, although as the story unfolded, it became clear that various political figures and media outlets had knowledge of explicit e-mails and instant messages as much as a year earlier. When ABC news confirmed the story, Foley's earlier evasions about his sexual orientation quickly morphed into limited confessions and a hasty resignation. His erstwhile defenders quickly abandoned him, themselves increasingly under scrutiny for what they knew about Foley's actions and when (they'd known quite a bit for quite a long time). The same news outlets that had sat on the Foley story for many months now seized upon the transcripts of Foley's exchanges with young male pages as evidence of political corruption, decadence, and hypocrisy, and as potentially significant in the then upcoming 2006 congressional elections. After his initial denials and subsequent resignation, Foley did little to challenge these characterizations. Indeed, he situated his online activities within a confessional model of culpability in which his transgressive erotic exchanges were the result of abuse and addiction: he was an alcoholic who as an altar boy had been the victim of a priest's sexual interest.

Foley's virtual intimacies, then, were embedded in a broader web of failed social relations: of the betrayal of trust by his childhood priest, the silence of the Republican leadership and news media for whom Foley's homosexuality had been known if not acknowledged for many years, in addition to his invasive (if legally careful)¹⁵ inquiries into the sexual lives of young male pages.

Within religious and political domains, the failures of Foley, Haggard, and Craig have to do with the ways their apparent hypocrisy undermines conservative homophobic sentiment (whether rhetorical or tied to specific policies). Indeed, for Haggard, it is precisely this hypocrisy that undoes him. Two years into their variously transactional and intimate relations, Haggard's masseuse/lover Mike Jones heard Haggard's voice on a television station supporting the Colorado gay marriage ban; Jones subsequently outed Haggard, angered by his hypocrisy.

My own interest in these figures lies less in their hypocrisy than in the ways their stories dramatize and congeal the borders of legitimate relationality and intimacy. Sex with pages, escorts, or anonymous partners emerges as a weak form of intimacy, and these figures' falls then function as cautionary tales about what happens when people get intimacy wrong, misrecognizing one thing (lust or freedom) for

another (coupledom or a family). These stories implicitly warn about what happens when sex leaks into the public sphere. Failing to keep intimacy private invites public speculation and censure, which simultaneously constrains and multiplies intimate possibility. These men bear the weight of public shaming, yet at the same time their shaming exposes a larger public to the reality that these forms of transgressive sex are in fact possible (even if also always threatening).

Foley, Craig, and Haggard all failed at concealing their indiscretions, and in the mass-mediated circulation of these failures the scorn and ridicule leveled at these men was tied to the ways their efforts to find connection (through Instant Messages, compensated sex, or in an airport bathroom) were on the wrong side of the real. Indeed, their subjectivities more generally, because they reject homosexuality without shoring up their straightness, remain just over the horizon, in some other speculative space that manages to endlessly delay and defer their queerness. At the same time, these speculations are charged with a life, with potentiality.

By labeling these men sexual hypocrites, the reacting public hoped to snap these figures into preexisting narratives about politics and sexual excess as well as narratives of the closet. Foley willingly participated in this process, proclaiming himself a gay man whose homosexuality was tied to (if not caused by) his victimization as a child and his alcoholism. Haggard and Craig were altogether more resistant, denying at length both their wrongdoing and any potential homosexuality. When, after three weeks of intensive conversion therapy, Haggard reported that he was “completely heterosexual,” it was an effort to snuff his delayed and deferred queerness out of existence. Likewise, Craig continued to challenge his conviction and the police policies that target cruisers, while adamantly insisting that he was not gay. All three bought into the publicly circulated (and produced) notion that some forms of intimacy are better than others and that particular forms of sexual contact are practiced by people who are either gay or straight, but not both or neither. The correspondence between their statements and actions and the desires of the witnessing public, however, are not entirely commensurate. The public, of which I am undoubtedly a part, wants more than witnessing or condemnation allows. Our repulsion to these stories is matched if not overwhelmed by our desire to get even closer.

As a public we not only watched these instances of sexual excess and transgression play out in news reports and blogs; we obsessively

speculated on them in increasingly proximate ways that implicated our own desires. Our fascination is tied to the specificity of these events: conservatives involved in transgressive sex, online grooming of minors, paid sex, public sex. Others' intimate failures rapturously sweep us away into whole virtual worlds of desire. These worlds might offer exotic escapes from our daily lives (and perhaps the failings of our own intimacies), but they are not unfamiliar even if we might like to disavow their particular content. Indeed, when the Mark Foley news first broke, I found myself unable to read the transcripts of some of the Instant Messages on the ABC Web site. Initially I thought this was because, in an effort to be family friendly, ABC had removed explicit content from their Web site. Later, reading through the strangely unsatisfying, banal, and bizarre text of the messages themselves—the teen talks about his favorite positions to jerk off in and admits to a cast fetish—I realized I had been unable to access the transcripts because ABC's servers had been overwhelmed by the traffic. What struck me was how, for a nation so opposed to underage and intergenerational sex, so many of us were drawn to learn the details of these text messages.

Of course, most people who enter into this world are quick to disavow it. The only pleasure to be taken in the world of online predation must be tied to the narratively powerful fall from grace, rather than the desires the messages express (see my discussion in chapter 4). But the excitement of witnessing the failure can't account for the degree and intensity of speculation and commentary. The public interest in the cases, and especially in their minutiae, suggests that the effort to contain the possibilities these scandals reveal (that one can have sexually explicit chat, sex with pages or escorts, or come on to a cop in an airport bathroom) is simultaneously accompanied by an excess and abundance. Indeed, the public of strangers who read and comment on these cases is drawn into greater proximity not only with one another, but also with the very desires we purport to reject.

TO CATCH A PREDATOR

In 2004, NBC Dateline's *To Catch a Predator* captured the public imagination in a way that other shows that similarly stage the enactment of justice, such as Fox's *Cops*, had not. *TCAP* dramatizes the failures and promises of virtual intimacies: you can meet anyone online, even the jailbait you've been looking for, but at the same time, people online are out to get you; trying to get connected online will lead to failure,

yet the spectacle of watching people fail in this way is a huge success, especially in cable reruns.

On the program, volunteer do-gooders from the nonprofit anti-online predator group Perverted Justice troll Internet sites and chat rooms masquerading as sexually precocious underage teens. When men—and there have only been men—contact and engage in sexually explicit talk or try to solicit sex with the imagined minor, they’ve usually already broken the law. But the show’s money shot occurs only after the men agree to meet with the assumed Lolita or Luke, when they arrive at the designated location, and Chris Hansen, *TCAP*’s host, confronts and interviews the would-be child rapist.¹⁶ The men respond in very different ways. Some are defensive, saying they never would have slept with a kid, even though they’d brought a teddy bear along with condoms and lube. Others narrate their own stories of victimization. A couple of years after the show first airs, some even confess to being fans of the program.

TCAP is a testament to the pleasures of looking at the disasters that are other people’s intimate lives. And it’s a warning to anyone who looks online for intimacy and for parents whose children surf the Net’s matrix of desire.

Figuring the Internet as a vast sea of desire and risk, rife with would be predators, *TCAP* broadcasts this drama to the homes of millions of ordinary Americans. The real drama of the show, though, and the key sites for identification or disidentification by viewers center on the failure of these men to direct their erotic energies toward appropriate object choices (adults) in appropriate contexts (the real, not the virtual, world). Their fantasy worlds evidence desire gone awry: looking online for underage victims rather than in the real world for a date, they fail the test of normative relationality, and ultimately they fail as men. The show titillates viewers in part by exploiting the tension between the predators’ identities as average guys gone wild and wrong. They’re normal, but perverted.

Viewers are thrilled by the discovery that these men—teachers, prosecutors, rabbis, firefighters, tech geeks—have secret lives lived on Web sites and chat rooms, and that beneath their usually unassuming surfaces there are expansive erotic worlds to which, without *TCAP*, we would never gain access. Linda Williams famously coined the phrase “the frenzy of the visible” to describe the visual grammar of pornography.¹⁷ In this instance, though, the source of fear and pleasure lies unseen, in the dangerous desires of the nice neighbor, upstanding

community member, and good worker. Hence, the justification of the show, to expose these men to the harsh judgment of public opinion in elaborate setups that provide audiences with the spectacle of the perverts' stunning failures of sociality. The program's voyeurism lies in the way it jumps between scopophilia on the one hand, and the public's erotic rage on the other. Its affective charge emerges in the movement between these positions.

As the series progresses, increasing screen time is spent on the interaction between the "underage" decoy and the men they've invited over:

Here in New Jersey, where we've set up in a multi-million dollar home on the beach, our decoy Casey is able to have much longer conversations with the men. This gives us a keen insight into what they plan on doing to a young teen. Usually we mostly rely on the men's online chats with Perverted Justice decoys and while that does give us a graphic look at these guy's intentions, it is really startling to see them engage in the grooming process in real-time.

Like the men who are duped into believing that the decoy is a potential eager underage sexual partner, the audience is drawn into the fantasy through these videotaped "longer conversations" and the detailed reflections of the fresh-faced decoy.

By bringing these predators' desires "into the light," *TCAP* triggers a mimetic contagion of desire in which the men, the audience, and the producers of the program are all brought into contact with one another, mirroring one another's longings for illicit sex, punitive retribution, and intimacy's failure. In the following exchange, the host Chris Hansen repeats snippets of Anthony Palumbo's online conversation:

Hansen: You asked him in your chat if he was top or bottom. What does that mean?

Palumbo: Did I ask? I don't remember though.

Hansen: Are you top or bottom?

Hansen: I'm horny, you said.