

Contingent Politics: Kiss-ins and Public Space

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On 3 August 2012, a National Same-Sex Kiss Day (NSSKD) in the US was staged with a deliberate sense of place. NSSKD was a response to the perceived homophobia of the Chick-fil-A fast food chain, and in particular its President and COO, Dan Cathy. Among the anti-gay actions to which this movement responded were large donations by the corporation to anti-gay groups and public comments by Cathy that opposed marriage equality.¹ Organized via social media, participants in NSSKD were encouraged to kiss at Chick-fil-A restaurants and to post photographs of those kisses to the event's Facebook and Tumblr sites (Fig. 1). While media reports on the actual numbers of participants vary, over 14,000 people signed up to the NSSKD Facebook page,² and the event garnered significant mainstream media coverage that extended well beyond the US press.³

The image shows a Facebook event page for "National Same Sex Kiss Day at Chick Fil A". At the top, there is a Facebook navigation bar with the "facebook" logo, a "Sign Up" button, and a login field labeled "Email or Phone" with a "Keep me logged in" checkbox. The event title is "National Same Sex Kiss Day at Chick Fil A" by Carly McGehee. The event details include the date "Friday, August 3, 2012" at "8:00pm in EDT" and the location "Chick Fil A". A featured image shows three cows holding signs that read "GOD HATES FAGS", "YOU'RE GOING TO HELL", and "EAT MOR CHIKIN". Below this is the Chick-fil-A logo with the tagline "We Didn't Invent Christian Hate Organizations. We Just Support Them." A text description states: "Unless you've been living under a rock this week you'll have noticed that Chick Fil A has officially come out against the LGBTQ community. (For those of you who have been living under a rock, or just want to read it again, here's the article <http://www.latimes.com/business/money/la-fi-mo-chick-fil-a-gay-marriage-20120719,0,5713061.story>)". A second paragraph reads: "In honor of their support for love, equality, and the real definition of family, we're holding a NATIONAL Same Sex Kiss Day at Chick Fil A's around the country. So grab a friend (or 20) and head out to your nearest Chick Fil A! And don't forget to post photos/videos of it here! For all the world to see!". A "Going (84)" section shows a row of profile pictures.

Figure 1

Organizer Carly McGehee cites a 2009 Starbucks kiss-in as giving her the idea for NSSKD,⁴ an acknowledgement that speaks to the citational chain of activism of which any kiss-in is a part. The kiss-in is a tool of intervention unique to queer politics that symbolically cites a history of queer intimacy that has previously been “zoned” outside imagined publics and public space. Veteran activist Peter Tatchell, who organised a kiss-in by the British group Outrage! in London’s Piccadilly Circus in 1990, describes that event as an act of defiance against laws that conveyed that “queers had no legitimate presence in public spaces or in public discourse.”⁵ As Tatchell’s comments suggest, a kiss-in’s transgressive utility seemingly lies in its insistence on same-sex desire as a legitimate part of public life and in its deliberate refusal of the heteronormative limits that construct that desire in public spaces. In their insistence on performing same-sex intimacy where it is either juridically or discursively disallowed, both the Piccadilly Circus kiss-in and NSSKD could be argued to enact the kind of “radical aspirations of queer culture building” that Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner see as unsettling heterosexual hegemony.⁶ However, as I argue below, the organisers of NSSKD imagined an event contained *within* the heteronormative limits of public affection. What I want to explore is whether the limits of the kiss-in as citational queer practice are precisely what might enable this practice to function in the queer terms Berlant and Warner suggest are necessary to disturb the structure of heterosexual culture.

As Berlant and Warner argue, the means by which heterosexual culture renders some forms of intimacy as “matter out of place”⁷ extends well

beyond the laws or norms of sexual impropriety. Instead, a “whole field of sexual relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality. . . . Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life” (544). Part of what is so interesting about the Chick-fil-A kiss-ins is their insertion of queer intimacy into a nexus of gay politics, public discourse, political funding, public commerce,⁸ family values, social media, and everyday eating habits. In doing so, NSSKD potentially illuminates precisely how heterosexual hegemony is structured and supported by these intersections of political and everyday life. Yet while NSSKD seemingly signifies as a gesture of public defiance, the 2012 event’s public voices made a point of seeking to limit any possible offence. Carly McGehee, creator of the NSSKD Facebook page, for example, made it clear it wasn’t to be a “make-out session.”⁹ She asked participants to be “polite and tasteful. . . . This is about us showing our love. . . . We’re not encouraging people to be outrageous or lewd.”¹⁰ Other media reports cited GLAAD encouraging participants “to keep the kisses on the conservative side.”¹¹ Thus, while Tatchell imagines the kiss-in as defying the socially imagined line between public and private, the Chick-fil-A event seemingly constituted same-sex intimacy within established normative limits.

It is difficult to disentangle that (hetero)normative impetus from the marriage equality campaigns that serve as the backdrop here. As Michael Warner argues, the version of gayness repeatedly promoted in marriage equality campaigns is one thoroughly cleansed of ‘unpalatable’ representations of queer desire: “marriage, in short, would make for good gays—the kind who would not challenge the norms of straight culture, who would not flaunt sexuality, and who would not insist on living differently from ordinary folk.”¹² Certainly, they are the kind of gays who would not turn a “polite” display of kissing into a “makeout session” in a family restaurant.

In their imagining of what queer culture-building might look like, Berlant and Warner argue that such a project should seek “not just to destigmatize those average intimacies, not just to give access to the sentimentality of the couple for persons of the same sex, and definitely not to certify as properly private the personal lives of gays and lesbians.”¹³ This, they argue, is what the prominent voices within gay politics, especially those advocating same-sex marriage, advocate (562). In their insistence on discourses of love and discretion, the organisers of NSSKD similarly articulate this intent. The event is thus imagined as an inversion

of the “incitement to discourse” that Foucault identifies as the key tool of power in the production of sexual subjectivity. While the homosexual was being made to confess, Foucault argues, the monogamous, heterosexual couple “with its regular sexuality, had a right to more discretion.”¹⁴ The public voices of NSSKD seem to seek precisely this privacy. In publically performing itself as a form of intimacy, same-sex “sexuality” here wants to announce itself less and less. Firmly left in place, however, are the heteronormative power relations that enable that discretion and that refuse it for those queer intimacies deemed inappropriate and unwanted in polite company.

What I want to suggest is that complicating that very normativizing gesture is the permanent contingency of the object of intimacy at the center of any kiss-in – the kiss. In a sustained teasing out of the contradictions that inform the kiss, Kate Camp argues that it is a moment of intimacy whose meaning is rarely self-evident.¹⁵ It is thus a gesture that functions as a thoroughly unstable border between the forces of social order, and their disappearance:

The border territory where the kiss, in all its forms, exists, is a place of fine but utterly immovable distinctions. Public and private kisses, sexual and chaste kisses, kisses of passion and kisses of duty: the uncomfortable closeness of these opposites is a constant threat to social order, and the distinctions cannot be ignored if that order is to be maintained.¹⁶

The threat of the kiss means that kisses are subject to a level of scrutiny that disavows the knowledge that their meaning is always inherently contingent. One need only recall the horrified response to Angelina Jolie’s kiss with her brother at the Oscars ceremony in 2000¹⁷ to note how fine those distinctions are and how impossible they are to solidify (precisely how “open-mouthed” was the kiss? At what point *exactly* did it go on too long?), as well as how high are the stakes in their crossing (here the breaking of the incest taboo). The kiss is thus a gesture of intimacy that refuses to “signify monolithically,” the very terms by which Eve Sedgwick describes the notion of queer.¹⁸ Given the kiss’s simultaneous “every day” quality and the importance of its appropriate repetition, what I want to ask is: what might the kiss’ potential to repeatedly fail mean for its deployment in a sexual politics concerned with cultural intelligibility?

The photographs captured on the NSSKD Facebook timeline are events framed within the normative ethos of the event. Yet because at their center is an image of a kiss, and because the kiss is a moment of intimacy whose meaning is never stable across culture, those images and each distinct event that they record cannot be contained within those intended constraints. This is neatly demonstrated by an NSSKD kiss recontextualised in the discursive register of the English tabloid. Perfectly encapsulating the spirit of NSSKD, in this image two women in bridal regalia chastely kiss outside a Chick-fil-A. Appropriated by the *Daily Mail*, however, this polite appeal to matrimony is grouped with another image of two women at the kiss-in, and both images are summarised by a caption that begins: “Girl on girl” (Fig. 2).¹⁹



Figure 2

Clearly this rebranding of a kiss-in with the discourse of straight male porn is likely more a normativising gesture than a queer one (although both are possibilities), but what I am interested in is the way in which this maneuver draws attention to the contingent meaning of the kiss. The kiss here is explicitly sexualized, and that sexualisation is precisely at odds with the aims of the NSSKD organizers.²⁰

When one considers how this remediation utilises the ready transferability of the digital image, the impossibility of the event's discursive containment becomes even more evident. The *Daily Mail* is able to reconstitute this kiss both because the meaning of "the kiss" is always already multiple, but also because the public space in which these kisses takes place is both outside Chick-fil-A and inside the pages of social media, an "inside" that is thoroughly impossible to sustain. The "deliberate sense of place" that I noted in the first sentence of this essay refers thus both to Chick-fil-A as the signifying geography at which NSSKD was staged, but also to the deliberate location of the event in social media. On the one hand this location can be read as a straightforward utilisation of the Internet as an organising tool and a crowd-sourced record that performs a supplementary politics of community building and visibility. At the same time, that online location can be argued to both structure and enable the restructuring of the event.

It is impossible to know for certain how many participants in NSSKD followed organizers' instructions for conduct, or indeed whether they were even aware of them. To the extent that anyone can adjudicate on what is deemed appropriate or polite, the photographs posted on the official NSSKD Facebook page and Tumblr feed seemed to heed the requirements, but it is simultaneously impossible to say whether images that didn't adhere to the requirements simply did not appear. Indeed the normative framing of the event may be connected, in part, to the hosting of the images on social media sites such as Facebook, whose rules of participation are informed by normative notions of sexual acceptability.²¹ As other scholars have noted, however, social media as an organizing platform for protest decentralizes those actions in ways that enable activism to exceed and recalibrate its original organizers' aims.²² The Facebook site set up by McGehee is just the most prominent portal for numerous connected events, and one of a number of archives of intimacy documenting the kiss-ins. Even within this "official" site, the very act of posting an image complicates the location of that image, and thus its discursive meaning. Uploading a Chick-fil-A kiss to the Facebook timeline, for example, one may simultaneously see that image appear on a user's newsfeed (alongside other images, political events, status updates), engendering a media context that, like the *Daily Mail*, may well serve to remediate entirely its discursive meaning. The architecture of social media, as well as the transferability of the digital image, thus combines here with the inherent contingency of "the kiss" to make it almost impossible to ascribe a universally normativising register to this event. It

is precisely this nexus of normativity and mediated contingency that may enable the kiss-in to function as a queer reconfiguration of public space.

Notes

- 1 Aaron McQuade, "More than just marriage, Chick-fil-A is anti-gay: Facts for media covering Chick-Fil-A," GLAAD, 1 August 2012, <http://www.glaad.org/blog/more-just-marriage-chick-fil-anti-gay-facts-media-covering-chick-fil-a> (accessed 25 October 2013).
- 2 Jennifer Preston, Robbie Brown and Kim Severson, "Gay Couples Head to Chick-fil-A for Kiss-In Protest," *The New York Times*, 3 August 2012, <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/03/gay-couples-head-to-chick-fil-a-for-kiss-in-protest/> (25 October 2013).
- 3 In addition to the major news outlets in the US, Canada and the UK, reports on the kiss-in extended as far afield as New Zealand : "Gay 'kiss-in' at Chick-fil-A Stores," 4 August 2012, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/world/americas/7416434/Gay-kiss-in-at-Chick-fil-A-stores>. (accessed 25 October 2013).
- 4 Amy Bingham, "Chick-fil-A Opponents Stage Same-Sex Kiss-In," ABC News, 3 August 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/chick-fil-opponents-stage-sex-kiss/story?id=16917414#.UasPw3AgArU> (accessed 25 October 2013).
- 5 Peter Tatchell, "The Art of Activism," http://www.petertatchell.net/direct_action/art_of_activism.htm, (accessed 17 February 2013.) The Outrage! kiss-in, which took place on 5 September 1990, was a protest against the ongoing arrests of gay men under the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalised male homosexuality in England and Wales but only in private spaces.
- 6 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 548.
- 7 Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 553.
- 8 Further research in relation to this event might consider the extent to which NSSKD functions as the kind of "economy of democracy" that Alexandra Chasin argues has increasingly (and problematically) come to dominate contemporary lesbian and gay politics, especially in the

United States. Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*, (New York: Palgrave, 2000). This seems especially interesting when one considers how the event's location on Facebook renders queer political activism as the unpaid labor on which the business of social media depends.

- 9 Matt Peterson, "Flower Mound Native, a Proud Lesbian, Plans 'Kiss-In' Protest at Chick-fil-A," *The Dallas Morning News*, 2 August 2012, <http://thescoopblog.dallasnews.com/2012/08/flower-mound-native-a-proud-lesbian-plans-kiss-in-protest-at-chick-fil-a.html/> (accessed 25 October 2013).

- 10 Rene Lynch, "Chick-fil-A protests: Will petition and 'kiss-in' help or hurt?," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 August 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/02/nation/la-na-nn-chick-fil-a-kiss-in-20120802> (accessed 25 October 2013).

- 11 Ben Brumfield, "Eat Mor Chikin: Chick-fil-A's Stance on Same-Sex Marriage Faces Test," *CNN.com*, 1 August 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/08/01/us/us-chick-fil-a-controversy> (25 October 2013).

- 12 Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 113.

- 13 Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 562.

- 14 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978; New York: Vintage, 1990), 38. Citation refers to the Vintage edition.

- 15 Kate Camp, *On Kissing* (Wellington, NZ: Four Winds Press, 2002).

- 16 Camp, *On Kissing*, 34–35, italics in original.

- 17 In a "Most Memorable Oscars Moments" slideshow, *Marie Claire* describes the event this way: "At the 2000 Oscars, Angie smooched open-mouthed with her brother, James, in front of the cameras. . . . Her behaviour led some people to wonder whether the pair were having an incestuous affair." See "Oscars 2000: Angelina Jolie's brotherly smooch," . 25 February 2013, <http://www.marieclaire.co.uk/celebrity/pictures/34835/17/most->

memorable-oscars-moments-the-oscars-oscars-memorable-moments.html#oH4qTqM8EZYdoZxL.99 (accessed 30 May 2013).

- 18 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.
- 19 “Chaos at Chick-fil-A: Police Called to Branches Over Protest Crowds, Bomb Threats and Graffiti as Gay Rights Protestors Stage ‘Same Sex Kiss Day’” *Daily Mail*, 4 August 2012, .
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2183534/Chick-fil-A-Chaos-gay-rights-protesters-stage-Same-Sex-Kiss-Day.html> (accessed 25 October 2013).
- 20 Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer of this paper for pointing this out.
- 21 It’s worth noting that Facebook’s Community Standards’ only explicit prohibition in relation to sexuality is of “pornographic content and any explicitly sexual content where a minor is involved” (along with some restrictions on nudity). This speaks more to the possibility of a regime of normative limits *as* heteronormativity rather than any explicit prohibition of activities likely to occur at a kiss-in.
- 22 See for example: Christian Fuchs, “The Self-Organization of Cyberprotest,” in *The Internet Society II: Advances in Education, Commerce & Governance*, eds. K. Morgan and J.M. Spector (Southampton: WIT Press, 2006), 275 –95; Jeffrey S. Juris, “Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Space and Emerging Logics of Aggregation,” *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 2 (2012): 259–79; and Christina Neumayer and Celina Raffl, “Facebook for Global Protest: The Potential and Limits of Social Software for Grassroots Activism.” Paper presented at 5th Prato Community Informatics & Development Informatics Conference 2008, available at <http://ccnr.infotech.monash.edu/conferences-workshops/prato2008cd.html> (accessed 25 October 2013)

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