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**Staking a Claim to Publicity:
Social Media and the Unpredictable Effects of Public Kissing**

Within recent years, discrimination against same-sex couples for kissing or displaying affection in public places such as restaurants, hotels, and airplanes has gained a prominent place in debates about sexual freedom and civil rights. The use of social media, sites such as Twitter and Facebook, has provided new avenues through which largely marginalized LGBTQ persons have been able to assert their voice and generate publicity for their lived experiences with this form of institutionalized discrimination, often leading to increased visibility in mainstream news reporting and public scrutiny directed toward the discriminating entity. While in the past, the limited media visibility of LGBTQ political struggles was heavily filtered through strictly regulated representational practices, the opportunities to raise public awareness about these struggles, and thus stake a claim for LGBTQ publicity, have improved substantially with the increasingly widespread use of social network sites.

Last semester I researched a series of protests aimed at an El Paso, TX restaurant that discriminated against gay men for kissing in 2009. At around midnight on June 29, a group of five gay men went in to a locally owned restaurant called Chico's Tacos, two of them kissed, and then they were ordered to leave by a security guard. They resisted the security guard's order and both parties called the police who in turn threatened to arrest the group for public homosexual conduct, citing a statute that had been ruled unconstitutional by the Texas Supreme Court in 2003. After one of the men involved took to Facebook to make his grievances against the restaurant and the police known, the local newspaper picked up on the story and the subsequent

protests and boycotts that it inspired. The incident was widely reported on in the local news media and the men, who have been referred to as “the Chico’s Tacos Five,” were able to garner a significant amount of support from the local ACLU chapter, GLAAD, El Paso City Council Members, and a significant number of El Pasoans. In fact, the responses that the incident elicited from the public in both local and national contexts were quite remarkable. In addition to serving as a rallying point for LGBTQ protestors, the controversy generated by the incident directly prompted El Paso’s City Council to expand their budget to include benefits for same sex partners of city employees. Although the incident draws attention to the deeply entrenched homophobia that continues to plague the city, it has also inspired a great deal of critical reflection on the issue that can be read in various online publications, blogs, and message boards.

The practice of public serving, privately owned, businesses discriminating against same-sex couples for kissing or engaging in public displays of affection has been gaining more attention within the past few years. Since the Chico’s Tacos incident there have been several other instances of this type of discrimination that have received national media coverage. In 2011, Teresa Folds and Juleigh Snell were kicked out of a Four Seasons swimming pool in St. Louis for kissing. That same year, Leisha Hailey and Camila Grey were told to leave a Southwest Airlines flight for kissing each other while the plane was landed, coincidentally enough, at the El Paso International Airport. Earlier this year Kenyata White and Aimee Diaz were similarly told to leave a restaurant in Tucson. In all three of these incidences, the women involved were able to generate support and publicity for what happened to them through social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook. Yet in all of these examples, those who engaged in the kiss report that they never intended for it to be political or disruptive; it was usually described as a quotidian act occurring in an everyday space. While television and film representations at best privilege a

homonormative vision of LGBTQ politics, the publicity generated by these kissing controversies (many of which involve people of color) has provided a media presence for otherwise underrepresented populations. As case studies, these incidences provide productive entry points for scholarly inquiry in to the potential political possibilities and limitations of both social media practices and LGBTQ activism. They can also be understood as constitutive elements within a larger constellation of struggle over recognition and belonging in which the disruptive potential of public displays of same-sex kissing can be used to make claims to public spaces while at the same time renegotiating the performative limits of those spaces.