

Colloquy



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Figure 1. Stencil in Dublin, 2020. Photo by Thomas Strong.

Unmarked, in English the word *intimacy* tacitly conveys good feeling—warmth of a kind—captured in the embodied spatial imagery of “closeness.” To be close to someone means to care for them, to experience a feeling of mutuality. But after COVID-19, *closeness* can no longer be taken for granted to mean mutual concern or familiarity—to the contrary. This suggests an emergent ethical rival

of intimacy: proximity. I argue that *proximity* detaches ethical or affective bearing from the way it conventionally has been spatially metaphorized in practices of bodily comportment and in reasoning about public and private space.

Will an “ethics of proximity” entail a new kind of formalism, even formality (cf. Foucault’s notion of “dressage” in Trombadori 2001 [1978]), in the practices of public life? One where bodies reflexively rediscipline themselves to elicit a grid of separation that materializes an ostensibly egalitarian premise of mutual regard and sociality, but whose quality of imposition makes each of us part of what Jacques Rancière might call “the police” (May 2007)? Now, after over a year of “social distancing,” we might be able dimly to visualize what this different mode of bodily bearing, and its ethical coordinates, would look like; but we also begin to sense what its aspirational egalitarianism—performatively enforced and realized by every small step away from each other—would feel like: awkward, unsociable, and ironically, perhaps unethical. It feels this way because it seems both necessary and impossible. Perhaps no better illustration exists of this necessary impossibility than the wayfinding iconography of social distancing: all those images reminding us to keep two meters apart—not drawn to scale, so that two meters actually looks like *two feet* apart. We are explicitly instructed about proximity, and at the same time implicitly reminded of intimacy.

Ostensibly, then, today *distance* can no longer be held to mean “distant”: spatial distance between persons might have once meant disregard, disdain, or fear—as when the depressingly proverbial pedestrian crosses the street rather than pass too close to the ethnic minority about whom she holds racist beliefs. Today, moving away from someone may mean something else altogether: a gesture of solidarity or of common cause. Physical distance between strangers, or bubbled isolation between kin, cannot be reduced to signifying the absence of consideration for the other. Instead, we find ourselves in a (often state-mandated) system of bodily relations in which systematic and reflexive separation makes the spaces of public relating the scene of something like the anxiety-inducing mother-in-law/son-in-law avoidance protocols detailed in the ethnographic record (e.g., Stasch 2003): my avoidance of you makes you more centrally constitutive of my personhood than would casual indifference to our proximity. Marilyn Strathern (1988, 2020) has sought systematically to emend the often unstated or assumed affective and ethical implications of conventional Euro-American metaphors for relations, as for example those that describe them as “close” or “distant” and the imputed positive or negative valences there implied—including the very idea that relations themselves are “good.”

And yet, at the same time, the demands the pandemic places on us portend a future that feels unimaginable. For example, we are invited to imagine courtship without intimacy of any kind, lest starry-eyed lovers “recklessly” breathe on each other. What will become of any activity involving physical closeness in the future, and what will such acts come to mean? The example of HIV affords a vantage from which to view society reassessing the meanings of “intimate acts” (their values, their risks and dangers). The value of the proximate relations characteristic of public and private domains, and the relation between public and private itself, are undergoing some kind of transformation. This essay hazards the thought that an “ethics of proximity,” rather than the comforts of the intimate, is what contemporary calamities (COVID-19, climate collapse) confront us with.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, I began to experience a kind of cognitive whiplash as nearly everyone I met reflected on the politics of contagion and risk in ways that gay men—especially those of us who are HIV-positive—have had to think about for most of our lives. People balanced the competing values shaping their assessments of risk and responsibility (Trnka and Trundle 2014), attempting to calculate those things “essential” to life (toilet paper, nightclub dancing, hook-ups). And I perseverated on a set of intrusive and personally troubling questions. Will this crisis create more or less sympathy for those of us who have been coercively and punitively “distanced” by HIV stigma from our own communities? How will the moral message imputed to COVID-19 resignify HIV? The questions would not have surprised Mary Douglas (1992); blame seems instinctual in the face of contagion.

For me, every comment on COVID-19 has become a fretful allegory of HIV, especially when people ascribe ethical significance to ways the viruses may be transmitted, as when mundane social activities (sharing a drink, having sex) become, suddenly, “reckless.” But after COVID-19, pandemic politics seem to have been reversed: whereas liberals in the early years of the HIV epidemic fought against quarantine for people living with HIV, and against the unfair curtailing of individual freedoms in the name of public health, today the liberal position tends to favor greater and greater restrictions on individual freedoms. Indeed, the most dreaded outcome that COVID-19 portends for me is that this new plague with a supposedly novel virus, SARS-CoV-2, will license the return of a certain providentialism (Hedden 2020; Willingham 2020): the idea that the diseased earn their fate (Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016). Thus, although the principle epidemiological worry regarding COVID-19 tends to be inadvertent risk to others when persons fail to observe prevention protocols (distancing, masking, etc.), often enough

people imagine “Covidiot” *suffering* for their sins (Lim 2020; Zichermann 2020). This was the *schadenfreude* that greeted the diagnosis of Donald Trump with the disease, a feeling I can’t say didn’t find some inkling in me. But an unstated implication emerges: in ascribing moral meaning to COVID-19, this sentiment resuscitates an old idea: that people with HIV actually got what *we* deserved.

Such meanings are echoes: shadowy, unstated implications. They are the secondary meaning of the mythologies (Barthes 1993 [1957]) that diseases evoke. In this sense, they comprise a kind of “HIV uncanny.” The persistent evocation of the AIDS crisis as a subtext for COVID-19 elicits that *thing* in the back of our consciousness, a thing associated with shame, guilt, pain, anxiety, loss.

I refer not only to the loss of death and suffering but also to the loss of a hopeful future now rendered uncertain, perhaps already simply gone (Bajko 2020; Wadsworth 2020). I write this in Dublin, Ireland, a country poised to throw off the yoke of a repressive reproductive and sexual social order at the historical moment when COVID-19 appeared, curtailing not only sexual freedom but other freedoms as well.



Figure 2. Stencil in Dublin, 2020. Photo by Thomas Strong.

On March 27, 2020, I was facilitating a “COVIDSEX online forum”—the second of a series of group discussions organized by Dublin LGBT and sexual health activists which focused on the impact of COVID-19 on sexuality. It was

an early iteration of what has become a ubiquitous facet of social life everywhere: a Zoom-mediated meeting. At the first forum, I had articulated the reasons for initiating such a discussion:

The impetus to spark community discussion came when, as usual, I found myself trawling the Grindr Grid, but this time during a pandemic and under conditions of social distancing and self-isolation. What was going on in the Grid? Hook-ups? And sex parties? How was I to understand this? Was it a problem? The thought, it so happens, has occurred to others. ([Dawkins 2020](#))

Over the course of these forums, it became clear that the COVID-19 pandemic had provoked reflection, resistance, melancholy, and widespread fear among gay men, in part because of the HIV uncanny. But it was also because COVID-19 appeared as a portent. Might we have to envision a future without sex altogether?

The online forum was well attended by what might be called “the activist class”: reflexive and progressive activists in the LGBT community, their friends and contacts. People made measured remarks acknowledging the vulnerability of the elderly and the importance of sexuality for gay people: we echoed the discourse circulating globally on the internet ([Abad-Santos 2020](#); [Juzwiak and Juzwiak 2020](#)). But while we hashed out differing perspectives on sex and risk after COVID-19—perspectives that seemed to have an explicitly moral, ethical, or political cast to them—gay men elsewhere in the city were simply getting on with it or, put otherwise, getting it on.

Javier, a Mexican migrant to Dublin who has lived here for seven years, recounts one such situation. It occurred in Phoenix Park, an expanse of meadows, woods, and sports pitches just west of Dublin’s city center whose most famous residents are a herd of deer. The park has been known to gay men for generations as a place for public sex ([Colter et al. 1996](#)), and with all other venues for meeting gay men shut down, the park became, for a time, perhaps the most important social space in queer Dublin:

In March it was still cold, but anyway we went to the park because we knew we could have sex in there. So then we started to. In my case, I thought, “I should be isolating, I shouldn’t be meeting people, I should respect the social distancing . . . but anyway I want to have sex!” How can I have sex with social distancing?

And one day, for example, I met a guy there, he was like touching himself and insinuating me, like he wanted to do something. And I went close, and when I was about a meter away from him, he said, “Stop there! Stop there!” It was kind of crazy. So he’s here in the park, he’s looking for fun, and now that I’m closer he just stopped me. He had a nice dick. He was hard. And I was like, “Oh I want to take it.” And he said, no, no: “Stay there, stay there.” “I just want to touch it.” “No, stay there.”

So in his case he was like stronger than me maybe? Because he went there to have some fun, but just himself. Stronger in terms of respecting social distancing, do that in here. I couldn’t at all. So for me it was so difficult.

Javier participated in a year-long ethnographic research project in which my research team and I had been documenting and analyzing sex between men in the Republic of Ireland after a 2015 public referendum had legalized same-sex marriage—the first time any country had legalized such unions through a public vote. The vote followed years of shattering revelations of sexual abuse within Catholic-run institutions and state complicity in covering up such abuses. Many interpreted subsequent gains in Irish sexual politics as a public repudiation of the morality the Church had used for generations as a pretext for egregious forms of repression (Hogan 2019; Drazkiewicz et al. 2020). At the same time, Ireland was recording its highest levels of new HIV diagnoses—something rarely remarked on, even within the LGBT community, although gay men were now the population hardest hit by HIV in the country (O’Loughlin 2019).

Across the Irish Sea, the ostensible quashing of gay sex during lockdown struck some advocates and service providers not as a worrying omen, but as an opportunity. In May 2020, 56 Dean Street, the leading provider of sexual health services for gay men in London, declared: “The HIV Chain Is Broken” (Wareham 2020). The organization was referring to putative declines in transmission of HIV because gay men were not “hooking up” due to the UK government–mandated stay-at-home restrictions in response to the COVID-19 crisis. If men were not having sex, it was reasoned, HIV could not be transmitted. Current infections could be diagnosed through mail-order tests and treatment regimens could be initiated, preventing onward transmission. Given the threat posed by the novel coronavirus and the collective imperative to “flatten the curve”—that is, to dramatically limit the rise in new infections and spread them out in time—sexual health organizations worldwide found themselves issuing advice that was, for them, un-

precedented: gay and bisexual men should stop casual sexual activities altogether (Brady 2020)—an uncanny echo of “abstinence only.”

One problem with this breaking-the-chain scenario is the assumption that men stopped having sex during lockdown. As Javier’s story illustrates, this was not so; at least a quarter of gay men continued hooking up over this period (Pebody 2020; cf. Terrence Higgins Trust 2020). As we began talking to gay men about what they did during lockdown, we found them not infrequently pursuing what might be called “promiscuity in a pandemic,” to echo the words of Douglas Crimp in 1987. Against the moralistic condemnation that framed AIDS as punishment for the sin of gay sex, in *How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic?*, Crimp (1987) argued that gay men’s “promiscuous love of sex” is precisely what would save us from the epidemic. The insistence on finding ways to have sex in such circumstances prompted the advent of “safe sex”—and indeed a whole activist movement that changed the course of history.

To assume that sexual activity, queer or otherwise, might be suppressed by lockdown means to assume the state as the arbiter of the good and right, and to exaggerate its powers of repression. But it became apparent that rather than suppressing sex, lockdown provided fertile conditions for its pursuit. The long period of social disruption—no work, no entertainment, dissonant apprehensions of time, with days of the week blurring into each other, days running into nights—offered an opportunity to have more sex than ever. Parties were arranged in Airbnb rentals, hookups happened, public sex environments drew new devotees. An anthropological question arises: What do people do when they don’t have to work all the time (Sahlins 1972)? One answer: they fuck (and see Lewis 2020).

But they weren’t supposed to. A two-meter distance between persons cannot be overcome by any body part. Lockdown created the conditions where any sexual encounter outside domestic relationships seemed at once “crazy,” morally wrong, and intensely fun, incoherent, wild. It produced scenes like the one Javier describes: socially distant public sex. Clearly, both participants in Javier’s tale knew that they were violating guidelines. And yet desire—being “childlike and chary of government” (Chu 2018)—compelled connection of a kind, however awkward, and however fraught with ethical uncertainty.

As the pandemic has worn on, old arguments are injected with fresh life: a moribund moralism gets its blood transfusion. During the holiday season of 2020 in North America and Europe, the gay community was riven with arguments about the social media shaming of gay men partaking in parties, whether private gatherings or public events, inevitably characterized as possible “superspreader”

(cf. “Patient Zero”) events. #GaysOverCOVID gave new life to what I suspect has been a long-simmering but rarely voiced sentiment in the gay male community: antipathy toward irresponsible gays (by implication, including the ones who contracted HIV and died of AIDS). And who would defend those who openly flout restrictions? What ethical values would legitimate this behavior?

If gay men were dancing in Puerto Vallarta, over Christmas 2020 the Irish public was celebrating in characteristic large family gatherings, a tradition tacitly nodded to as the Irish government relaxed restrictions on movement and gathering during the holiday period. But soon, Ireland found itself with the highest incidence rate in the world (due in part also to the prevalence of the more efficiently transmissible so-called UK variant of the virus). Ethical debate linking risk and responsibility flooded the social media feeds of the Irish public: Should the government have relaxed restrictions? Should people themselves be blamed for being cavalier? What didn’t emerge was the hashtag #StraightsOverCOVID, nor did photos get posted exposing private family gatherings to the sting of public shame. Nevertheless, the closeness of the extended family could not be seen as justifying the precipitous rise in incidence that followed. The intimacy of the family could no longer be its own justification: an ethics of proximity requires inspecting even that haven in a heartless world.

In slyly implicit, one might say unconscious, ways, the moral messages of disease are conveyed (Douglas 1975). They tell us which lives matter, and which forms of social intercourse are essential; these are the values capable of holding the weight of risk.

ABSTRACT

Though comparisons between HIV and SARS-CoV-2 are of limited use, many people experience the epidemics simultaneously. For those of us living with HIV, every comment on COVID-19 becomes a fretful allegory of HIV, and the ethical lessons that COVID-19 teaches will inevitably be brought to bear on how we understand the meaning of the HIV epidemic, especially as it pertains to sexuality. This essay describes some of the ways gay men in Dublin, Ireland, reasoned about the ethics of sex during lockdown. [COVID-19; sexuality; gay men; ethics; proximity]

NOTES

Acknowledgments Funding for this research was provided by the Irish Research Council’s COALESCE Programme (Strand 1E—Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Project) and the Social Science Research Council’s Rapid-Response Grants on COVID-19. I would like to thank Andrew Leavitt, Diego Caixeta, and Pranav Kohli for their assistance and commentary; I would especially like to thank my colleagues Lisa Wynn and Susanna Trnka for always being on point, and for their magnanimous forbearance.

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