

'Myspace led girl to Mideast': Race, the online predator myth, and the pathologization of violence

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Abstract

In June 2006 a 16-year-old Michigan girl reached an airport in Jordan in her attempt to visit a boyfriend she met on Myspace, 20-year-old Ali from the West Bank town of Jericho. The national media attention to this relationship begins with fears that Ali is an online predator, moves to stories of the pair as star-crossed lovers and constructions of Ali as a dangerous Arab terrorist, and ends with the conclusion that Ali was simply a bad boyfriend. I examine the media representations of this atypical case to illustrate the need to denaturalize and challenge typical constructions of sexual danger as embodied in racialized and pathologized figures such as the online predator.

Keywords

New media, online predators, race, sex offenders, social media

In the mid-1990s, online predators emerged as one of the major sexual threats to teenage girls, and they have since appeared often in discussions of adolescents, online safety, and sexuality. The stereotype of the online predator is a lecherous white middle-aged man who poses as a teen and tricks his victims into meeting him in person. Though this online predator figure is largely a myth (Wolak et al., 2008), it animates a range of policies addressing youth, technology, and sex offenders. Even as resources for child abuse prevention and treatment programs have been cut in the aftermath of the 2008 recession (Fessler, 2010), funding for registering and monitoring convicted sex offenders and combating internet sex crime has

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dramatically increased in the past decade, including a recent rise in internet sting operations to catch potential online predators (Wolak et al., 2009).¹ In this article, I examine the media representations of one atypical case that illustrates the continuing need to challenge the common assumption that sexual danger is located in racialized pathologically deviant figures such as the online predator.

When Ali² was 20 years old, he logged on to Myspace from his home in the West Bank town of Jericho and met Jennifer, a 16-year-old Michigander. After talking online and over the phone for six months, in 2006 Jennifer reached an airport in Jordan in her attempt to meet Ali in person. During the course of media attention to this case spanning almost two years, there are four conflicting and co-existing interpretations of their relationship. These explanations include the initial fears that Ali was an online predator, stories of the pair as star-crossed lovers, constructions of Ali as a dangerous young Arab male, and the conclusion that Ali was simply a bad boyfriend.

I analyze the shifting media representations of Ali and Jennifer in this complex case to illustrate key problems with the figure of the online predator and the pathologization of sexual violence. I use discourse analysis (Rose, 2001) to examine taken-for-granted assumptions about sexuality and technology in mainstream media coverage of this case, including print and television news, three episodes of the US TV talk show *Dr. Phil* dedicated to the case, and a *Seventeen* magazine article. There are a few hundred newspaper and magazine articles about the case archived in NewsBank (many appearing in June 2006 when Jennifer initially left the USA), as well as a few TV appearances, which I located through the Vanderbilt Television Archive and through online search engines. In examining all these sources, I found four different interpretations of Ali and Jennifer's relationship; the specific examples I discuss in this article were chosen to illustrate each.

This atypical case illustrates that there are still many problems with dominant understandings of sexual violence. Anti-rape feminist movements in the 1970s worked to dismantle the stranger-danger mythology of rape and advocate for lesser criminal penalties, since severe punishments discourage victims from reporting and deter law enforcement from pursuing sex crime cases against perpetrators who do not fit the model of the violent stranger rapist (Corrigan, 2006). Yet, this legacy is unraveling as one of the most significant developments in sexual violence prevention in the last 20 years is a series of US state and federal policy initiatives mandating community notification of registered sex offenders.³ A key problem with registries is that they rely on and reproduce the stranger-danger model of child sexual assault. As Ahmed explains: 'A reduction of danger to the stranger conceals the danger that may be embedded in the familiar' (2000: 36). That is, while the violent re-offending stranger is a terrifying prospect, the vast majority of people who commit sexual assault are known to their victims as acquaintances, intimate partners, or family members who have never been convicted of a sex crime before (Snyder, 2000). Critics of sex offender registration argue that current sex offender registration policies are both ineffective and unconstitutional.⁴

The common figure of the monstrous and inhuman sexual predator (Filler, 2001; Garfinkle, 2003; Jenkins, 1998; Lynch, 2002; Pratt, 1998) collapses distinctions among sex offenders—some are even criminalized for consensual conduct.⁵ Seeing sex offenders as an identifiable type of person who is innately evil makes it incredibly difficult for those who want help and support to avoid offending or re-offending to find it. In Ahmed's terms, the stranger is produced as 'a figure—a shape that appears to have linguistic and bodily integrity' (Ahmed, 2000: 22). The sex offender figure has become so naturalized and stigmatized that in Florida, for example, residency restrictions have made it so difficult for registrants to find a place to live that is not within range of a school, bus stop, or park, that officials sent dozens of Miami-area sex offenders to live under a bridge (Brown, 2009). As Fischel points out, the sex offender now occupies the position once held by the homosexual as the key site of sexual danger and amorality, which 'comfortingly, and wrongly, relocates the danger of sexual harm onto a discrete body (the stranger, the pathological recidivist)' (Fischel, 2010: 281). While the character may have changed, the role has not; instead of seeing sexual violence as a broader social problem inherent to gender norms, this construction locates harm and violence in an imagined type of person. This construction of the predator is especially troubling because it puts young people at risk by directing attention and resources to the wrong issues, hindering offenders' rehabilitation, and foreclosing a more nuanced discussion about consent and harm.

After the flurry of feminist anti-rape theory and activism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, sexual violence research turned towards more instrumental concerns, examining the prevalence of assaults, institutional responses, and prevention programs. As particular strands of sexuality studies and queer theory developed in the 1980s and early 1990s out of identity-based activist movements, it was politically important, especially for gay men, to distance themselves from the sex offenders they were so often equated with. Robson, for example, notes that mainstream LGBT rights agendas have depended on the construction that 'distance from criminality is a necessary condition of equality' (1998: 30). A number of critical scholars point out that mainstream feminists, LGBT activists, and the organized left need to pay more attention to the development of sex offender registries, constructions of sexual predators, and the consequent expansion of the prison system (Corrigan, 2006; Fischel, 2010; Meiners et al., 2011; Spade, 2012). Sex offenders may not be attractive allies for queer theory or feminism, but the sexual predator figure plays an important role in dominant ideas about sexuality and sexual violence.

As Duggan (1992) and Cohen (1997) argue, the term 'queer' should describe sexual acts and formations that have a subordinate relationship to power. Queer scholarship, especially recent work that critically interrogates the prison system, has taken up this project by analyzing dominant constructions of sex offenders. As Meiners (2011) explains, ideas about sex offenders reverberate widely, contributing to the growth of the prison system and increased surveillance in public places. The idea of the online predator, in particular, has been cited in initiatives to increase internet censorship and monitoring (Marwick, 2008) and in other efforts to

criminalize sexual behaviors. For example, Canada's age of consent was raised in 2008 from 14 to 16, aligning the law with those of most US states. At the time, *CBC News* reported, 'The internet luring problem has become so serious that it has helped push the federal government to raise the age of consent in Canada by two years' ('Internet', 2008). In effect, the largely spurious threat of online predators was invoked to pass legislation that increased the policing of youth sexuality.⁶

In the remainder of this article, I examine the unstable, contradictory, and co-constitutive representations of Ali and Jennifer in order to explore the limits of and problems with the construction the online predator as a key site of sexual danger that is located in a specific embodied identity. I examine the media representations of Ali first as an online predator, then as a part of a romantic pair, then as a 'dangerous Arab terrorist,' and finally, as a bad boyfriend (see Table 1 for a timeline of events). This case illustrates how domestic violence is normalized while imaginary sexual monsters gain most of the attention from media and the legal system. Given Puar and Rai's (2002) insight that the terrorist can be seen as a psychologically deviant and damaged monster, it is unsurprising that the rhetoric about Ali's dangerousness can simultaneously refer to his monstrosity as a sexual predator and an Arab terrorist. The two seem to reinforce one another. What is particularly striking in this case is that heteronormative narratives of love and marriage, and then later, of banal domestic violence, can exist alongside constructions of Ali as a deviant figure. While not often applied to the same person, all these narratives reinforce the pathologization of gendered violence that obscures its normalization in everyday life. As Spade argues, the prison system exacerbates this problem: 'If we deal with the complexity of how common violence is, and let go of a

Table 1. Timeline of events.

December 2005	Jennifer sees Ali's profile on Myspace and sends him a message. They communicate regularly over the phone.
5–7 June 2006	At the age of 16, Jennifer secretly leaves Michigan in her attempt to meet Ali in the West Bank. She gets as far as her last layover in Jordan, where FBI agents escort her off the plane and bring her back to the USA.
23 June 2006	Jennifer declares her love for Ali on <i>Good Morning America</i> .
Mid-September 2007	Jennifer, now 18 years old, finally travels to Jericho to visit Ali. She later reports that Ali was verbally and physically abusive during their time together.
Early November 2007	Jennifer appears on <i>Dr. Phil</i> via satellite video feed from Jericho during the first two of three episodes. Jennifer eventually returns home to the USA with <i>Dr. Phil's</i> assistance. In the third episode Jennifer appears in the <i>Dr. Phil</i> studio in the USA and ends her relationship with Ali (who is still in Jericho), again over satellite video feed.

system built on a fantasy of monstrous strangers, we might actually begin to focus on how to prevent violence and heal from it' (2012: 5). The familiar narratives that describe Ali and Jennifer's relationship underlie a range of criminal and social policies that assign excessive attention and punishment to people who are seen as deviant monsters while offering few effective solutions for more intimate and common forms of violence.

Ali as an online predator

At the outset, the national attention this case receives is unsurprising since it involves a missing blonde white girl (Kincaid, 2004; Walkerdine, 1997), a potential sexual predator, and the topic of the moment: the dangers of Myspace for teenage girls. In the initial days of coverage about the case in June 2006, suspicions that Ali was an online predator who had lured Jennifer through Myspace dominate the discussion. At this moment in the mid-2000s, fears about predators lurking on social network sites were particularly heightened (Marwick, 2008), resulting in the passage of the Deleting Online Predators Act in the US House of Representatives on 26 July 2006 (US Congress, 2006). At a hearing for the Act, one representative commented: 'It is estimated that at any given moment, 50,000 predators are prowling for children online, many of whom are lurking within social networks' (*H.R. 5319*, 2006). This seemingly accurate crime statistic was widely disseminated, but it was actually culled from a television program that stages sting operations of alleged online predators ('To Catch a Predator', *Dateline NBC*, 2004–2008), and was invented by a consultant as a rough estimate (Kaplan, 2006). While such statistics are fictional, they help to create a climate in which Ali might be one of those '50,000 predators' luring Jennifer from her home—the accuracy of the number is less significant than its discursive power. Another representative refers directly to Jennifer's story to justify the importance of the bill:

We all were horrified by the story of the teenage girl from Michigan who traveled across the world to the West Bank town of Jericho to meet a man she had been communicating with on [Myspace] . . . [These] sites have become new hunting grounds for child predators. (*H.R. 5319*, 2006: H5889)

Since Ali met Jennifer on a social network site, at this time in the mid-2000s, it is easy to interpret him, especially initially, as an online predator.

The construction of Ali as an online predator is particularly prominent when Jennifer seems like an innocent, naive victim. The initial coverage of Jennifer's journey stresses that she was a 'good girl' and an 'honor student' in order to establish a contrast to the monstrosity of the older man who lured her to fly to meet him in the West Bank. One early article reports that friends and family wonder 'how the level-headed, sheltered teen could get caught up in such a mess,' and quotes a classmate, 'No one can believe that she would do something like this voluntarily' (Lee and Kurth, 2006). The article also quotes an attorney

who doubts that Jennifer would have left the country of her own accord: 'She's never been away before. She's a straight-A student, National Honor Society member. She gets along with Mom. She gets along with Dad. There are a lot of questions' (Lee and Kurth, 2006). If Jennifer was an unruly, disobedient teen, she might have been seen as the type of risk-taker who would voluntarily get involved with an older man, but since she is depicted as a 'level-headed, sheltered,' honor student, these observers assume that Ali must be a predator who tricked the otherwise-sensible Jennifer into meeting him. The more innocent Jennifer seems to be, the more monstrous and deviant Ali can appear as an online predator.

Love and marriage

Once Jennifer returns to the USA after her first attempt to meet Ali, the story that the pair are in love and plan to marry starts to dominate the coverage. After Jennifer's declaration on *Good Morning America* that when she is 18, she is 'definitely going to marry' Ali ('Danger', 2006), a number of articles stress these wedding plans, with headlines such as 'Teen still wants to wed web beau' (Swickard, 2006) and 'Teen: I'll marry man I met on Myspace.com' ('Teen', 2006). While meeting someone on Myspace is viewed as dangerous and foolish, Jennifer and Ali's desire to get married adds another dimension to their story that they might be a romantic pair of star-crossed lovers rather than a predator who is exploiting and deceiving an innocent victim. Making sexual choices that conform to heteronormative expectations, such as getting married, helps to secure validation and recognition for their relationship. In other cases, stories of teenage lovers prosecuted for consensual sex who later marry establishes that they were 'Romeo and Juliet' all along rather than a sexual predator and an exploited victim, and offer some of the few critiques of sex offender registries in mainstream media (Guthrie, 2009; Kaczor, 2009; Stossel et al., 2008). In one case, an 18-year-old Michigan man convicted of statutory rape for having sex with his 14-year-old girlfriend succeeded in having his name removed from the sex offender registry on the grounds that the pair later married. A judge explained: 'Public safety... is not served by requiring an otherwise law-abiding adult to forever be branded as a sex offender because of a juvenile transgression involving consensual sex during a Romeo and Juliet relationship' ('*People v. DiPiazza*', 2009). In this case, though the couple's age difference was too great to exempt the older party from a statutory rape conviction in the first place, the fact that the adult-minor couple later married cancels out the previous legal assessment that the adult male was preying on an innocent young girl. Marriage plans work in a similar way for Ali, in that this new narrative competes with the previous story that he was an online predator.

One Associated Press article reprinted in different formats at least a dozen times raises and then refutes the theory that Ali is an internet predator. This article makes a general comment that Myspace has 'raised concerns among US authorities, with scattered accounts of sexual predators targeting minors on the site' (Daraghmeh and Gutkin, 2006), connecting Jennifer and Ali to the online predator panic

frequently discussed at the time. However, the article simultaneously casts doubt on that interpretation by printing Ali's saccharine comments about his love for Jennifer. The article positions Ali as a hopeless romantic, quoting him: 'We love the same things, the same songs and we have similar dreams. I fell in love with her because she is innocent and goodhearted. We found ourselves to be soul mates' (Daraghmeh and Gutkin, 2006). The article continues:

[Ali] said his love for Jennifer is pure. Had she made it to Jericho, he said, she would have shared his sister's bedroom . . . The couple would have walked together through the tree-lined streets of Jericho, he said . . . 'When I realized she wasn't coming, I felt my whole world collapse,' he said in the interview Sunday at his family's home. 'My tears didn't stop and I couldn't sleep for three days.' (Daraghmeh and Gutkin, 2006)

Describing Ali as a 'shy soft-spoken young man,' this article refutes the notion that he may be an online predator by reporting Ali's comments that his love for Jennifer is 'pure' and offering romantic imagery of walks through 'tree-lined streets.' Photographs of Ali accompanying this story depict him looking sad and pensive—in one close shot he leans on his hand, his brow furrowed, and looks down and off to the side (Figure 1, right). In another shot from above he sits cross-legged on the floor at his computer and looks up at the camera (Figure 2, left). While the imagery in online safety campaigns often depicts predators in dark spaces with their faces grotesquely illuminated by computer screens (which I discuss next), in this picture of Ali at his computer, he is sitting on the floor in a bright domestic space, and the shot from above makes him look physically smaller and unthreatening.

Jennifer and Ali both speak in the language of romantic, eternal, and everlasting love, which appears in much of the media coverage about them, even in articles that also discuss the supposed dangers of the Middle East and the risks to teens online. Though *Good Morning America* also uses Jennifer's story to warn parents about the dangers of Myspace, the show focuses on the romantic aspects of Jennifer's



Figure 1. Ali poses in Associated Press photos by Muhammed Muheisen.

relationship with Ali and their strong emotions for one another. After playing a tape of Ali speaking about his feelings for Jennifer, the host, visibly touched by the display of emotion, asks: '[Jennifer], you had the biggest grin on your face seeing him. You care very deeply about this guy?' Jennifer, beaming, replies, 'Yeah I do, I love him very much . . . he's a great hearted person, we built trust and it developed into love' ('Danger', 2006). Jennifer then begins crying as she listens to Ali declare in a video clip that nothing can stop the pair from being together. When the host asks Jennifer if there's anything she would like to say back to Ali, through tears she says to the camera, 'I love you, that's all I can say' ('Danger', 2006. See Figure 2). Likewise, an October 2006 article in *Seventeen*, titled 'I ran away for Myspace love,' tells the story from Jennifer's point of view, stressing how the couple's love for each other developed and narrating Jennifer's feelings about Ali. For example, Jennifer says: 'I thought about him constantly and waited for his calls. I was crazy in love and hoped he felt the same' ('I ran', 2006: 96).

The 'Romeo and Juliet' narrative is a widely recognizable cultural trope that stories about Jennifer and Ali can access to legitimate their relationship, as it provides a model of teenage passion and recklessness that is nonetheless still celebrated for its romance. The many references to Jennifer and Ali as 'Romeo and Juliet' are crucial because they establish the two young people as equals, who, though perhaps immature, are legitimately deeply in love with one another. Direct references to this well-known play are scattered throughout articles about Jennifer and Ali, from comments about their 'star-crossed love' (Snapper and Greenlee, 2006) to a headline that reads: 'When parting is not such sweet sorrow' (Albom, 2006). In these narratives, Ali's racial and national difference is part of a compelling 'star-crossed



Figure 2. Jennifer sobs, 'I love you, that's all I can say'.

lovers' narrative. As members of warring families writ large, Jennifer and Ali are located in two nations and two religious traditions long at odds with one another. As such, US mass media typically depict young Palestinian men as part of a homogenous group carrying out an armed, violent resistance against Israel, a US ally. In these stories of romantic love Ali is a humanized individual who can be admired for defying these stereotypes of Arab, and particularly Palestinian, young men. Yet, at the same time, depictions of Ali as a 'hopeless romantic' do fit other western cultural constructions of Arab men as passionate—perhaps even to the point of being dangerous, which I discuss shortly.

The 'Arab kidnapper' and the whiteness of the online predator

The sexual predator is imagined as an otherwise normal person with pathological sexual practices; thus within the normative racial logic of the US, the predator is imagined as white and middle-aged to establish an overall normalcy that conceals his monstrous sexual predilections. Indeed, a number of public service announcements about the dangers of online predators depict a relatively consistent type of predator (see Figure 3). Filler (2001) points out that legislators passing sex offender registration legislation focus on high profile cases with white victims and white



Figure 3. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children represents online predators as white, middle-aged, slightly overweight men in a print advertisement published in 2003 (left) and in an online video PSA released in 2010 (right).

predators, which facilitates the approval of tough-on-crime laws that appear color-blind. Yet, these punitive policies excessively impact people of color, and African Americans in particular, who are disproportionately charged with sex offenses and are more likely to be placed on sex offender registries (Filler, 2004; Hutson, 2008). Filler comments on the sex offender registration bills in the mid-1990s: 'It must have been a relief—and even a pleasure—to promote a bill that would not only avoid charges of racism, but might be seen as virtually inapplicable to African-Americans' (Filler, 2001: 360). Race and nationality further complicate the story of Ali as an online predator. Western constructions of the sexual predator's pathological deviance echoes that of the terrorist, who, as Puar and Rai (2002) explain, is often thought to be suffering from a racialized damaged psyche. Since the imagined Arab terrorist is already constructed as a monster, it is perhaps easy for narratives about Ali to shift from sexual-predator-monster to terrorist-monster and back again.

In early stories about the Jennifer–Ali case, and during their later appearance on *Dr. Phil*, commentators fear that Jennifer is not safe in the company of an Arab man. One sheriff worries: 'I don't think these young people realize what can happen when they go into some of these Middle Eastern countries... In some areas, women are treated as slaves. It's very, very dangerous' (Coleman, 2006). Jennifer's sister similarly comments, 'If wives don't do what they're told, they are killed' (Snapper and Coleman, 2006). Jennifer's mother fears that Ali 'may be a terrorist' (Casey, 2007c). Abu-Lughod (2002) points out that the 'war on terrorism' and US military interventions in Afghanistan have been premised on the assumption that gender inequality and domestic violence are specifically racialized problems that are located elsewhere. As such, *Dr. Phil* uses file footage of camels, veiled women, and militant young Arab men yelling, marching, and holding guns to represent the general dangers of terrorism and Islam that Jennifer supposedly faces in Ali's hometown. These orientaling images and conversations both complicate and align with the idea that Ali is an 'online predator'—both the terrorist and the sexual predator are seen as deviant and pathological. Arab Muslims have long been simultaneously admired and feared in western news media and popular culture for being supposedly sexually free, virulent, and alluring (Massad, 2007; Said, 1979; Shohat and Stam, 1994). The idea that Ali might be an online predator, luring Jennifer from her home in Michigan, maps onto the long-standing western cultural trope of Arab Muslim men kidnapping and enslaving white women (Shohat and Stam, 1994). This particular narrative offers a familiar eroticization of heterosexual male romantic pursuit and domination that is displaced onto a racialized figure.

In the first of the three *Dr. Phil* episodes devoted to the story, Jennifer's family members suggest that Ali is manipulating their daughter—by this point in Fall 2007, Jennifer has turned 18 and traveled to Jericho to visit Ali. Jennifer's mother worries: 'I believe that [Ali] is slowly working on [Jennifer]... I think he's made up a bunch of lies to entice her to be with him' (Casey, 2007a). She explains: 'This man has been talking to my daughter for almost two years.



Figure 4. *Dr. Phil* suggests that Ali has brainwashed Jennifer.

Anything he says, she just believes it. It's odd . . . I feel as though [Jennifer] has been brainwashed' (Casey, 2007a). The introduction to the first *Dr. Phil* episode suggests that Jennifer is being manipulated, superimposing the term 'BRAINWASHED?' over an image of Ali in high contrast lighting, looking away from the camera, and then over an excerpt of the Qur'an hanging on the wall in his parents' house, visually linking this form of manipulation to Islam (Figure 4). *Dr. Phil* uses clips from news stories and the *Good Morning America* segment of Jennifer and Ali talking about their love for one another with jarring editing and ominous music that casts doubt on the authenticity of these feelings. Betty Mahmoody, whose experiences formed the basis of the 1991 film *Not Without my Daughter*, appears on *Dr. Phil* to warn Jennifer's family about the danger their teen faces. As the central figure of one of the most well-known contemporary orientalist narratives of a white woman kidnapped by an Arab man (Bahramitash, 2005), Mahmoody warns Jennifer's family that their worst fears about Ali could be true. The sensational narrative that Ali is brainwashing Jennifer seems to combine with the online predator narrative in these moments on *Dr. Phil*, but as I discuss next, once it is clear that Ali is actually an abusive partner, his status as a villain shifts again.

Blaming the victim

Over a year after Jennifer's initial trip out of Michigan, she finally goes to Jericho to meet Ali in person, but the relationship does not progress to the happy marriage she had planned. Instead, she later reports that he was verbally and physically abusive, and after a few weeks with Ali, Jennifer returns to Michigan with the help of *Dr. Phil*. Jennifer explains to talk show host Dr. Phil: 'He has, like, bit me. He kicked me a few times. He hit my hands with a belt. He said he didn't mean to' (Casey, 2007c). She also comments that since she returned to the USA, Ali has called her names and been 'verbally aggressive' (Casey, 2007c). However, in the second and third *Dr. Phil* episodes, Jennifer is no longer portrayed as a passive victim of an online predator or a brainwashing Arab kidnapper. Jennifer's mother

explains this shift: 'For a long time, I thought she was brainwashed . . . I guess it's easier to blame him than to blame my daughter' (Casey, 2007c). At this point in the story, Dr Phil and Jennifer's family blame her for being immature and failing to break up with Ali and for not leaving Jericho sooner.

Instead of criticizing Ali or holding him accountable for his alleged abuse of Jennifer, Dr Phil focuses on advising Jennifer to take responsibility for her actions, to reconcile with family members she has alienated, and to end her relationship with Ali. Dr Phil says, 'It's time for you, [Jennifer], to step up and take some responsibility. . . You need to make choices like an adult' (Casey, 2007b). By focusing on the need for Jennifer to act 'like an adult' and to 'take responsibility,' Dr Phil diminishes Ali's accountability. To encourage Jennifer to break up with Ali, Dr Phil paints the task as a test of her adulthood and personal strength. He explains, 'It's part of going from a girl to a woman. It's part of going from a child to owning your responsibilities. You just need to tell him, "We tried it. It didn't work, and good luck to you"' (Casey, 2007c). Instead of following Dr Phil's advice to share the blame for the relationship's demise, Jennifer both recognizes the positive aspects of their relationship and chastises Ali for his abusive behavior over the live satellite video feed. Jennifer says to Ali, 'You're possessive. . . You treated me good, but at the same time, you've done a lot of stuff, and you know what you've done' (Casey, 2007c).

It is striking that after actual allegations of abuse come to light, Jennifer is positioned as needing to take full responsibility for extracting herself from the relationship. Indeed, discourses about intimate partner violence often focus on female victims' failures to leave these relationships rather than the wrongdoing of the men who perpetrate this form of violence (Berns, 2001; Projansky, 2010). The idea of the online predator or the terrorist-kidnapper requires an innocent, passive victim as his counterpart. Thus, when Jennifer chooses to go to Jericho after she turns 18 and refuses to return to the USA at her family's request, she can no longer easily occupy the role of the sheltered naive honor student, the good girl, and the ideal victim. The construction of the online predator not only excludes imperfect victims, but it contributes to the damaging assumptions that genuine survivors of gendered and sexualized violence are ultimately to blame for their victimization.

In these final *Dr. Phil* episodes, all four versions of Jennifer and Ali's relationship seem to co-exist. Dr Phil refers to it as 'puppy love' (Casey, 2007c), he reminds viewers after nearly every commercial break that the pair met online, and the show continues to construct Arab men as inherently dangerous and implies that Ali might be a terrorist trying to get a green card through a marriage to Jennifer. While women are often blamed for failing to leave abusive partners, this particular story also serves the function of pathologizing Arab masculinity in a more subtle way. By telling Jennifer that the failed relationship is her responsibility, and that she should have known better than to enter into it, Dr Phil can implicitly affirm the safety of American masculinity and the danger of both online relationships and of Arab men. Dr Phil confirms that a man like Ali is inappropriate for Jennifer when

he says in the final episode, 'You met, like, an American boy, and that's a good thing... It just feels a lot more right, doesn't it?' (Casey, 2007c). In this case, by blaming Jennifer for her failure to perceive the supposedly obvious dangers, it is easy for Dr Phil to read Ali's underlying monstrosity as rooted in his Arabness and the dubious online origin of their relationship.

Conclusion

When Ali is constructed as a monster (sexual or racial) Jennifer's agency is completely evacuated in order to highlight Ali's supposed deviance. When Ali is viewed as a so-called normal heterosexual man (as Romeo or as an abusive boyfriend) Jennifer is seen as an equal participant. That is, Jennifer is constructed as a passive victim when Ali seems like a deviant, pathological predator, but she is viewed as fully responsible for her relationship when it fits normative expectations—of romantic heterosexual love or, unfortunately, of mundane intimate partner violence.

Thinking about harm and danger in terms of criminal types or pathologies—whether the monster is sexual or racial—makes it difficult to see the more common forms of violence that are embedded in everyday life. For example, Meiners (2011) observes that her neighbors reacted strongly against registered sex offenders moving in on their block but at the same time pretended to ignore the incidents of domestic violence they witnessed more regularly. She asks: 'What does it mean that we are so willing to notice certain kinds of violence, to picket and organize, but the other, equally devastating and even more intimate harm, is so carefully protected?' (Meiners, 2011: 118). Indeed both the narratives that indict Ali as a deviant monster and those that blame Jennifer for staying with an abusive partner illustrate this disturbing dynamic. As Spade (2012) and others suggest, accurately recognizing intimate, everyday forms of violence requires destabilizing assumptions about sex offenders, and as I detail here, about this newer figure of the online predator as well. Both rely on essentialized identity constructions of sexual pathology and dangerousness. Looking at all four of the narratives of Ali at once illustrates just how limiting and ineffective they each are. As scholars like Fischel (2010) and Freedman (1987) point out, it is vital to pay more attention to the role of assumptions about sexual harm in ideas about what constitutes normal, good, consensual sex.

A handful of critical scholars argue that queer theory can better understand sexuality by accounting for the problematic ways that sexual violence is often ignored in its most common everyday contexts and instead located in pathologized and essentialized identities (Fischel, 2010; Meiners, 2011; Puar and Rai, 2002; Spade, 2012; Stanley, 2011). It is easy to abandon the sex offender or the online predator and to think he deserves a lifetime of shame, ostracism, and a marginal existence. And yet this idea that the sex offender is a monster makes the problem of sexual violence worse. The Jennifer – Ali case illustrates that longstanding problems with how sexual violence is often understood not only remain but are also

exacerbated by the new figure of the pathologized online predator. Reading the four interpretations of Jennifer and Ali's relationship at the same time illuminates the limitations and dangers of promoting sensational figures of sexual violence, such as online predators or Arab kidnappers. I hope that unpacking the assumptions about these figures might help create a space for reckoning with the complexity, intimacy, and familiarity of most gendered violence.

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Notes

1. In 2006 just over 600 people were arrested for sexually soliciting minors over the internet, but 3100 additional people were also arrested for soliciting undercover officers posing as minors online. For comparison, there were an estimated 50,000 arrests for all sex crimes against minors in 2006 (Wolak et al., 2009).
2. 'Ali' and 'Jennifer' are pseudonyms. Though this case received sustained national media attention, and their real names were widely publicized, I use these pseudonyms in hopes of preventing this article from appearing in online searches for either person.
3. Beginning with the state of Washington in 1990, many states adopted laws authorizing community notification of registered sex offenders (Tofte, 2007). The federal legislation on sex offender registration and community notification consists of the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act, which was passed in 1994 (and amended with Megan's Law in 1996) and the 2006 US federal Adam Walsh Act. The Walsh Act is the most expansive to date.
4. See for example, reports from the Justice Policy Institute (Petteruti and Walsh, 2008), Human Rights Watch (Tofte, 2007), and the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (Tabachnick and Klein, 2011).
5. Registries gain popular and political support by purporting to address predatory strangers, but as of 2007, more than 600,000 people in the USA were listed on these registries, including some convicted of non-violent crimes such as consensual sex between teenagers, prostitution, and public urination (Tofte, 2007).
6. Since an existing law prohibits exploitative sexual contact between adults and teens under the age of 18, this reform newly criminalizes consensual non-exploitative sexual activity between 14- and 15-year-olds and their older partners. The Canadian Federation for Sexual Health explained in their statement opposing the new law, 'There is no evidence that this increased restriction on individual rights will increase protection of youth from sexual exploitation... [and] the prospect of legal sanction and third party disclosure could seriously discourage youth from accessing preventive and therapeutic health services' ('Age', 2008).

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