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The State of Unions: Politics and Poetics of Performance¹

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It is Friday, May 6, 2005, day two of the First International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. I arrive at room 210 in the Illini Union, 25 minutes early for our 1:30 session. The room immediately strikes me as less than ideal: aging ventilation system blowing and clanking, narrow rows of seats stretching back, podium several paces from the LCD projector. I must choose: use the mike but forgo the slides I have spent untold hours preparing or show the slides and project my voice much louder than I have practiced. I choose the slides.

I connect my Dell laptop to its brethren projector, boot up, and double click the PowerPoint file on my desktop. The title slide illuminates. With an exhale, I press the projector remote's "Black Screen" button and take a seat. My piece is scheduled last.

Barbara Jago, fellow USF alum, approaches from behind. Eyeing my black sweater, jeans, and boots, she fondly greets, "Conference wear for the newly-*tenured* professor." I stand to hug her. The reunion continues as we wave over Christine Kiesinger. Then arrive our academic parents, Art Bochner (Barbara's, Christine's, and my graduate advisor) and Carolyn Ellis (member of our doctoral committees and chair of this panel). As the room fills, sweat beads at the base of my skull.

The quality of the other presentations leaves little space to worry about my own. Mary

¹ The most updated version of this piece appears in the book *In Solidarity: Friendship, Family, and Activism Beyond Gay and Straight* (Routledge 2015). Earlier versions of "State of Unions" were presented at the 2004 meetings of the National Communication Association and the 2005 International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry and published in *Qualitative Inquiry* (Tillmann 2009; used with permission, Sage Publications: <http://qix.sagepub.com/content/15/3/545.abstract>). John and Beth Tillmann contributed the photograph of me as a little girl.

Poole describes her activist work with MoveOn during the 2004 presidential election; Abby Arnold and Wren Colker's co-constructed narrative chronicles the conflicted relationship between a stepdaughter and stepmother; and Robin Boylorn confronts the largely White audience with her experiences as a graduate student of color. When the applause for Robin subsides, I move to the front of the room.

I turn off "Black Screen," but my slide appears neither on my computer nor overhead. I push the button again. Nothing. Someone moves to turn off the heater, but its fan keeps whirring loudly. I power everything down and reboot, turning on the projector, then the computer. Shaking my head in Art's direction, I know exactly what he's thinking: *This is why I never use PowerPoint*. Audience members begin opening windows; it may be my nerves, but the room feels over 80 degrees. I decide to reboot one more time (computer, then projector). Alas! My slide appears on the laptop. I turn around: nothing on the screen. Function F4. Now the slide appears on the screen but not on my computer. Several repetitions later, I still can't get the image onto both. I decide to proceed with a blank monitor.

I take a deep breath and smile at the three-quarters full room. With a nod toward Mary Poole: "Let me first honor a fellow precinct leader." I peel off my sweater to reveal a grey retro muscle shirt reading "John Kerry for President." Planting my feet shoulder-width apart, I embark.

Warning:

though I am a postmodernist,
 an anti-essentialist,
 and an aspiring queer theorist,
 I will be making capital-T

Truth statements

in this political
 poetic
 polemic.

I invite you to offer your own truths

in response.

I spent the autumn of 2004 as many did:
 walking,
 knocking, and what bordered on
 stalking, [Mary offers a knowing laugh.]
 all to prevent the result we now have:
 Four
 More
 Years.

[I cue a photo of George W. Bush, eyes ablaze, finger pointed accusingly, with the sort of expression Jon Stewart mocks with a “Heh, heh!” on *The Daily Show*.]

Four
More
Years:
 the refrain
 lodges
 in my throat.

I swallow
 and begin to speak,
 my words flowing
 from despair,
 fear,
 and hope.

I address this
 address
 to men like those
 in my research community.

Men with whom I have been collaborating
 for 10 years on a project exploring
 communicative and relational opportunities and challenges
 of friendship across sexual orientation.

Men who have shared
 their stories,
 struggles,
 and families
 with me.

Men who identify (privately)
 as gay (not queer).

Men who also tend to be
 White,
 healthy (at least for now),
 middle-, upper-middle, or upper-class,
 educated (not academic),
 professional (not overly political).
 Men who can
 and do
 pass.

That audience, the “you”
 in the commentary
 to come,
 is probably not the “you” in this room.

But I suspect I am not alone
 in counting such men
 among my closest friends,
 my family.

My friends,
 every day I question the ethics
 of my participation
 in an exclusionary “program of privilege”:²
 heterosexual marriage.

I remind myself that I never can understand fully
 the constraints under which
 you live,
 love,
 move,
 and work.

But as a woman who teaches gender and queer studies,
 I know a thing or two about
 constraints.
 I have slogged my way through
 the year-long academic hazing we call
 tenure.

[Laughter spreads as I post a slide of a yellow and black road sign reading, “Danger: Men at Work.”]

The senior members of my department:

² See Warner (1999).

all White,
middle-aged,
heterosexual,
upper-middle and upper-class
men.

The Faculty Evaluation Committee:
 six White,
 middle-aged,
 heterosexual,
 upper-middle and upper-class
 men.

[I advance to a photograph of me, at perhaps six years old, pressing a tiny iron to my toy ironing board.]

[Insert photo I.1 Lisa around next 2 stanzas]

Deans,
 President,
 Chairman of the Board
 —need I go on?

So yes, I know a thing or two
 about constraints,
 about repression,
 about rage,
 about the performance of
 good
 little
 self
 in everyday life.

Here is my question:
 my friends,
where were you
 in this election cycle?

The stakes were so high:
 the remaking of the Supreme Court
 in the images of Scalia and Thomas,³
 the overturn of *Lawrence v. Texas*⁴
 and *Roe v. Wade*.

³ In his second term, George W. Bush appointed two Supreme Court Justices, Samuel Alito and John Roberts. Both were among the dissenting judges (along with Scalia and Thomas) in *United States v. Windsor*, the case that overturned the Defense of Marriage Act.

⁴ The 2003 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* struck down sodomy laws in 14 states. Scalia and Thomas dissented, as did then-chief justice Rehnquist.

When I get my head around this,
I will report back.

My friends, can you not see
that your fate as a gay man
is intertwined with mine,
with all women's?
In *Gender Outlaw*,
Kate Bornstein credits Craig Lucas with the statement:
“Homophobia and misogyny are not related.
THEY ARE THE SAME!”
I don't know about “the same,”
but surely two sides of a
reversible coat.

It could be said that,
of all members of your—our—community,
you have the most to lose
by making yourself vulnerable.
Passing brings privilege,
however temporary
and unstable.

I also see,
 hear,
 feel—
but never understand fully—
the economic,
 social, and even
 bodily consequences you might bear
should things go terribly,
 even violently,
awry.

[I display an image of protesters from the Westboro Baptist Church with signs reading: “GOD HATES FAGS” and “GOD SAID KILL FAGS.” The next slide features a young woman who has been bashed. Her right eye is swollen shut, her mouth bloody.]

On the other hand, my friends,
compared to your non-White,
working-class,
lesbian,
and transgender brothers and sisters,
you stand on firmer ground.

In this election cycle,
 so many others *did* make themselves
 vulnerable,
 canvassing for Kerry,
 MoveOn, or most visibly,
 HRC.⁸

Why not you?

I realize that it's heresy for someone
 with heterosexual
 and marital PRIVILEGE
 to excoriate you for what are, at least in part,
responses to homophobia and heterosexism.
 But I am afraid of your—our—
 complacency.

We share many enemies,
 and they are organized,
 on-message,
 well-financed.
 Emboldened by “mandate,”
 they earned, according to Bush,
 “capital in the campaign—
 political capital”—
 and they
 “intend to spend it.”

If their heterosexist amendment⁹
 was not that final moment of clarity,
 what will it take?

You tell me you're not a single-issue voter.
 But this federal amendment,
 these state initiatives,¹⁰
 strip your humanity
 and undermine your most significant relationship:
 one *hell* of a single issue.

⁸ The Human Rights Campaign, a civil rights advocacy organization.

⁹ The Federal Marriage Amendment seeks to define marriage in the U.S. Constitution as a union between one man and one woman. The Republican platform of 2012 reaffirmed the party's support for this amendment.

¹⁰ In 2004 alone, 14 states passed statutes and/or constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage; see State (May 15, 2013). By the end of 2008, 37 states had passed such legislation. In 21 states, prohibitions went beyond marriage to include recognition of, e.g., civil unions and domestic partnerships. As of this writing, seven of the 37 states that once barred same-sex marriage are now marriage equality states: California, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Oregon, and Pennsylvania. Thirty states still have anti-equality statutes and/or amendments on the books.

What will it take to get
 a little more of your—our—discretionary income
 into the nonprofit sector?
 A little more of your—our—
 time,
 energy,
 spirit into grassroots efforts?
What will it take?
 I am afraid of the answer.

[Advancing to a black and white image of Matthew Shepard,¹¹ I turn to meet his gaze for a few seconds before continuing.]

You and I knew that Kerry wasn't Kucinich
 or even Dean
 (not that you voted for Kucinich
 or even Dean).
 You did vote in the primary,
 right?

You and I had read the Kerry-Edwards (re)position paper.
 Against the heterosexism amendment
 AND same-sex marriage.¹²
 For civil unions
 AND state determination.
 Those saucy Republicans:
 always cooking up
 charges of inconsistency!

And who could forget the 2004 “debates”?
 Kerry's remark
 (was it off the cuff;
 was it calculated?):
 “If you were to talk to Dick Cheney's daughter,
who is a lesbian...”
 Or Edward's condescension-qua-compassion,
 his “respect” for Dick's “embrace”
 of his none-too-proud Mary,
 as if she had contracted leprosy
 while spreading the Gospel of abstinence-only.

¹¹ A 21-year-old student at the University of Wyoming murdered by Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney in 1998.

¹² John Kerry altered his stance and expressed support for same-sex marriage seven years later, in 2011.

But

don't get me started
on Daughter Halliburton either.
I'm more ambivalent about outing
than about *selling* out.
Marginalized status does not automatically confer
raised consciousness,
but neither is it a free pass
for undermining others' human rights.

So yeah,
Kerry was not the second coming,
but how can you simply throw up your hands
and not vote?¹³

And *you*.
You came to my "Take Back Our Country" barbecue
on September the 11th.
You ate pulled pork,
drank beer,
wrote a check for MoveOn.
Now I hear you were part
of the 23% of GLB folks who voted for Bush,¹⁴
whom you believed would be "better for business."
Whose business?

And *you*, Mr. Representation without Taxation.
What do you think financed
our public educations,
including our state-subsidized college degrees?

And you two.
Did you have to buy your new
and your certified pre-owned BMWs
from the only dealer in town
whose towering billboard read:
"We Support the Troops and President Bush"?
Yes,
I did see the Kerry-Edwards sign
in your yard.

¹³ Across sexual orientations, nearly 57 million eligible voters did not participate in the November 2004 elections. Sixty-two million votes were cast, 38 million less than in the spring 2009 finale of *American Idol* (see Berman May 20, 2009).

¹⁴ See CNN.com (n.d.).

you said the ‘you’ in your commentary is probably not the ‘you’ in this room. But even I felt implicated by some of the lines.” He clears his throat. “Several times during your performance I asked myself: *did* I do all that I could?”

Feeling pain in his question, I respond, “I try to show myself grappling with that as well. Whatever any of us did individually and collectively, it was not enough.

“You said you felt ‘implicated.’ I’ve thought a lot about interpellation: who is the ‘you,’ the subject, hailed by this piece? The poem emerged from everyday experience among my network of gay male friends. Those lines stem from actual events, real conversations; I am not being hyperbolic. I speak to these men and about them, but in the process, I speak to larger social forces and hail a broader audience.”

He asks, “More specifically, what—and whom—is the poem for?”

“It’s a call to action for all of us. We may be marginalized in one or more ways: me as a woman, you as a gay man. But we also have the privilege that comes with our dominant statuses: my heterosexual privilege, your male privilege, our White privilege, educational and class privilege. The question is: how do we use that for liberatory and just ends?”

Keith Berry asks, “How has your research community responded to the piece?”¹⁶

With the back of my left hand, I wipe sweat from my brow. “Everyone was invited to a performance at Rollins College, though only my friend Mike could attend. I also read it to my friend Tim over the phone. Both responded with something akin to: ‘Right on!’ But both Mike and Tim served on my MoveOn team, so they were less likely to feel challenged by the more critical lines.”

Keith presses, “Why didn’t you include, as you have in past work, your participants’ voices?” His brown eyes lock on mine.

¹⁶ For an extensive discussion of Keith’s reactions to “The State of Unions,” see Berry (2006).

“I take your question very seriously. Such inclusion would have made the piece more dialogic, as would have greater efforts to ensure that my participants had prior access. Perhaps not doing so makes me something of an ethnographic ‘fink,’ to use Goffman’s¹⁷ term.”

Silence again falls. Just as the audience seems poised to move on, Art Bochner says, “I’m wondering about . . . tone. I didn’t have the same reaction to reading this as a text as I did hearing you perform it today. My graduate advisor used to say, ‘We shouldn’t alienate those we’re trying to persuade.’ I’m wondering if anyone would like to talk about that.”

Keith responds, “I think of autoethnography in Goodall’s¹⁸ terms: as relationship and conversation. I am perplexed by your decision to scold those whose liberation you claim to support.”

A man I don’t recognize immediately follows up. His voice shakes as he says, “To me, your performance felt like gay bashing.”

My stomach drops. Before speaking, I find my center. “I said early in the piece, ‘I invite you to offer your own truths in response.’ Thank you for doing so. I cannot dispute that, to you, it *felt* like ‘gay bashing.’” My spirit connects to the hurt and despair he embodies. Gingerly, I add, “To me, the piece is radically *anti*-heterosexist, a longtime friend and ally speaking from her heart, her gut.”

“A *‘friend,’*” he retorts, clearly marking the word with vocal quotation marks, “speaking to members of an already-marginalized group to which she doesn’t belong.”

The ground beneath my feet seems to quake a bit, but I retain my balance of passion and compassion. “That description is accurate but incomplete. Again, each of us has both marginalized and dominant identities. I ‘live, love, move, and work’ under different, but related,

¹⁷ See Goffman (1989).

¹⁸ See Goodall (2000).

constraints. When I speak to or about these particular men, I see myself as speaking across the table to my peers.

“You might experience such a dynamic if your fieldwork involved a community of women. Your experience as a gay man could move you to empathize with women’s struggles, to work for gender equality in your everyday life, *and* to critique ways that *women’s* actions and inactions further our own oppression. For example, my piece doesn’t mention, but you could in fairness raise, the fact that 48% of women—more than twice the percentage of GLB persons—voted for George W. Bush.¹⁹ I do think it important to distinguish between hegemonic critiques that reproduce oppressive practices and structures and anti-domination critiques aimed at undermining and dismantling those.”

Keith says, “That seems to place responsibility for understanding the researcher/performer’s intent in participants’ and audience members’ hands. What do you see as *your* role in that process?”

Lesa Lockford interjects, “Perhaps it is, as Art mentioned earlier, a question of tone. I wonder how the piece would be received differently if the central emotion you communicated were fear instead of anger.”

A woman seated behind Lesa queries, “What’s the implication, though? That autoethnography rightfully expresses sadness and fear but not anger?”

Bud Goodall says, “I met Lisa through her autoethnographic account of bulimia²⁰ and followed her journey into this fieldwork community in *Between Gay and Straight*. What does it say if we embrace her as a ‘girl’ struggling with an eating disorder or as the consummate gay man’s gal pal but resist her speaking from the truth of her lived *political* experience?”

¹⁹See CNN.com (n.d.).

²⁰ See Tillmann-Healy (1996).

“There does seem to be something gendered about that,” observes Lesa.

I respond, “I made a deliberate, rhetorical choice to write and speak in second person, to be direct and confrontational—a style reflective of my research community’s conventionally masculine gender expression.”

“Plus,” Bud says, “the poem is an open text. I heard this coming not from anger but from pain, perhaps even betrayal. Think of the interaction she describes after Margaret Cho and the failure to achieve intersubjectivity over women’s rights.

“Perhaps it is a sign of autoethnography’s maturation that scholars using the same methodology, and likely sharing similar politics, have such divergent opinions about how to accomplish their goals.”

As the conversation shifts to the other presentations, I take my seat and begin turning over the responses, a process that continues to this day.

Ethical “State of Unions”?

I believe in judging research practices as Keith Berry suggests: “by their impact and efficacy.”²¹ My performance at the Qualitative Congress sparked a lively, layered discussion, but at what cost and to whom? I still pause when reengaging the responses of gay male audience members who felt “implicated,” “scolded,” even “gay bashed.”

What of my friends’ responses? In “State of Unions,” were the men in my research community “participants” in any meaningful sense? At the very least, I should have ensured that these men had access to the poem prior to my first public delivery. I did distribute copies and solicit feedback before submitting the piece for publication—a step in the right direction but still ethically insufficient.

²¹ See Berry (2006, 3).

My friend and colleague Kathryn Norsworthy and her research collaborator Ouyporn Khuankaew,²² following Buddhist practices of “right speech,” offer three criteria for judging “rightness”: Is it the truth? Is it the right time? Will it be helpful? Regarding the first question: I wrote and spoke my truths but explicitly marked them as “capital-T Truth statements.” Though I invited others’ truths, and Congress attendees offered them, I could have marked my truths as provisional and contingent. Such rhetoric likely would have evoked less alienation and pain. At the same time, as I expressed, the stakes felt so high: on the line were my friends’ basic human rights—if not their very lives. Indeed, during the eight years of his administration, President Bush signed no legislation or executive order that advanced rights on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, and Bush’s Supreme Court nominees (especially Samuel Alito, preceded by Sandra Day O’Connor) maintained a body well to the right of the general population—an impact that may last decades.

This relates to the question of “right time.” To me, the situation felt urgent, desperate. The time had to be *now*; I wrote the piece within days of the 2004 election.

Readers and audience members enter an intellectual and/or performance space with a range of lived experience and at different places in their own identity developments. Therefore, no text or speech—and certainly no polemic—will feel “right” to everyone. My first performance of “State of Unions,” part of a panel sponsored by the GLBTQ Caucus of the National Communication Association (NCA), occurred barely two weeks after the election. No audience member there expressed feeling gay bashed or even implicated, but that offers no vindication. For those prone to being triggered by the poem, the election may have been so fresh that they shut down emotionally. In addition, no one explicitly invited members to respond to the

²² For examples of their work, see Khuankaew and Norsworthy (2000), Norsworthy with Khuankaew (2005) and Norsworthy and Khuankaew (2012).

piece's tone, as Art Bochner did at the Congress.

Environmental differences also may have contributed to how audiences received "State of Unions." The NCA room was much quieter and smaller, and I had access to a microphone. My NCA delivery likely sounded much closer to my normal speaking style than to the near shouting I thought I needed to reach Congress attendees seated in the back of a long room with a loud fan.

Returning to the notion of "right time," my performance at the Congress occurred just over six months after Election Day. Some audience members may have had enough emotional distance from the election to engage the ideas and even the tone of "State of Unions"; for others, the election still may have felt like an open wound.

As with the other two questions, "Will it be helpful?" cannot be answered, only processed. Helpful how and to whom? I could not stand by quietly while the ruling party used and stoked fear and hatred of LGBTQ+ persons as a distraction to what seemed to be its real agenda: the upward distribution of wealth and the communication of U.S. military dominance. At the same time, I recognize now that, even when I feel frightened or angry, I must stay focused on the major *sources* of oppression. I must ensure that I do not relocate the problem and blame the targets of oppression. When I perceive that someone—even a member of a marginalized group to which I do not belong—contributes to her or his own and/or to others' oppression, it is my duty as an ally to try to interrupt that. To the greatest degree possible, my interruption should convey "loving honesty," a phrase offered by a member of my research community. "State of Unions," while honest, is insufficiently loving. The poem, even as published in 2009, was too much an ethnographic monologue, too little an ethnographic dialogue.

In “Friendship as Method,”²³ I indicated that researching with an ethic of friendship requires a reflexive stance of mutuality, empathy, and understanding. I take seriously feedback indicating that my poem and/or my performance failed to embody that stance. My responsibility now includes moving forward with heightened and better-informed commitments to equality and justice for my friends, for their communities, and for everyone.

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²³ See the Appendix and Tillmann-Healy (1998, 2001, 2003).

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