Blasphemies and Queer Potentiality: Performance and/as Relation

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ISSN: 1557-2935

I was neither present for the debut of *Blasphemies on Forever: Remembering Queer Futures* at DePaul University in the Spring of 2009 nor during its most recent performance at Arizona State University in 2010. The two times I did see *Blasphemies* live in Fall 2009 were varied enough to inform different experiences, reads, and relations. The bar in Chicago was interactively playful, rowdy, and had a two-drink minimum. There were no drinks when, at DePaul University, the performance ran one night during the National Communication Association's annual conference and followed Terry Galloway's *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes*. The feeling in this audience of primarily students and convention goers was formal, and for that I liked my space alone up in the tech booth where my labor was both as audience and operator. In less public contexts, I've watched rehearsals and video documentations, offered both invited and unsolicited comments, and dialogued with its roots in dissertation-related writing and performance. I recount these contexts to situate this solo performance¹ in a circuit of space, time, and relations.

Performance, at least for me, depends as much on where and with whom you see it as it does your relation to the person/performer/performance, and all the politics in between. This essay is a reflection on the politics of relation (see Carrillo Rowe) of performance and among performers and audiences. To recognize the politics of any relation is to locate subjectivities within discourses that inform, are reinforced and resisted, and find their way between and among people. Relationships are messy, complex, and changing, and inform the audiencing, writing about, and standing next to any performance. My own relation to Goltz throughout the past seven years informs my process here. It is particularly interesting to write in relation to this performance at this time, a time with layers of distance and proximity. Here I write through and next to *Blasphemies*, the discourses it hails, resists, and relies upon, as well as its relational doings and potentials.

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¹ I understand *Blasphemies*, written and directed by Goltz, as a solo performance, though it features Jason Zingsheim as "the Ghost."

An act of blasphemy reflects back on the subjectivity of the blasphemer and speaks of a particular relation to its object. To blaspheme is to speak out, to talk back. The word blasphemy invokes the sacred. For Goltz to blaspheme is not unexpected. In his previous performance work he challenges the sacred. Banging the Bishop, even before its production, was perceived as blasphemy so much so that its production at Arizona State University was temporarily halted (see Goltz, "Insert"). Yet Goltz blasphemes as aesthetic strategy. In her review of Banging the Bishop Aimee Carrillo Rowe argues that one thing his blasphemy does is to interrupt the false binary between sacred/profane. Rather than dismiss what is sacred, Goltz locates his body and voice in direct relation to its discourses and asks in what non-normative ways it might be lived.

Blasphemies on Forever is consistent with Goltz' previous approaches to performance and resistance. The rhetorical and performative force of the blasphemies on forever recognizes the ways discourses of forever—and here particularly the force of heteronormative temporal and relational structures—interpellate and produce expectations on all lives.² The central and material expression of the forever Goltz argues with/blasphemes against is marriage. However it might be practiced, lived, and/or regulated, in the cultural imaginary the dominant attitude favoring marriage circulates as sacred. Forever (after) is the promise of future, the neoliberal legacy white children are socialized to expect as their rightful inheritance (see Berlant; Duggan; Edelman).³ Goltz' blasphemy on forever, with its focus on media and the mundaneity of everyday life, positions gay (aging) lives directly in conversation with the unfolding of forever. Through the lives of gay men facing forever in ways that intersect with race, gay generations, Goltz' past, imaginaries, and multiple relations, Goltz grapples with and resists the ways some of us are cast out of, shaped by, and ultimately bound to discourses of future.

These blasphemies open the door to "remember queer futures." While his blasphemy might be enacted in any number of ways, the choice to do so through staged performance situates the action/argument, its implications, and potentials as a *relational* venture among the performer and audience. As we audience the blasphemies on forever and participate in remembering queer futures, our own positions in

² The turn in queer theory that tends to the violences of heterotemporality and the potentials of queer orientations to time now enjoys a significant body of literature and ongoing interdisciplinary dialogues and a more full discussion is beyond the scope of the current essay. See Halberstam, Edelman, Muñoz, Freeman.

³ While most children in the US are born into master narratives of the American Dream, progress, and meritocracy, not all of us are socialized in the same way, nor do we all expect the same thing, despite the dangling carrot that is the future. Though sexuality might interrupt and cast us out of future, the mainstream gay and lesbian same sex marriage movement demonstrates a sustained investment in and maintenance of it. Here intersections of class, race, ability and citizenship are particularly informative of the ways we find ourselves in relation to discourses of future. For a discussion of the ways performance speaks back to this, see Muñoz 83-96.

relation to the discourses, our intersubjectivity with the performer, are called to attention, are visible. What I focus on below are the questions this raises around relation in and through performance. In what follows, I consider three sites of relation in *Blasphemies*: the politics and labor of audiencing, gay marriage and gay weddings, and a queer politics of relation.

Reading Blasphemies on (White) Gay Male Aging by a Queer Chicana of a Certain Age

In promotional material for *Blasphemies*, the viewer is invited to a "performance piece [that] investigates the pop cultural production of gay male futures." Throughout the performance, Goltz' aging gay male body is positioned in relation to the demands of normative discourses. We enter the performance through his "playfully postmodern" time-travel through the cartoon figure of Tooter Turtle from the NBC program in the 1960s. In the cartoon, Tooter is always imagining a "what if" in relation to his past and begs Mr. Wizard to let him try, to let him explore a past experience. While Mr. Wizard always warns against this, and the end result functions as both catharsis and warning to viewers who might fantasize about similar returns, Tooter's wish is always granted. The figure of the Ghost embodies Mr. Wizard here and grants Goltz' request to "let me try." From there, we as audience accompany Goltz through mediasaturated, and at times dizzying, encounters with and re-imaginings of the lives and discourses informing aging gay men through popular culture, the/his past, and queer futurity. From there we, as audience standing alongside Goltz, face an onslaught of familiar narratives and tropes of gay lives: aging gay male as predator, the object of a fag-hag's dependence, a lack of options for gay relations, complexities across gay generations, suicide, loneliness, and more.

I engage *Blasphemies* as a queer Chicana. From my brown queer subject position, it is possible to audience this performance about gay men from a distance, to turn away from that which is not me and from representations that do not immediately structure my life. If queerness is a process of subversion, of reflecting and refracting, of finding space to move and breathe, then there is also the potential here for queerness to shut down. I do not see myself reflected. I confront the familiar presence of white gay men and it quickly becomes about *them*. Their repetition, their presence, their centrality. The "30 Year Old Man" finds his reflection in the representations of other white 30-year-old men of popular culture. The potential 'we' of queerness begins to evaporate; coalition is called into question. Who am *I* audiencing *this?* As a brown queer woman who only sometimes thinks that lesbian separatism is a viable and desirable choice to structure my life, I choose to stand in queer relation—political, intellectual, collaborative, intimate, familial—to gay men. How then does performance constitute, or how is performance a site of, relations among performer and audience?

In *Blasphemies* grand narratives of gay men are displayed, toyed with, re-written and complicated, inter-woven with and placed alongside Goltz' personal narratives.

The politics of personal narrative performance, how to engage its meanings and doings, are ongoing in the field of Performance Studies. In a recent essay, Goltz ("Frustrating") argues the limitations of insisting that one narrative account beyond itself, that it may not address or include everyone, and that all narratives are partial, fallible, and located in a moment of time. How we might account for absence, or consider intersectionality in narrative, is a larger discussion than there is space for here. As important as that is, rather than ask what might be absent in Goltz' narratives, here my attention is on the presence of the audience in relation to the performer/performance and what that might mean for and reflect back on the performance.

When we agree to *audience* a performance that includes personal narrative, questions emerge around how we engage the differences and similarities, and how that might account for an emergent *politics of relation* in that moment and through the performance. From what position, and with what relations, do we face performance of personal narratives? For me this is a potential of a performance like this—that in addition to the structural politics called out, resisted, or even reinforced, that I might know some *one*, understand some *thing*, touch and be touched. Performance may invite or foreclose dialogue, pause for reflection, generate speaking and listening. It can be particularly exhilarating and complex to have this experience with a performer one already has a relationship with, to know that person differently, deeper.

While this performance enacts blasphemies on forever and remembers queer futures, broad and potentially encompassing categories for sure, its content is more narrowly about the lives of gay men. Even in relation to others, to straight women, to straight couples, to natal family, and other gay men, the argument of the performance revolves around gay men. In this discussion it is not my intention to critique the performance for what it is not. Rather, I call attention to what might be a gap between remembering *queer* futures and *gay men* as a point of entry into a politics of relation, alliance, and knowledge. It is to ask what relations and investments are visible and possible in performance. If I, as a queer Chicana, stand in relation to gay men, what are the politics of my listening? And how is the labor of audience reflected back, brought further? Performance about experience, and to speak from one's experience, is part of the history and politics of performance art and reflects a shift in performance studies in communication over the past few decades. My question here is to pry open personal performance and resituate it as relational.

Blasphemies on Gay Marriage?

Two best man speeches anchor Tooter Turtle's point of entry into and departure from imagined worlds in and through popular culture and personal narrative. In each speech, Goltz as best man figures as best men do (and as gay men do in relation to heteronormativity)—in a supporting role. The insider/outsider role of best man supports the central figure of the couple. In keeping with tradition, the speeches invoke memories from the past and make pronouncements about the future. In the first speech, "That Lovely Toast," the best man toasts Kevin and Jules, hailing

popular culture references to inform what their life and love might become, among other things:

... as passionate as a Nick Cave ballad
That is as playful as The Magnetic Fields
As patient as the Counting Crows fan
As cool as Emily Valentine on her first day at West Beverly
As anticipated and as rewarding as this season of LOST
That is as dedicated as Jules to her Blackberry
As honest as the crowd at a Neil Diamond concert
As unique as Kevin's hair twist followed by a sniff
As thoughtful as a Cameron Crow movie soundtrack

The wedding and marriage mark a ritual that also separates the primacy of platonic relations—that of the best man and the groom—in favor of the now married couple. The ritual of the speech symbolizes that relation and the new form it will take.

Though the meaning of the references between the best man and groom in the speech are felt through Goltz' delivery, the close of the speech performs the looming shift in the homosocial relation. "May you find a happiness and joy that exposes the artifice and shallowness of all the previous films referenced, redefining the dream in such as way as to make those fictional bastards jealous." Though the speech is dedicated to Kevin and Jules as a couple, the meanings in the referents lie in Kevin and the best man's relationship. In wishing Kevin and Jules a life that makes "those fictional bastards jealous," I read a form of recognition that the life being forged through the ritual of the wedding and the institution excludes the best man to the degree that this (performance) is about them. Yet simultaneously, by maintaining that those fictional bastards could feel jealous, popular culture and the relation between the two men lives on, much like the figures of the ghosts that haunt Goltz and us throughout the performance. The tension between, and the negotiation of, the statesanctioned relation and that between Kevin and Goltz present a queer dilemma that threads its way throughout the performance.

The second best man speech emerges further into the performance in a markedly different tone. The scene, "(Not) My Best Friend's Wedding," functions not like a toast to the couple's future, but rather as a predictor of a formulaic unhappiness awaiting Paul and Jacqueline: "To the endless parade of clichéd scripts, which all begin with two hands meeting, the most gentle of touch, and inevitably sink into a slow slow fade. – To Paul, Jacqueline, and the shit dreams are made of." The relationship between Paul and this best man is at best strained, as Goltz punctuates throughout the speech. What made Paul at once interesting enough—the rejection of future—to want to fuck him shifts for Goltz once Paul falls into a heteronormative relation and script. The secondary position of best man, who Paul frames as one who needs "to get a life, take that next step, to grow up," casts Goltz in the stereotypical role of the best man suspended in a heteronormative temporality. As Goltz demonstrates throughout *Blasphemies* in several ways, in popular cultural narratives this position is framed as a crisis for gay men who are neither allowed to age (gracefully—

they become dinosaurs) nor to maintain the embodiment of youth (Goltz' body confronts his "30 year old ass" in therapy, imaginary, and reflection).

Gay men and marriage are initially then presented as a vexed relation. It makes another appearance in the first two thirds of the performance in another parody. In the scene "Not Me TV," Goltz and Zingsheim (as the Ghost) appear as the figures of the hypervisible superhero in a cape with a gay republican sticker across his chest next to the boy scout, also in cape. Together they perform while Goltz sings his re-written theme song of the TV show "The Greatest American Hero" against a videoscaped backdrop of fictional and celebrity gay cultural icons who celebrate marriage and children. These "white WASPy" gays marvel at themselves as "straight acting gays" in their suburban dream/nightmare in which they "don't even fuck anymore." The acknowledgement of their bed death at the end of the song prompts the Ghost to exit the scene. Embedded in the song is a direct address to mainstream American public that pleads the case of white gay normativity, "if you would just let us marry."

Read together, in a moment of increased change in same sex marriage laws across the country as well as debate within GLBTQ communities, these three scenes in *Blasphemies* might be read as a wholesale rejection of marriage, both gay and straight. However, the final two scenes of the performance, which include another best man speech, this time at a gay wedding between two men, implicate the previous scenes in yet another twist and re-imagination of popular culture in and through gay lives. The nuances of gay arguments for and queer arguments against same sex marriage are ongoing and complex, and while I do think *Blasphemies* deserves a more drawn out reading within that context, it is more than I have space for here. One of the dimensions of the relational argument of marriage is the regulation of intimacy by the state, or the ways people understand themselves in relation to one another and how those lives are recognized by the state (see Brandzel; Eng; Duggan; Freeman).

Since the performance hinges on questions of *future*, and as such future is mediated, foreclosed, resisted, and re-imagined here through the *performance* of *weddings*, this is where I want to focus the discussion. In *The Wedding Complex*, Lisa Freeman reconsiders literary and cultural representations of marriage and weddings. She argues that in literary genres *marriage* functions as narrative closure; marriage marks the end of the crisis, the completion of the story (Freeman xii-xiii). We read less about marriage and more about the road to it. Marriage is the happily ever after, or the scripted nightmare that Goltz maps for Paul and Jacqueline in the best man speech. We don't necessarily get to see or know what happens after the wedding, and at least in this performance, it's best left to our imagination and knowing rather than spoken out loud. The Ghost confirms for Goltz that his pronouncements are too much. The figure of the gay man and his truth-telling represents excess, that which is not to be spoken.

The wedding, Freeman argues, is a performative act open to any number of temporal and relational directions. While marriage largely participates in a neoliberal dynamic of representation, personhood, citizenship and belonging in the eyes of the state and is therefore available to persons and relations recognized and sanctioned by

the state, the form of the wedding is open. A wedding is a highly stylized performance in which anyone can participate. While all weddings are not equal and are without the weight that accompanies legal marriages, Freeman's argument is that weddings as a performative act allow the space to re-imagine and potentially legally redefine personhood and relations. As a performative act, Goltz' best man speech in the final wedding, the gay wedding between Jimmy and Brian in the second to last scene of the performance, we as audience participate in what a gay wedding might do.

As we witness/audience Jimmy and Brian's wedding, Goltz situates gays within and hailed by the discourses of the future as they materialize in the temporal punctuation of the wedding and subsequent marriage:

Today Jimmy and Brian follow a tradition which honors tradition itself. Traditions of their parents, that of their rearing, and yet they stand on the cusp of a second liminality. Marriage is not new. From our first breath, it is there for us to define the future, to structure a template for the years we spend in this life.

The speech argues the question of why wouldn't gays want to marry? It is a discourse that precedes and structures our lives, and for those of us in relation to heteronormative couplings in the form of family and/or friends, we stand witness to the what is around us, to that which we learn to want to belong. To long to perform and participate in that which we see. The speech continues to introduce the force of queerness available as a point of departure from this normativity:

Queerness is not defined. It is open, it seeks out and celebrates the potentiality that each present and each new moment affords—it celebrates brave and fearless discovery, never mapping, yet illuminating a new terrain.

At this point the performance of the gay wedding, much like performances of gay life in relation to heteronormativity throughout the performance, is interrupted once again. Up until this point, so many of Goltz' moments of experience—moments filled with pleasure, pain, desire and belonging—are interrupted through bodies and relations to normativity. His "Dancing with Death," in which he tries to court death (and is rejected for his age) is muddled by the role he plays as the gay friend in a formulaic romantic comedy.

In *Blasphemies*, Goltz is the product of the popular cultural narratives that have shaped his life and relations (for a discussion of the space-off and gay men see Goltz, *Queer*). But in this second to last scene, the interruption that would erase the experience of gay life, here a gay wedding, Goltz turns back and faces the script directly. Rather than be swept away by the life written *for him*, Goltz speaks from the position of that which is erased. This interruption is an insistent return to the lives that popular and mainstream culture interrupted and ignored, and also by ghosts of the past. Goltz prompts an argument to notice the discrepancies in the place holders gay men often play in popular culture, the supporting roles to straight women, to ask after our disappeared uncles and kin who go unremembered, to remember queer futures from Goltz' own life in relation to the men; what they collectively might (have) become, what they imagined, those present and those no longer with us whose

lives have been taken by any number of things. I read this moment, this invocation, as recognition of the lives lost to AIDS, heteronormative violences, and other erasures and as an argument to notice those who are otherwise rendered visibly invisible. This is an act that is more than reclaiming the past, it is a return to the past to inform the present (Muñoz). These collective ghosts prompt us forward, occupy space in, and infuse the wedding not with foreclosure of marriage but with the kind of performative opening that Freeman writes about as the wedding. The toast opens more than it forecloses, then, and the best man wishes the men forward in the form of a question, in a "what next", and "what else"?

The performance closes with a return to (for some of us) an immediately recognizable, yet now somehow different, somehow queered yet completely intact, rendering of the song from the *Muppet Movie*. Kermit sings us through yet another dizzying montage of popular culture and the now past performance, this time set at a dinner party. The dinner party's symbolic referent to Judy Chicago's infamous feminist performance art polemic *The Dinner Party* is interesting, and prompts my final question that I somewhat rehearsed in the previous section that haunts the edges of the conclusion, to which I will now turn.

A Place at the Table? Blasphemies and a Queer Politics of Relation

Mr. Wizard always tempers Tooter Turtle's requests to go back in time with a refrain of "Very well my boy, but be careful." It's dangerous to go back; we risk feeling the skewed vision hindsight provides us. Filled with regret, fear, and an inability to do what he thought he wanted in the past, Goltz/Tooter pleads with the Ghost/Mr. Wizard to come back to the future. In Scene 17, "Melancholy Postmodern Sitcom Tragedy Sampler" Goltz cries out, "Mr. Wizard? Mr. Wizard! Get me out of here!" And the Ghost/Mr. Wizard eventually does let Goltz come home, but not before a Facebook reconnection with a childhood friend.

Against the backdrop of a montage of sitcom theme songs, voiceovers, interactions with the Ghost, and narratives, the performance confronts the ways popular culture precludes youthful queer belonging. Goltz revisits and maps back on two gay boys who never shared their burgeoning sexuality with one another. He now mourns the "what-ifs" in the gap between now and then. Herein lies the danger of going back that Mr. Wizard warned against, as we witness Goltz confront "the years of alienation, shame, regret, suicidal crap" that might have been rendered less lonely, or not at all, if only they each had known of the other's longings. Pandora's box is now open, spilling over into the present as Goltz feels/faces "all those things I have put into a box labeled late teens, early twenties angst, and stored away," the un/finished business now uncontained in the past.

I experience a never-happened embrace between our eleven-year-old bodies as a thirty-four-year-old man, the embrace I didn't ask for, or know I needed until it randomly walked up to me and opened its arms, and I collapsed inside it and sobbed. My narratives of progressing beyond the past unravel before me.

As we, as audience, stand present and in direct relation/witness to Goltz in this moment and throughout the performance, I would argue it is full with a potential for *collective* mourning, a relational generative production of queer history and belonging that might have been. What might have been is made possible, enfleshed and experienced, through performance. But ultimately that embrace is not enough as Goltz returns back to the future. As the narratives unravel before him in present time, he reflects on the weight of the discourses that produce him, that continue to inform his subjectivity even as it is examined through a critical and queer lens over the theme song from the TV show Taxi.

Now that I am a thirty-something year old man who bleaches chunks of his dark hair light blond, refusing to let it grow out of me. A man who, when he gets depressed, goes home, and puts on his theme song in the dark, and just wonders to himself, what would it be like to hear this song while riding in an actual taxi.

When Mr. Wizard/the Ghost decides Tooter has had enough, he holds the power to grant Tooter's request to "get me out of here." He brings Tooter back with a knowing, "Oh! Here we are again. Dweezle, dreezle, drazzle, drone. Time for this one to come home." But what/where/when is home for gay men? What sites of belonging, kinship and relation are possible? To what home does Goltz return, under what conditions, and with what agency as he has confronted, witnessed, and rewritten through his intertextual encounters with the sitcoms and films of popular culture in his youth? Goltz' final reflection before we move into the final scenes of the performance is less 'what if' and more 'now what.' Though reeling in shame, and shame is not an unfamiliar feeling for gay men in particular, Goltz offers one final reply/invitation to his childhood friend turned retroactively queer kin.

It's good to hear from you friend, I too am trying to figure out where to start. How to start. I trick myself into thinking that I cannot wait till this Ph.D. is over, so I'll have time for a life, and I say that with a confidence that implies I have a clue what that means. A Life. Next? I start with what I know. I've decided to have a dinner party. It's what I have right now, because those who don't remember the future are destined to repeat it. It begins with the exit, and the trace that lingers. I look forward to seeing you. I hope you can make it.

The dinner party is another familiar gay trope (see Goltz *Queer* 115-155). As a performance of relation, the dinner party is a site of queer belonging and knowing. It is the gathering site for those whose bodies, perhaps whose ghosts, occupy the "trace that lingers."

In *Blasphemies*, as in popular culture, the gay dinner party is a site that is interrupted time and time again. And yet its interruption is an interesting site to consider for a queer politic of relation. In the final scene of the performance, as Kermit serenades us to write the endings to our movies, Goltz and the Ghost turn from the gay wedding and toward the audience with champagne glasses full and raised. Are we invited to a place at this table? Are we now part of a dinner party in progress? Have we been at a dinner party all along, or is this a party just begun? If this is a

beginning and/or an invitation, and it feels like one, this dinner party, like the gay dinner parties in so many movies and TV shows, is interrupted by the end of the performance. Our time is over but it opens onto an ending that we can collectively write. Is everyone invited? Who will attend? What will we talk about? Who will belong? Its performance is incomplete, and therefore its potential—relational, coalitional, individual—remains open.

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