

MATERIALS

Fundamental Femininity in Performance: An Artist's Reflections on *Jesus Camp Queen*

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Coming to Terms

In truth, *Jesus Camp Queen* (*JCQ*) is a story about the story I can't tell. It is the kept secret that sounds like confession. My wrenching and incomprehensible loss in the wake of a legal judgment that denied to me the custody of my six-year-old son was, and mostly still is, too painful to translate directly into story. The small-town custody drama into which the truly "righteous" insinuated themselves was one in which themes of femininity and morality were central, and with respect to my own, simultaneously impugned and conflated. In an Illinois courtroom, I learned once and for all that "performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments"; that "gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences" (Butler 1988, 528, 522). And while *JCQ* is not explicit about my experience of such consequences, in the reflections that follow, I trace the ideological contours that compelled a punitive response to my "erroneous" femininity. I explore as well how the creation of *JCQ* helped me identify performative elements of what I call *fundamental femininity*. I use this term to denote being female in ways that originate from and conform to literal interpretations of sacred texts as promulgated within various religious traditions.¹

I wrote *JCQ* several years after what I sardonically refer to in its narrative as my "blaze of glory" exit from the religious culture in which I lived out the first thirty years of my life. I did not write expecting to perform *JCQ*. I only wanted to sort through some recurring life themes in a more systematic way than I had as yet managed, and putting them into the form of a story seemed like a good way to do that. Shortly after I had completed an early draft of the narrative, I saw an audition notice for Stockyards Theatre Project's then annual Chicago-based Women's Performance Art Festival. As one who had done a good bit of solo performance work previously, I was intrigued by the prospect of transposing what was clearly emerging as a story about performance into an actual performance. I presented *JCQ* for the first time at the Stockyards Festival in October 2007.

Fundamental Femininity as Performative Accomplishment

In the years since I first performed *JCQ*, I have continued to reflect, read, and write about my own and others' experiences of fundamental femininity. As a result, I now clearly recognize the gendered admixture of veiled dissidence and manifest devotion that marked my early life in a fundamentalist Christian culture. That dichotomous state of mind and being is perhaps best explained by Judith Butler, who asserts:

Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative

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accomplishment which . . . the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief (Butler 1988, 520, emphasis in original).

Although Butler does not use the term “belief” here in an expressly religious sense, her choice of words could not be more apt in framing the complex and often hazardous intersection of gender, religious belief, and performance that is the essence of *JCQ*.

The stories of *JCQ* and the underlying crisis that compelled me to weave them together in the way I did are the product of a specific religious context that merits additional consideration. My church denomination of origin is described by its members as “evangelical.” The label “fundamentalist” is not favoured, though I use it here and in my performance as a way to denote the church’s literal approach to biblical interpretation (Olsen 2004, 5), a fact which is crucial in understanding its attitudes toward gender (Gallagher 2003, 65, 79, 83)² and general world view. I grew up hearing the stories of the Bible so often that I knew them by heart and as historical fact (as did everyone else, as far as I knew). Jonah really did end up in the belly of a giant fish for three days and live to tell about it. Noah really did build an ark into which he put his family and a pair of all the animals in the world. Adam really did have a wife made out of his rib whom he later blamed for getting him to eat fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Everyone thinks it was an apple he ate, but there is no real proof of this if you know your Bible stories well enough, and I did—just not metaphorically.

In my church, female roles—especially those of wife and mother—were scripturally circumscribed and ecclesiastically reiterated, beginning but not ending with the hermeneutics of Eve’s foibles. Training in these roles began early and was powerfully reinforced, sometimes through performative rituals like the ones described in *JCQ*, but mostly in explicit teachings. The institution of marriage, and particularly a hierarchically structured form of marriage with clearly prescribed sex and gender roles, was frequently the topic of sermons and ancillary programming. This was, after all, the church brand of James Dobson, founder of the highly influential parachurch organization, *Focus on the Family*, whose Colorado-based talk show played daily on the radio station of the denominationally affiliated college I attended. *Focus on the Family* publications were everywhere on view here too—at the college bookstore, the library, and certainly in church members’ homes. But perhaps the primary indicator of how ubiquitous Dobson seemed to me in the 1990s, when I taught at the college, was the *Focus on the Family* flyer I received on Sundays—inserted into the service bulletins handed out by greeters at the campus church.³ These sheets contained Dobson’s advice, especially his conservative views on marriage and childrearing. So certain was the tone of his rhetoric that I became convinced that my full-time employment away from the care of my pre-school-aged son was most unfortunate, as it indeed turned out to be, from a custody standpoint at least. In any case, Dobson’s prolific emphasis on stay-at-home mothering was widely accepted in my cloistered world as the ideal family arrangement. It was a mantra among my peers, particularly those women who were able to stay home and care for their children. I worried a lot about my status as “working mother,” especially on sleepless nights and—oh the irony—to the clackety-clack sounds of Dobson’s son riding a skateboard around in my neighbourhood. He was a student delivered into the care of college faculty, including a working mother like me.

In her exploration of gendered communication within an evangelical college community, Allyson Jule describes socio-culturally specific binary divisions of gender in performative terms, noting that “being male seems to equate with speaking in public as specifically demonstrative of a masculine morality,” whereas to be female seems instead to “equate with the avoidance of speaking in public as specifically demonstrative of morality” (2008, 2). Jule focuses primarily on student speech in her

study. Admittedly, my role as a faculty member at my alma mater necessitated my speaking in public, but the highly circumscribed nature of my speech within that position is beyond the scope of this analysis. Nevertheless, Jule's research offers insight into the gendered morality of *dramatis personae* in *JCQ*, including but not limited to depictions of my own student and faculty selves. Certainly, camp queen and homecoming court ceremonies that I experienced venerated a silent feminine piety. But my angst about and attempts to censor an "increasingly sarcastic self" from making "barbed" comments point as well to a culturally inscribed reticence—or at least soft-spokenness—not shared by the mostly male members of the music major clique I accompanied for a time. The sweet-natured, muted self who is revealed in such *JCQ* scenes—fervently sincere as well as silently duplicitous—would of course eventually evolve into someone less opaque, more unpredictable and, I like to think, more fun to be around. But during the time represented within the world of *JCQ*, the cracks in my façade of fundamental femininity are only just beginning to appear.

Creation as Revelation

In the long aftermath of grief and loss, the narrative threads of *JCQ* emerged almost unbidden, as fragmented recollections of a time before the verdict that divested me of my motherhood, and for a while and to a large extent, my sense of self. These earlier memories were of scattered and truncated scenes, quick flashes of insight, and frightening new truths that threatened a way of life. No single narrative could convey how a girl who tried so long and so hard to "imitate Jesus" could be so harshly penalized for failing to portray a feminine "Christlikeness" to perfection.⁴ Still, a desire was strong within me to follow these storied breadcrumbs that retrospectively mapped my journey.

Eventually, as noted in the opening and closing lines of *JCQ*, the stories of others suggested a through-line for the disparate strands of my own. The documentary film, *Jesus Camp*, as well as my previous scholarship on spectacular rituals of culturally prescribed femininity, provided a framework within which I might essentially recast myself in my own story.⁵ Through *JCQ*, I would reveal the fragility and collapse of the fundamental femininity I so painstakingly enacted throughout my formative years and well into adulthood. To a lesser extent, I would reveal the price I paid for "breaking character."

My wry observations and sometimes arrogant internal monologues attest to an innate candour I did not recognize at the time, but which became increasingly clear to me as I crafted my storied performance. Using methods of autoethnography, my "back and forth" gaze uncovered "multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural . . . first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of [my] personal experience: then . . . inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 739). As I fashioned *JCQ* using this multivalent approach, I realized in a more complete way how my disquietude compelled me to abandon a role that was at odds with my experience of reality; a role that if retained might thwart my sense of reality as well. Autoethnography facilitated my honest efforts to expose the strategic ways I navigated my religious culture. Perhaps inevitably then, as the product of those efforts, *JCQ* foreshadows my escape from this culture, as well as from the persona of devout femininity that it inculcated.

In her illuminating study of evangelical Christian women, Julie Ingersoll casts a theoretical and theological net that encompasses the continuum of my sacred performance of gender, from staged compliance to repentance-worthy micro-resistances known only to me. Specifically, she notes the

“myriad” ways in which the gendered body is ritualized: “When nearly all of life is ordered by gendered requirements, life itself becomes the performance of ritual in the space of the human body.” Ingersoll further suggests the perceived eternal ramifications of binary divisions within conservative Christian cultures in that the gendered body “enacts myths of masculinity and femininity and marks boundaries between the saved and the lost with idealized gendered behavior” (Ingersoll 2003, 123–24). The salvation-sized significance I attached to my performance of a devoutly gendered self attests to the validity of Ingersoll’s claim.

My *JCQ* renderings point as well to yet another binary: elation and shame. I was elated to compete successfully in this highly specialized form of femininity, but I tried to view my competitive edge as an affirmation of my own exceptional female virtue rather than admit to my rather ordinary human vanity. My earliest inklings of shame came from not performing my gendered faith with either sufficient faith or sufficient femininity. But by the period of my life in which *JCQ* is set, I had developed a high level of proficiency in this two-toned role. Shame cast its shadow over my elation as I began to recognize why and how others were ineligible for the accolades bestowed on me. My shame became unbearable when I finally understood how tenuous was the particular faith behind the femininity I performed, and that I had built an equally tenuous life out of both.

Truth to Tell

According to Ellis and Bochner, “life and narrative are inextricably connected. Life both anticipates telling and draws meaning from it. Narrative is both about living and part of it.” Narrative has the potential to transform; it is “agency through testimony” (2000, 745–46, 749). Frankly, long before I knew of narrative-based research methodologies or could even begin to articulate the power of performance to shape one’s life, I knew about testimony. Testimonies were the tales told by the faithful within the sacred spaces of my religious culture.⁶ They were storied ways of knowing and owning lessons of loss and truths discovered in joy and sorrow. So, in the lessons and sorrow of my own great loss, I did what I knew to do—what the church I had escaped taught me best to do.

JCQ is a testimony. By virtue of its indirectness, it is a parable of sorts, a way to explain as well as to contain the incomprehensible. I may have left the faith, but not without a means of redemption.

Acknowledgements and a Note on the Performance

The author wishes to thank Jason Zingsheim and Dustin Goltz for their comments on an earlier version of this essay as well as Joy Palacios for her insightful editorial comments. *JCQ* was originally performed in direct address style to a live audience. These performances were not recorded. In the process of recreating the performance so that it could be digitally shared here, I discovered new interpretive approaches to the work. The primary interpretive shift was a result of my collaboration with filmmaker and director Daniel Nearing. Specifically, and at his suggestion, I discovered that to the degree I treated my story as an intimate disclosure, it read on film and in my own psyche as more authentic and plausibly motivated. Divulging such personal and conflicted memories simply felt more like the kind of thing one would do in private conversation, not as a monologue to an audience of strangers. While retaining most elements of the live performance (including strategically interspersed images), my “pillow talk” manner and the use of voiceover are specific to this filmed performance. And although I will adopt a more confidential tone with a live audience in future

performances, my experience of performing *JCQ* live and now on film as well convinces me that this particular aesthetic text is especially suited to the latter.

Notes

1. Although my experiences were within a Protestant Christian tradition, *fundamental femininity* is a term that may apply to gender role expectations for women within any religious tradition whose behavioural codes are based on literal interpretations of sacred texts. For more on the impact on women of literalist views of religious texts see, for example, Vorster 2008 and AWID et al. 2015.
2. It is important to note that while Gallagher repeatedly acknowledges that most research on evangelical culture causally and primarily associates gender ideals with biblical literalism, she argues instead that literalism is lesser in significance than several other factors (83–84). This may be so, but my comments here are based on my lived experiences within a particular religious culture that heavily promoted a literal interpretation of scripture, including but not limited to scriptures pertaining to gender roles.
3. Dobson was prominent well into the next decade—if being newsworthy enough to be featured in a segment on Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show* is a sufficient measure of such. In the June 25, 2008, episode, then host Jon Stewart described Dobson plainly as “just a hate-filled guy that got lucky.” See Stewart 2008. Dobson has continued to participate in political and often gendered controversies. He publicly supported Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential campaign, before and after a video of the Republican nominee surfaced that revealed his misogynistic and lewd attitudes toward women and disrespect for the institution of marriage. See Dobson 2016.
4. These phrases are common parlance within the religious culture in which *JCQ* is set and suggest the performative nature of the devoutly Christian identity to which members aspire.
5. Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, directors, *Jesus Camp*, film, Loki Films and A&E IndieFilms, 2006. In addition to portions of the book noted in the author bio, scholarship of this sort includes: Latham, Angela J. 1995. “Packaging Women: The Concurrent Rise of Beauty Pageants, Public Bathing, and Other Performances of Female ‘Nudity.’” *Journal of Popular Culture* 29 (3): 149–67; and Latham, Angela J. 1997. “The Right to Bare: Containing and Encoding American Women in Popular Entertainments of the 1920s.” *Theatre Journal* 49 (4): 455–73.
6. In the religious culture in which *JCQ* is set, to “give a testimony” means to stand up during a public worship service (usually but not always when invited to do so) and give an account of one’s spiritual state. Most testimonies include an extended example or two of personal experiences that taught the speaker some spiritual lesson and/or that reaffirm the speaker’s commitment to the faith.

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