Performing Fugue: Desire, Denial, and Death in *Jesus Camp Queen*[1]

Patrick Santoro

> Sometimes it seemed there were too many shadows, or that they were in the wrong places…little things. Nothing definite. Nothing I could be certain of.
>
> (Munro 1983, 12)

> For while the self may have many selves, while the psyche is saturated and shattered and scattered, each of us nonetheless is rooted in a body, brain, and spirit that we cannot separate from.
>
> (Miller 1998, 321)

Performing one's own life story is a radical act (Langellier 1998, 207–8). For women, especially, performing the self is, as Carver titled her argument about the subject, "Risky Business," insofar "as women begin to speak the unspoken and to embody the selves previously unperformed by audiences" (2003, 15). In *Jesus Camp Queen* (*JCQ*), Angela J. Latham spins[2] rhetoric and aesthetics in an intellectual and visceral assemblage emblematic of a fugue—an account of her rise and fall from religious grace. While my reference to the fugue certainly reflects the pathological state characterized by dissociation, my primary intent is to evoke the musical form. The fugue, simply put, is highly structured, comprised of specific elements and developed through the technique of counterpoint—several interweaving melodies creating harmonic polyphony. According to Harrison:

> If the task of an oration is to persuade an audience of the validity of the speaker's point of view, the task of a fugue is to persuade an audience that the musical material can make a convincing and successful composition, and that the composer has sufficient technique, control, and artistry to create an interesting piece of music despite the several obstacles that the fugal form puts in the way. (1990, 5)

She is fluidity of time, space, longing, and loss in this theatricality of consequence as she recalls her dutiful discipleship, both reveling in and reeling from the glory of Jesus Christ, exemplifying "to narrative, the personal gives body; to lived experience, narrative gives voice" (Langellier 1998, 207).[3] Composed, yet fractured, she sits in the

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middle of an empty stage, a scripted re-presentation "of self, memory, and milieu" (Miller and Taylor 2006, 186), a human ghost light of grief, life in and as performance, "much more self-reflexive, much more aware of [her] own constructedness, and much more willing to make this awareness itself part of the presentation" (Carlson 1996, 604). Confessionally and contemplatively, she speaks to the camera—a "sensual somatically thinking body" (Spry 1998, 256)—at times too vulnerable, perhaps too shameful, to stare directly into the lens of the eavesdropping viewer. Boundless, she traverses here and now, there and then, embodiment and disembodiment, interiority of feeling and exteriority of affect—"one of those planes of 'unique reality' where memory and dreams, past and present, the everyday and the once-in-a-lifetime are reconciled and woven together upon a single loom of time" (Steinman 1995, 72).

While *JCQ* is a solo work, Latham is not alone: the church, alongside the rigid gender roles it upholds, functions as an integral character. Religion, therefore, becomes the primary narrative, or establishing subject, of this fugue. Yet her perspective on, and relationship with, religion evolves, revealing variations, or multiple statements, of the initial subject—specifically, desire, denial, and death—each a contrapuntal strand woven through religion's fabric. Important to the fugue is the equal weight of the melodies as each part contributes to the whole, which Harrison confirms, in a move to expose the oft "facile equation" (8) between a rhetorical subject and a fugal subject:

> Just as the thesis of an oration is usually not baldly announced in the first sentence, the thesis of a fugue, if you will, is hardly confined to the unaccompanied "sentence" that opens the composition. The musical "subject" of a fugue can only be but one component of a larger, musico-rhetorical thesis. Other material in the fugal exposition is as important to the development of the work as the titular subject. (1990, 8)

Although desire, denial, and death in *JCQ* appear to function independently from one another, they are intended to be read as interdependent entities. Latham first desired religion because it was the world in which her life was rooted—the rituals and principles that formed her sense of self, in all of its codedness—a reality ushered in and perpetuated by her biological family as well as the chosen family of her congregation, near and far. Though she was aware of how the church asked her (and other women) to perform "religious" "female" (compounded oppression—a double whammy!), and

of her complacency due to her perceived sense of power in a deceivingly power-hungry Church, she denied that "Truth" in favour of her desire to belong. However, it was the death of her friend and the custody battle (and eventual loss) of her son that led her toward increased dissonance. Not only did the church deny her, turning against one of their "royal" own, but she denied the church, betraying the only world she knew, desiring anything else but *that*.

Is Latham's tale primarily about desire? Does it exist along a continuum of denial? Or perhaps it ends where it begins—in death—as a child unable to choose religion for herself? Herein lies the conundrum of identity (re)formation. Together, desire, denial, and death build a complex whole for Latham, but it is this final movement—metaphorical religious death—that, in fugal terms, reveals the harmonic answer, or, is often the case with loss, the disharmony that leads to questioning. Yet, as Steinman assures: "The presence of death gives life a context and a rhythm" (1995, 133).

For Harrison:

> fugue achieves artistic success not because it displays a pre-existent unity in every structure . . . but because its various thematic treatments, harmonic modulations, contrapuntal devices, and so forth interest, convince, and perhaps even amaze, persuading the listener that it has not only displayed but also earned its unity. The rhetoric of fugue consists in this: that structure is also device, motion is also gesture, and that unity is a result, not a source. (1990, 40–41)

Similarly, the multidimensionality and intricacy of performing personal narrative renders a self not in isolation but both contingent upon and emergent from a backdrop of formative circumstances—a polyphony of forces that inform identity, or, as Latham explains, how "people can get lost in such pageantry." Live performance is about the cultivation of presence—the foregrounding of a performing subject in a performing world, "significantly more pronounced when performing autobiography" (Spry 1998, 254)—but as Park-Fuller reminds us, we must also consider "*absences and emptiness*": "absent tellings, absent tales, absent selves, and absent others, in a concert of dialogue that exists on both harmonic and discordant levels like intricate jazz—rich with open, unfinished, and yet integrated patterns of beauty and strife" (2000, 39, emphasis in original). Ultimately, Latham elucidates the challenge (if not impossibility) of disconnecting completely from the rigours of religion—as from a fugue's establishing melody—what it means to seek, embody, and surrender the title of Jesus Camp Queen. While performance affords Latham an opportunity to clarify her fugue state, working toward unity, she is not the sole beneficiary of this work: *Jesus Camp Queen* is for all of us, both present in and absent from her story, for the titles we aspire to hold, continue to hold, and hold no longer.

She is "a living text through performance" (Spry 1998, 254), rich with generative possibilities: a survivor reframing, verse - by - verse, her evangelical Christian upbringing of the rapture and the R U P T U R E —

"linguistic,
theatrical,
political,
psychological,
p e r f o r m a t i v e (Carlson 1996, 606)—re-membering
"not just her own
personal history but her *cultural* history
as well" (Carver 2003, 23, emphasis in original),
bridging the
g
a
p
within and without,
"dialogue
rather than definitions . . .
subjectivity
rather than Truth . . .
critique
rather than objectivity" (Spry 1998, 256),
witness and witnessing,
p e r f o r m i n g f u g u e.

Notes

1. I was fortunate to witness the development of *Jesus Camp Queen*—twice on stage, followed by video. While my writing reflects both stage and video performances, my primary reference for theorizing about the work stems from the live stage performances. Further, the scholarship I reference throughout this piece is from those writing in the context of live performance.

2. My use of the word "spin" is borrowed from Langellier's "spinstorying"—a concept that emerged during her work with women storytellers, "concerned with a creative, collaborative, conversational practice of personal narratives . . . as a way to negotiate personal identity and effect social change" (1998, 207).

3. While I view Latham's screen performance persona as more confessional (in part, due to the close-up shot), I regard her work on stage as more testimonial in its presentation, a distinction articulated by Park-Fuller: whereas confession "contribute[s] to the recuperation and reinforcement of dominant norms following individual transgressions," testimony refers to "a transgressive political act performed without repentance. It is an artistic declaration of personal experience given by a witness despite constrictive taboos" (2000, 22). It is also worth noting that viewing Latham's work on stage as testimonial alludes to testimony in religious practices, which she addresses in her artist statement.

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