

Blowing the Whistle on Hatred: demonstrating against homophobia

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ABSTRACT

I account for demonstrating against the homophobia of a radio evangelist who had rented space at the University of Winnipeg.

RÉSUMÉ

Je me justifie d'avoir manifesté publiquement contre l'homophobie exhibée à la radio par un évangéliste qui avait loué un local à l'université de Winnipeg.

Blow the whistle: 1 To inform, to sing. Underworld use. 2 To expose a scandal: to threaten to expose a scandal.¹

On April 21, 1995, a student organized protest outside the Duckworth Center at the University of Winnipeg grew into an unplanned demonstration inside the building. The University had rented the space to radio evangelist Bob Larson, who promoted his event by promising that he would be at the University of Winnipeg, taking on "the devil's crowd and combatting the invasion of satanism and sodomy."² When Student Association President Jim Heber was not able to get the University to cancel, he organized a protest, bringing together a coalition of groups and individuals opposing homophobia. The University advised Larson to change his venue, but he chose not to. My discussion

focuses on my understanding of events, my pride in being there, and what I am learning from the difficulty in writing about it.

Both individuals and institutions put off what is difficult. The University of Winnipeg has a Human Rights policy statement that might have provided guidance in areas of academic freedom and the rental of space, but after several years it is still in draft form. And I am struggling with the problem of how to address hate speech when it is happening in my university, when many of the students protesting have been in my courses, and when my daughter is joining them. I am a professor of English and Women's Studies. From 1987 to 1992, I held the Margaret Laurence Chair in Women's Studies. I have spent 28 years in universities, teaching courses on Literature, Women's Studies, Feminist Theory, Critical Theory, Women and

Literature, and Gay and Lesbian Literature. I am a lesbian, a mother of three now grown-up children, and this year I turned 50. And still the difficulty: when do I know enough to act on the words I read and write? Who will I act with, what will the action be and mean, and who gets to say? And in my mind I hear the voice of Audre Lorde at the Feminist Book Fair in Montreal in 1987:

Each one of us has some power. That power is particular, it is specific.... Unless each one of us learns to recognize that power, and to use it in the service of what we say we believe in, then each individual woman is only making her power available to her enemies.... So the only way for us not to be used as instruments of oppression is to actively engage ourselves in the liberation struggles of women who are oppressed.³

The issue for me that April evening was my own sense of responsibility and harm when an evangelical meeting at my university was planned and promoted around the demonizing of gays, lesbians and bi-sexuals. A second issue is how to write about that demonstration that is true to the faces I respect. The decisions at the demonstration had to be those we could live with for a long time, for we would have to. I understand those decisions in the context of local history and contradictory theories about identity and language. For example, considering the meaning of lesbian, I could address discussions of contradictory terms and the fluidity of identity, but I could also address

the frightening stability of discrimination even when the social conditions that produce it seem to change. Judith Butler's problematizing of lesbian addresses how such terms of identity can work to exclude and to police us, yet, as Terry Castle points out, "we live in a world in which the word lesbian still makes sense" (14).⁴

I think it probable that both of these very different theoretical approaches were present in the demonstration: we recognized and accepted ourselves and each other through labels that were themselves problematic. I use the term demonstration, then, to focus the embodied presentation of selves and community as well as to distinguish the political activity inside the building from the organized protest outside.

Maybe because I am a poet, when I began thinking about this paper I started with the metaphor on the protest posters inviting the public to "come out and blow the whistle on Larson." In my literary work, I have found that metaphoric language is usually grounded in particulars, which it evokes even (and maybe especially) when they are disclaimed, forgotten or not understood. In this way, the metaphor imports context, communicating in quite literal ways a suggestion of particularity. We were being invited literally to blow whistles, a non-violent self-defense strategy used by gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers, and women: those whose social/sexualized identities make them targets for violence. But we were also being invited metaphorically to inform, sing, expose a scandal, signal an infraction. I began an earlier version of this paper, titled the Politics of Reading Metaphor, with a modest, though evasive, goal: how were those assembled at the protest able to read that

message and act on it. How does the figurative speech both evoke and disclaim the literal? My conclusion some sixteen months after that April evening in 1995 is that temporarily, the coalition of that evening's demonstration achieved a political coherence because so many of us did understand immediate and figurative levels of meaning in language and because we had worked together before and had many various reasons to trust and protect one another. Certainly, we knew the difference between the language that damned and objectified us and that which spoke to our sense of selves--our bodies and our communities.

For many there who refused to hate or be hated, the demonstration combined principle and courage with wit, humour and sometimes joy. Whether the University would repeat such a rental arrangement is not the only way to assess the worth of the demonstration. Far more significant are the specific experiences that many now carry in our memories of the night we stood up for ourselves.

On April 21, 1995, we were going to celebrate my daughter's 17th birthday after the protest at 7:00, which I thought would last about an hour. But things were not quite as I expected. The crowd at the protest was bigger and more various, brought together by the Student Association "Stop the Hate" Hotline and posters. There were students from the Gay/Lesbian/Bi Collective, the Student Christian Movement, Women's Studies, the Women's Centre, as well as students and non-university people from anti-racist groups, the United Church, and the gay/lesbian/bi/anti-homophobic community, many of whom had been active during the lobby for the Human Rights Act in 1987 that

prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation. Several people spoke and the whistles shrilled. The Association provided 200; I had brought my own. Groups carried placards reading:

Hate is Not a Family Value.
Faggots Sissies. Queers and
Dykes Unite Against AntiGay
Bob. Keep Abortion Safe and
Legal. Hitler Claimed He
Only Wanted To Make a
Better Race Too. Love Thy
Neighbour Bob! Every 10th
Messiah Is a Queer, and
Being Gay Is Not a
Problem--Hate and Ignorance
Is.⁵

The mood was a combination of gravity, gaiety and anxiety.

Though we expected to remain outside, as Larson's audience arrived, many of us decided to attend what we could not stop; we moved beyond what had been planned and began inventing. Whistles mixed with music from a local revival band. When they played "Amazing Grace," audience and protesters sang along, performance artist Shawna Dempsey began waltzing in the aisles with another woman, and students did a gay cancan on stage. The ironic poetry of the demonstration had begun--with a foregrounding of language, labels, and embodied communication.

The protest organized outside to persuade others was transformed inside into a demonstration of ourselves, a making visible of our different ways of thinking and being. Often the visual images were ironic parodies of stereotypes. Some demonstrators played out and played up the distances between ourselves

and homophobic representations; many spent the next four hours in conversations about the meanings of what was happening with Larson's audience. There was no admission charge, and the 6-700 people in his audience ranged from the curious to the committed, Christian to Klan.

As my daughter, her friend, my partner and I sat with my colleague and his partner, watching the high energy of young people refusing to be hated, we realized that we were letting them do the work of being visible for the all of us, and we joined them on stage. I felt glad and dignified to stand there in solidarity, but I was also frightened. There were close to a thousand people there. Above me, behind the officials' windows, were administrators, security people, and police. The racket was tremendous. No one could speak above the whistles, so no voice was heard above the others; much communication relied on eye contact and body language. Groups created impromptu strategies, drawing on our knowledge of each other from the last ten years of anti-homophobic organizing in Winnipeg: annual Pride Days, Stonewall Socials, a coalition lobby for inclusion of sexual orientation in the Human Rights Code, discussion groups, billboard projects with Anti-Homophobia phone lines, film and theatre festivals, and community newspapers.

If Larson had wanted to speak any time in the first hour or so, I think he could have. In the time he let go by, however, circumstances changed. What was happening, as Jim Heber recalls, was "confronting homophobia face to face," and what developed that evening were meanings that were mocked, enacted and interpreted by the participants. The entire evening the Lesbian Avengers displayed their

defiantly bantering banner--"We recruit!"--mimicking the old homophobic accusation that lesbians and gays recruit. The mockery is double edged, for ironically, the reality is that heterosexuality is everywhere recruited, as Sheila Jeffreys has noted.⁶ And of course, we do recruit--that is, organize--for communities are built by working together to establish common grounds, however partial the similarities are that are honoured.

Reclaiming terms politically involves a highly conscious practice that acknowledges the lack of fit between the term and the person or group named. While gay liberation has challenged denigration by using the terms proudly or ironically, many lesbian, gay, bi people still retreat into namelessness -- invisibility, a "choice" that is enforced by discrimination and harassment. The phrase "coming out of the closet" means more than coming to consciousness of one's homosexuality, it is a metaphor for coming into the community of speech in which you are othered; "coming out" involves a coming into terms that are shaped by homophobia.

The dangers of self-hatred and of being targeted for discrimination and violence are increased when a university appears to endorse the homophobia. Larson's message is that there is no community in which a person coming out can be accepted; homosexuality is "the devil as he appears in culture," evil personified.⁷ Although many of the University administrators would not see themselves as homophobic, their decisions provided support for his views. However different their contexts and politics both Larson and the University had planned to make money that night through taking a collection and through rent. He was interested in demonizing; the University was

disinterested in homophobia. We demonstrated not just what, but who, is at stake in this collusion.

The experience of the coalition was remarkable. Many of the individuals and groups attending the protest recognized the connections among various forms of hatred; only some of them were lesbians or gays or even had anti-homophobic work as their primary consideration. The contributions of students, Christian social activists, skinhead anti-racists, concerned citizens, and the families and friends of lesbians, bi-sexuals and gays surprised many of the demonstrators who no longer look for support from the heterosexual population. That coalition solidarity denaturalizes the binary of homo\hetero which homophobia enforces. The protest was against socially created conditions; the tactic was to demonstrate which people these conditions offend: heterosexuals as well as lesbians, bi-sexuals and gays. Homophobic hatred offends all of us.

The presence of families--our parents, partners, chosen families, children, sisters and brothers, neighbours and friends -- demonstrated that we have families we care about and who care about us as well as social injustice. My daughter explained that she was there for herself: "I'm a member of the gay community, not by choice or by action, but by family."⁸ This was her University too. "I don't like stopping people from speaking, but I felt I had to for the sake of the community (not just the gay and lesbian community, but Winnipeg in general), for the sake of the University, for the sake of my 17th birthday. For my sake." Having Emily there meant for me that I was there for myself--a lesbian, a feminist, an academic--but also a mother, responsible to

the next generation for the problems we were passing on to them. The coalition work was within as well as among persons and groups.

Conversations addressed commonalities and contradictions. Two young people asked my daughter and her friend why they hated Christians. Emily explained that the protest was not against Christians, but homophobia; that the message that homosexuals are possessed is hatred; and that many of the protesters were themselves Christians. They spoke with people their age as did Hildie Heber, Jim's mother, who reminded some women of what they both had lived through: "You must remember what happened in World War II. We don't want that happening here."⁹

We demonstrated that homosexuality does not have to break up families, for the decision to support a lesbian, gay or bi family member (or be supported by them) is well within the power of the family. The various groups and families were themselves a demonstration to us of our differences and our ability to work together. That evening, coalition was not a theory or a strategy, but a demonstration of our interconnected realities. What a wonderful surprise.

Responses to the event are critical. While those I have spoken with all express some ambivalence, each of the protesters also expressed pride in their community and a conviction that organized hatred cannot go unchallenged, even if we have not found the ideal way. For many, the experience of stopping evangelical demonizing of homosexuality, even for one evening and on one campus, meant that there is hope that it can be stopped.

Many of Larson's audience did not

support his views, and conversations further blurred the "us" and "them" lines during the evening. But there were less benevolent presences too. A group of Anti-Racist skinheads charged through the bleachers to surround and harass local Klan organizer William J. Marcus, later described in a Neo-Nazi group poster as "a brave and stoic Euro-Nationalist." He left.

Then something interesting happened to me. While rows of people sat with closed eyes chanting, "Je-sus, Je-sus," a group of chanting young men tried to clear the stage. When one pushed against my back, I turned and told him to stop it. He resumed, but this time I turned, gave space, and then asked him if he wasn't worried that everyone would think he was gay, being on stage with us. He paused for a minute, opened his eyes, looked startled, and then laughed. He also stopped pushing and talked to his friends. A few minutes later, as he was leaving the stage, he tapped me on the shoulder, smiled, and waved goodbye.

The evening's political action raised difficult issues. In addition to the ethical concerns to respect free speech, particularly in a university, are the concerns to resist the exploitation and abuse of that freedom, particularly in a university, where such views could carry the expectation of some academic method or acceptance. While it was disappointing that a Larson could rent the university space and name, it was encouraging that police did not stop the demonstration. It may have been the best strategy for the University, for it also had to contend with media, the courts, and the diverse views of its own faculty.

The media served Larson well. If demonstrators had let him conduct his rally

that evening--naming us sinners, sodomites and satanists--would our silence have been interpreted in the press as responsible or just invisible? Perhaps because so many of the different voices in the demonstration were responsible, Larson's nonappearance, dressed in the garb of violated free speech, was given the attributes of reasonable discussion. Letter writers thought he had been invited to the University for an exchange of views; some assumed that he had planned some form of debate with equal time at the microphone.

The evening news announced a mob at the University of Winnipeg, though the footage showed laughing students in a chorus line on stage with the band. Cameras did catch the Klan organizer being identified by anti-racist skin heads, an image which, as Doug Arrell points out, at least has the benefit of publicly acknowledging some of the audience attracted to Larson.¹⁰ But TV also gave coverage to Bob Larson behind stage, who turned his decision not to speak into a spot on the evening news by announcing that he would sue the University for not enforcing his right to speak in the space he had rented.

The University of Winnipeg's subsequent media release clarified that they had rented the space for an assembly, that their primary concern was for the safety of those in attendance, and that the University remained committed to the ideals of freedom of thought and speech.

That they chose a middle line is clear from an article in the Winnipeg Free Press by Donald A. Bailey, Professor of History and President of the Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties. Pointing out the media attention that Larson got, Bailey wrote that MARL "now thinks we must comment on

what we would have preferred to ignore." Arguing that "the police or the authorities of the rented facility have an obligation to protect the speaker's right to speak," Bailey concludes that if Larson returns to Winnipeg, "the University has the first claim on the right and duty to offer him hospitality. We suspect Larson does not have sufficient respect for the freedom he claims for himself to share his platform or radio show, in an equitable and respectful way, with those who dissent with him. But that's his problem and his responsibility; ours is to treat him according to the process we value and defend for ourselves."¹¹

Confronting hate speech, hate literature, is a difficult ethical problem for many who see freedom of all and any speech as the necessary guarantee to our diversity in thought and expression. Yet, as Arrell argues, as a society we have recognized that some hatred is criminal; if we are going to define "hatred as a crime, let's make sure that it applies to everyone who is hated." Failure to recognize hatred against gays and lesbians when other forms of hatred are recognized is discriminatory.¹²

Many presenters at the June conference for the Association of Statutory Human Rights Commissions discussed the problem of media ameliorating hate speech by presenting it as free speech. When a Winnipeg CBC reporter talked about his frustration that protesters were playing into Larson's hand, he referred to Larson's audience and the protestors as two groups of people who hate each other. But political anger and confrontation are not the same as hatred, for they do not seek the elimination of other persons. In many cases, people that night from both groups created

peaceful alternatives to demonizing. Whistles did not replace speech so much as democratize it; without the microphones, people talked to each other.

Our demonstration was ahead of our explanations of what could and should happen when a Larson plans a rally at a university. MARL's preference that organized hatred wither away from lack of attention is understandable, but not realistic. Larson was bringing in an audience, in the name of the University who did not invite him, and on the backs of lesbians, bi-sexuals and gay men whose defamation he promised. We said No to homophobia, and we said it in person, accepting the risk and responsibility, acknowledging the conflicts and contradictions. The University was concerned that someone there that night would be hurt; we knew people had been hurt--shamed, knifed, beaten, raped and killed--by homophobia. We left that night in groups to protect ourselves.

Tolerance is not the only thing important in our society; our laws indicate the abuses we do not tolerate as do our Human Rights codes and our social behaviour. We do not tolerate theft of property, murder and slavery, we are no longer tolerant of rape and child sexual abuse, and we are learning not to tolerate racist, ethnic and religious hatreds. We will learn not to tolerate homophobic hatred too, if we realize it is happening and do not accept it, even enfolded in other values of religion and free speech.

ENDNOTES

1. Wentworth, Harold and Sturt Berg Glaxner. Dictionary of American Slang.

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- NY: Thomas Y. Crowell, Publishers. 46.
 2. "You will not want to miss this rally. I'm going to be taking on the devil's crowd and combatting the invasion of satanism and sodomy. You're going to hear about it all. It will be an evening unlike any you've ever attended before and you are going to have a chance to personally ask me the questions you've always wanted to ask me. So don't miss this. Come expecting the unexpected and don't miss it for anything."
 3. Audre Lorde, "Audre Lorde at the International Feminist Book Fair in Montreal," the Womanist. September 1988: 4-5.
 4. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in Diana Fuss. ed., Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories. New York: Routledge, 1991; 13-31. Terry Castle, The Appartitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993; 14.
 5. Interview with Shannon Slater, December 29, 1995.
 6. Sheila Jeffreys, Feminist Book Fair, Montreal, June 1987.
 7. Bob Larson, radio broadcast in Winnipeg, April 1996.
 8. Interview with Emily Warne, January 6, 1995.
 9. Conversation with Hildie Heber, February 22, 1996.
 10. Interview with Doug Arrell, January 5, 1996.
 11. Donald A. Bailey, "Reject the Message, But Respect Messenger," Winnipeg Free Press. May 10, 1995; A9.
 12. Interview with Doug Arrell, January 5, 1996.