Animal Acts

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As the Globe Warms is a serial performance piece that unfolded live in half-hour episodes over thirty-four weeks in 2010–11. Each performance was simultaneously webcast, multiplying the spaces of “the live.” The first twenty-four episodes were staged at Echo Curio, a performance space in Los Angeles’s Echo Park neighborhood; most of the final ten performances took place at the Bootleg Theatre, with one special show at WordSpace, also in Los Angeles. Heather Woodbury—the spinning talent who devised and performed this multicharacter, one-woman show—went on to curate an online serial from recordings of the live performances, releasing them in weekly installments over forty-eight weeks. She has also compressed the seventeen plus hours of the piece into a twelve-hour epic, performed in two-hour installments over six nights. It premiered at The Vortex in Austin, Texas, in October 2012.

Woodbury’s “Globe” is not any one place; it is not a sealed universe. Instead, she represents a buzzing pluriverse of characters who traverse religious and secular spaces to bump up offline and on. On the website she created for As the Globe Warms, Woodbury refers to the live performances as “first drafts,” a characterization that underscores both the improvisatory feel of the piece or, better, pieces and the doubled context of their live and relived performances. This is not to say that Woodbury’s As the Globe Warms is not tightly scripted. In fact, she worked intensely each week to write and memorize that week’s segment—a labor of great effort and virtuosity. Given the impossibility of memorizing everything in so compressed a time, however, Woodbury also relied on what she terms “improv embroidery”—improvised physical gestures as well as verbal flourishes—to stitch character to
written script in the moment of live performance. Is this performance as a kind of inspired speaking in tongues?

If so, this makes the Sunset Boulevard location of Woodbury’s performances at Echo Curio all the more apt: it is located a mere half mile from the Angelus Temple, the five-thousand-seat church founded, in 1923, by another woman who sure knew how to put on a show, evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. As historian Matthew Avery Sutton neatly summarizes, McPherson—Sister Aimee to her thousands of followers and fans—brilliantly “integrated show business pizzazz with a tongues-speaking, holy-rolling faith,” mixing old media and new to bring the Gospel to life. Her illustrated sermons were a hot ticket in Los Angeles, drawing in the faithful and the curious. The dramatized Bible stories combined scriptural passages and interpretation with sound effects, elaborate sets, skits, live animals, and costumes. In one well-known sermon, she dressed the part of Little Bo Peep. In another, she brought a live camel on stage to illustrate the Gospel passage from Matthew, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24). McPherson also embraced the relatively new technology of radio for its capacity to break down boundaries of space and “convert the world by radio,” as she famously enthused in the pages of her monthly magazine *Bridal Call.*

The first woman to be granted a license by the Federal Communications Commission, McPherson launched her own Christian radio station in 1924. Shortly before her death, she had applied for a license for another emerging medium: television. With her canny use of media, a publicist, and her carefully cultivated good looks, the thrice-married McPherson helped make Pentecostalism not just mainstream but even Hollywood sexy.

Two decades before McPherson’s Angelus Temple became arguably the first megachurch in the United States, Los Angeles had already shown itself to be fertile territory for Pentecostalism. Travel another two miles or so from the Echo Curio performance space, and you will reach 312 Azusa Street, in what is now LA’s Little Tokyo. A century ago, it was a birthplace of the modern Pentecostal movement. There, in an abandoned Methodist church, the charismatic African American preacher William J. Seymour spearheaded a vibrant interracial and cross-class ministry that drew spiritual seekers from around the country eager to experience for themselves the “‘Pentecostal fire’ [that] fell on Los Angeles in April 1906.” The “fire” took ecstatically embodied forms: hands lifted high in prayer, rhythmic swaying, jumping movements, and, above all, speaking in tongues. To nonbelievers, the scenes taking place on Azusa Street strained credulity—and abandoned all decorum. In an April 18, 1906, front-page story entitled “Weird Babel of Tongues” and
subtitled “New Sect of Fanatics Is Breaking Loose,” the Los Angeles Times breathlessly reported how devotees were “breathing strange utterances and mouthing a creed which it would seem no sane mortal could understand.”

The Times seemed as troubled by the “wild scene” of African Americans worshipping side by side with whites as by the worship practices themselves.

The Protestant establishment was not exactly thrilled either. The Azusa Street revival broke form, theologically and ritually, with mainline Protestantism by giving life, in an embodied here and now of everyday worship and modern-day miracles, to the New Testament Book of Acts, when the apostles received the gift of tongues:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1–4)

For modern-day Pentecostals, the gifts of “various kinds of tongues” and “the interpretation of tongues” enumerated in 1 Corinthians (12:10) are not confined to the past but are available to contemporary Christians as biblically founded evidence of their baptism with the Holy Spirit. The theological claims and embodied experiences that fired the worshippers on Azusa Street and later inspired the thousands who came to hear and see “Sister Aimee” are now a global Pentecostal movement, comprising one-quarter of Christians worldwide.

Speaking in tongues is the key plot point, the deus ex lingua, so to speak, of Woodbury’s As the Globe Warms. During a regular Sunday service at the multiracial Pathways of Christ Pentecostal Church, where her father is the pastor, teenager Lorelei Jennifer Ray is filled with the Spirit and called forth to testify. In contrast to the other congregants who are seized by the Spirit and speak in tongues, however, Lorelei’s own testimony does not take the form of tongue-speaking; instead she receives the gift of interpretation, the ability to translate the unknown tongues of those who spoke before her. (There is even an SAT-ready, Hellenized term for this: “ermeneglossia.”) And so, after Connie Rodriguez and Brett Morrissey each sing-speak a symphony of syllables and wordlike sounds at the periphery of recognizable human language, almost but not quite speech, Lorelei tells her increasingly bewitched father that she is hearing voices: “a translation in American English words,” she says. “It’s—the Lord is translating to me.” Lorelei even seems to
share her father’s bewilderment, especially after the overload of a third unknown tongue to translate, Old-Timer Mike’s. But called by the Lord she is, and she duly translates.

Her translation involves a transpeciation—what I am calling “zooglossia” (from the Greek zoion for animal + glossa for tongue)—as the human Lorelei takes on the physical gestures and approximated sounds of a high-pitched bat. The stage directions call for Woodbury to speak in a lisping baby voice, the kind people often use when talking to pet animals. Here, the animals are talking back, and we—the “we” of Woodbury’s characters as well as the “we” of Woodbury’s live and online audiences—are called urgently to attend:


“Bat” dies. LORELEI tilts her head to one side and closes her eyes.

“Bat” dies. In quick succession in the first excerpt printed in this volume, Lorelei speaks as a bat, a bee, and a frog. These next transpeciations do not end well either. The stage directions simply note: (“Bee” dies.).

This is epitaph as epiphany. The biblical truth of Pentecost is revived—in order to tell us a story of planetary life on the brink of extinction. Christianity’s concern with eternal life and death is repurposed for Woodbury’s presumptively secular audience to illuminate the toll of human arrogance in the world. Not for nothing does the fictional world of Lorelei Ray, her family, and friends unfold in Vane Springs, Nevada. Vane: a punning and witty critique of human vanity and self-absorption. Hope may spring eternal, but the wellsprings of human vanity have unleashed global warming, species extinction, the ongoing defilement of the world we humans share with other creatures.

Lorelei’s testimony is immediately subject to multiple interpretations. Is it the Lord speaking through her or the devil? Or is there a more mundane explanation: a seizure? (Her stepmother, Pam, takes no chances; Lorelei
ends up on Lexapro.) When video of Lorelei’s episode goes viral on YouTube, debate over the meaning and veracity of her possession by—well, by what or whom exactly?—the Spirit, animal spirits, grows exponentially. She becomes the subject of a discussion fold on a Christian website, or, as Woodbury’s Christian teens pronounce for emphasis, “Christ dot teen dot net.” Fellow Christians quickly begin uploading their own videos and marking them for Lorelei (“flocking” is Woodbury’s colorful term), in hopes she will interpret the tongue-speak of their nearest and dearest. “Keen you translate that? Keen you translate that?”

The attention is not all celebratory. A posse of “mean tweens,” led by the angry Melody Johnson, takes to the Internet to make fun of Lorelei, her “re-tarded church,” and her “Christian freak friends.” In the excerpts published here, our sympathies are with Lorelei, not Melody—although in the larger arc of As the Globe Warms, we will warm to Melody, too, a bright teenager who lives in a trailer park with her recovering meth-addict mother, her family just barely getting by. Melody has lashed out at Lorelei in an attempt to take the edge off her own desperate circumstances.

Throughout As the Globe Warms, the sympathetic hearing the character Lorelei Ray demands for nonhuman animals is thus mirrored in the sympathetic portrait the performer Heather Woodbury offers of individuals and communities (such as Pentecostals or the working poor) who, when they do enter the dominant secular field of vision, too often do so for either exotic color or easy laughs. Certainly, I suspect that Pentecostal Christians initially seem like members of another species to Woodbury’s audiences in LA’s hipster performance scene or her web subscribers. At a time when antigay bullying has been much in the news, with an entire online project—the “It Gets Better” campaign—dedicated to helping LGBTQ youth, there is something bold about the inversion Woodbury offers. It is the “fat Christian freak”—dare I say: the religiously queer teen—who is cyberbullied. Here, I see Woodbury slyly and importantly undercutting the cultural mapping “secular” is to progressive as “religious” is to backward. Look and listen closely enough, and the world does not really sort out so easily.

There is also something delightfully meta about the frequent invocation of YouTube videos, chat rooms, and virtual communities throughout As the Globe Warms. Think again of the online life of Woodbury’s performances. If the live performances at Echo Curio, Bootleg, and WordSpace were only “first drafts,” where does the final version, the really real, take form? But, perhaps a final version is less the point than the ongoing creative meetings between Woodbury and her multiplied and multi-platform audiences. At
As the Globe Warms, not just a means of communicating across distance and beyond the boundary lines of supposedly fixed communities and identities but also a metaphor for the possibility of a truly worldwide web linking human and nonhuman.

“Whoo yes.”

NOTES

*I am grateful to Jill Casid for her careful reading of an earlier version of this essay.


2. Personal communication with Heather Woodbury (June 2013).


8. For an online excerpt of this 1906 cover story and reproduction of the newspaper’s front page, go to http://312azusastreet.org/extra/latimes.htm (accessed July 1, 2012).

9. There are many different ways of telling the origin tale of modern Pentecostalism. Although Azusa Street remains the dominant organizing story in the United States, in fact Pentecostalism was international and decentered from the start, with contemporaneous Pentecostal and Pentecostal-like revival movements happening in India, Wales, Korea, and Chile at the same time as the Azusa Street revival. See Allan Anderson, An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Edith Blumhofer’s short essay “Azusa Street Revival,” The Christian Century 123.5 (March 7, 2006), 20–22.
The Others, live performance.
Photo by Basia.