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'God's law indeed is there to protect you from yourself': The Christian personal testimonial as narrative and moral schemata to the US political apology

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the deployment of semiotic devices in several mass-mediated public apologies by US politicians and the reflexive awareness of apology as commodity in national political contexts. Beyond acts of contrition and deliverance from the clutches of sin, apology events are extremely dialogical, salient modes of sociality that reach across, arbitrate, and bond multiple publics. The paper examines how speakers toggle between particular chronotopes—of time, place, and personhood—to both shape and reflect particular presentation and participation frameworks. Of certain interest is how the Protestant testimonial informs the apology, makes way for, even necessitates future transgression as it shifts proximity between the sin of the Lost and the testimony of the Found, reinstating membership in and reinforcing a moral public.

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What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people.

*'On truth and lie in an extra-moral sense.'*¹

1. Introduction

How did the Harvard Law School graduate-turned-crusading New York governor plunge to Client No. 9, suffer as disgraced tabloid punching bag but then suddenly amount to a viable cable news candidate? Lanny Davis, political pundit and former special counsel to President Clinton asks this question about New York Governor Eliot Spitzer and his rise from the fall of an extra-marital affair to host his own talk show on CNN: According to Davis, simply put 'this is about someone who's willing to bounce back. It's part of an American narrative that goes all the way back in history. We love Horatio Alger. We love forgiving' (Gillette and Pillifant, *The New York Observer*. 22 June 2010).

This article examines mass-mediated American political apology performances by current prominent US politicians—who, in their case, committed extra-marital affairs. The political apology performance, I suggest, presupposes across the mass-mediated 'cultural chronotope' of cable tv, radio, and internet a doxic acquaintance to the Christian doctrine of Original sin and the performed Protestant Christian personal testimonial (Agha, 2007). With this link in mind, this article

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¹ See Nietzsche (1977). "On truth and lie in an extra-moral sense," *The Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 46, 47, Walter Kaufmann translation. New York: Penguin Press.

seeks to show how patterned structures and styles conveyed in the political apology performance tap into a national narrative of the Protestant Christian personal testimony, in particular the evangelical televised confession that moves its speaker to a higher place after some fall from grace.

The article compares and contrasts the semiotic framings and discursive strategies of mass-mediated apologies by David Vitter (R) of Louisiana, Larry Craig (R) of Idaho, John Edwards (D) of South Carolina, President William Jefferson Clinton (D), Mark Sanford (D) of South Carolina, Eliot Spitzer (D) of New York, and John Ensign (R) of Nevada. While in office, these men were accused of having secret extra-marital affairs with a fellow employee, an intern, a family friend, a prostitute, a foot in an adjacent bathroom stall. All apologized in front of national television or at the very least their written and/or spoken apologies were reported and discussed in front of a presumed national audience. To exhibit the narrative structure and style of the televangelist Christian personal testimonial in these political apologies, the article makes reference to the past apologies of two televangelists, Jimmy Swaggart and Ted Haggard, both of whom confessed and repented on mass-mediated national television for their extramarital affairs.

The focus in linguistic anthropology on political oratory has ranged generally from a concern with the structure of the performance itself (Bloch, 1975; Ochs, 1975; Parkin, 1984), to the presupposing role of contexts—spatial and temporal—or what may be created spatio-temporally when someone speaks (Bate, 2009; Hirschkind, 2006), to the interdiscursivity of oratory as material and political practice mediating social relations, power, and authority (Brenneis and Myers, 1984; Jackson, 2008, 2009; Kuipers, 1990; Rosaldo, 1984). Following the political and moral economy of performance, oratory also has been examined for its productive service as a form of ideological and practical persuasion in both egalitarian and hierarchical societies (Bate, n.d., 2009, 2010; Brenneis and Myers, 1984; Duranti, 1994; Jackson, 2008, 2009; Hill, 2000; Hill and Irvine, 1993; Keating 1998; Kroskrity, 2008; Kuipers, 1990; Ochs, 1975; Rosaldo, 1984). This work builds from these latter traditions as it examines oratory as a mode of both sociality and representation, an object of ideology. From this point of view, we come to find clarification on the material and indexical links between micro-practices of oratory performance and the reproduction of larger macro-social orders. In this case, these larger implications for everyday practices of apology are productive of reduced, homogenous moral imaginaries discretely informing whole political systems and their constituents, in this case *under God* (Bate, n.d.).

To contribute to these pursuits, this article applies Asif Agha's cultural adaption of the Bakhtinian chronotope (2007) and my own past work looking at register shifts in political oratory as examples of chronotopic portability productive of a multiplicity of publics (2008) to engage with the ways in which certain public linguistic practices such as political oratory and punditry motivate multiple and shifting participation and presentation frameworks shaping publics within single communicative events. In particular, it is a contribution to the larger query in the anthropology of the state of not *who* rules but how rule is accomplished (Corrigan, 1990). In all, the project looks to how rule is sought and secured through the existential-pragmatic enterprise of the mass-mediated apology that is shared and presupposes others who are able to concur, correct, object, or redirect the meaning of what is being said' (Duranti, 2009, p. 246).

Building from the Bakhtinian notion of chronotopes (1981); Goffman's studies in social interaction (1981, 1984) and Agha's organization of selves and participation frameworks (2007) these may be described as (1) scaling and calibrating **different versions of the self** through allusions and **alignments with other people**; (2) reconfiguring **the unfolding of events in time**; and, (3) **scaling down spatial contexts** to localize an otherwise anonymous national mass-mediated public. Agha refers to this process as framed within cultural chronotopes made up of presentation and participation frameworks in place and time with multiple subjectivities to which social interactants orient (Agha, 2007, p. 320). Mass-mediated space-time connects the contexts of otherwise 'geographically dispersed audiences by semiotically unifying their orientation to a common television message', continual representations and multiple iterations of persons, places, and times (Agha, 2007, p. 322).

In each of these cases, American politicians and their minister counterparts climb the Hester Pryn scaffolding of the televised press conference and utter their apologies to a public that spans from the broadly-drawn national rhetor-multitude to the specific audiences of their states and congregations. In this setting of the televised/publicized and then *talked about* apology event, these men perform an act that must do the work of saving face while also easing social relations. They do this by exhibiting contrition, inviting forgiveness, and engineering a future impression. However, these semantico-referential aspects (the Austinian 'I am sorry', for example) are necessary but not sufficient for explaining what is happening, what is being transformed by the event itself. Rather, mass-mediated apologies are discursive events in which categories of personhood, time, and place are embedded in a multiplicity of preceding and anticipated discourses, commitments, acquaintances and allegiances, even hatreds.

Multiple instantiations of the self, conjurings of multiple temporal periods and space within a single mass-mediated event have the immediate consequence of separating the public apologizer from the time/place/person of the private Sinner and his past transgression, and joining his redeemed here-now-self to the membership of the public Saved. As the rhetorical incarnation of the Everyman's struggle toward strength and conviction, one shifts proximity between the sin of the Lost and the testimony of the Found, reinstating his membership in and reinforcing a moral public, while also legitimizing one's social and political authority. As interdiscursive and multiply-mediated social interaction, the perlocutionary productions of these apology events by major American political leaders scale much broader than individual face and socio-political relations. Rather than isolate, paradoxically, the journey of this self-made Everyman from Lost to Found serves a national ethos to reinforce a particular ideology of the morally righteous and fortifies its manifestation in politics. The now mass-mediated narrative 'triggers abstract projections of a whole moral order of which that incarnation is part and instantiates an entire

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