Raging Against Rage: Telling Tales of Taboo, Molestation, and Anger

Ragan Fox

The recent media attention given to the Catholic Church child sex abuse scandals indicates that US culture is on the verge of challenging the taboo associated with talking about molestation. Media depictions of child abuse, however, frequently implicate gay men in their recounting of child abuse. This performance uses fictive monologues as a method of inquiry to explore alternate expressions and representations of gay masculinities, while simultaneously calling into question authoethographic accounts of homosexual mating rituals.

Keywords: Child Abuse; Child Molestation; GLBTQ; Solo Performance; Staged Narrative

Nervously pacing behind the curtain, I overhear a young woman wax pessimistic about the title of my show. “Kid: A Gut-wrenchingly Hilarious Look at Child Molestation? I don’t know if I’m ready for this,” she tells a friend. I cannot help but share in her sentiment. Are any of us prepared for the words that will soon drip from my trembling lips? I clip on my tacky dime store earrings and brush the wig’s blonde forelock from my eyes. Without warning, the Wonder Woman theme song ricochets off the four walls of the black box theater that I am about to perform in. My heart is fluttering like a mad bird trapped in a shoebox with no breathing holes; I take the stage and hope that I will not trip over any of the black set pieces that adorn the dimly lit performance area. I carefully sit on a stool; the blinding lights expose my pink jumpsuit bejeweled with heart-shaped, faux-gems that project tiny beams of light, like a Jewish disco ball. Barbara’s distinctly Floridian, Yiddish accent escapes from my larynx:

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Hello, my name is Barbara Goldstein. I’m here today, because I am very angry with my daughter, Cheri Goldstein. It all began when I wrote this book. Actually, it’s a three hundred and forty-one page personal memoir with five additional sheets for family recipes and such. Don’t get me started on the years I spent collecting photos, documenting stories, and schlepping to and from the Kinko copy to see my dream realized. Never mind, the thousands of dollars I invested to make sure that all of my family and fifty-three of my closest friends received a copy of this book. Well, a few weeks after I send everyone the memoir, I get a call from my daughter, Cheri Goldstein. Cheri is screaming and yelling at me on the phone, “Mother, how could you? How could you?” Cheri was upset by the dedication section of my book. I dedicated the book to her daughter, my granddaughter, Robyn. I’ll read the dedication to you now, and you tell me what you think:

Dear Robyn,

I just thought you should know that when your mother, Cheri Goldstein, was pregnant with you, she wanted to have an abortion. Her friend Rhonda who always brings you gifts on the holidays told her to go ahead and do it. “Abort, abort,” she said to Cheri. I just thought you should know that at one point your mother wanted to kill you, and I saved your life. This book is dedicated to you, the grandchild I almost never had, Robyn Goldstein.

Love Always,

Grandma Barbara

Barbara came to me while I was reflecting on my ethnic heritage. I wanted to explore the proverbial Jewish guilt trip that has strangely become hyperbolic in our politically correct era. Barbara is the quintessential Jewish mother, well intended but eclipsed by rage. Both in and out of character, we take a sip from our bottled water and she continues at a fevered pitch:

Cheri was very difficult growing up. The problems only got worse when I remarried. Dick, my late husband, may his soul rest, had the most fitting name on the planet Earth. Dick and Cheri were always at odds, and Cheri would do the strangest things to protest his authority. My daughter, Cheri Goldstein, used to go number “one” and “two” on the carpet and newly upholstered furniture whenever Dick tried to discipline her. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to clean feces out of a shag carpet? Sure, my friends were doing fabulous things with their husbands on the weekends, going to see Joan Rivers, Rita Marenco, and Dean Martin, while I was stuck at home cleaning shit from my middle finger.

By the time Cheri turned sixteen, I was ready to let her go. I will never forget the night she came in three hours past her curfew, and I was waiting up for her in the kitchen. When she came traipsing through the door at three in the morning, I picked up a carrot, pointed at her, and calmly asked, “Cheri Goldstein, where have you been?”

“Mom,” she tells me. “I’ve just been out with some of my friends. What’s the big deal?”

I say to her, “The big deal, young lady, is that your father and I have been worried sick! Do you know where my left foot is? It’s in a grave, and you are the mortician, Cheri! You are the mortician! Dick and I have been going crazy all night!”

Then she has the nerve to tell me that Dick is not her father, and if he’s so worried about her, “Why is he upstairs fast asleep?” So, I says to her, “How dare you question all that Dick has done for you. Your scumbag of a father walked out
on us, and Dick is the man you should thank God to for putting a roof over your head and food in your mouth.’’

Then she says to me, “Momma, Dick has been molesting me for years.”

It was like a knife through my heart. Not only was she willing to make up a lie like that to get out of trouble, but she implicated my husband, the only father she ever knew, just to hurt me. So, I slapped her. I slapped her so hard that I thought her face was going to fall off. I wanted it to fall off. I never wanted to see her again.

“Go up to your room, pack your things, and get out of my house!”

The theater is filled with a silence thicker than tar as audience members glare up at the postmodern Frankenstein that I have stitched together with thrift store clothing and glue gun epoxy. Will they see their own collective cultural reflection in this discourse of denial?

I can sense my audience’s discomfort as Barbara refuses to acknowledge the abuse of her daughter. The witnesses begin to grimace, shift around uncomfortably in their cheap foldout chairs, and stare angrily at this make-believe woman with all the rage and determination that a lioness protects her cubs. If Thomas Sheridan is correct in assuming that the sole universal language is emotion (883), perhaps the audience will leave the theater questioning their own complicity in the “talking about molestation” taboo. “I would never react like her if my child revealed to me that she was being sexually abused,” I can imagine an audience member saying in her car on her way home from the production.

* * *

My mother’s glowing face is notably absent in the crowd of students, colleagues, strangers, and friends. This is the first performance I have ever conducted in which she has not been invited.

Sweat pours down the topography of my skinny and bare frame; the salty fluid desperately searches for a flat surface in which to lay still and evaporate. I remove the awful pink pants and slip into a pair of jeans and a bright yellow shirt with shiny gold letters that read “U.S.A.” on its center. I slowly walk to the center of the stage and take a quick gulp from the Evian bottle that is placed next to a black box that will soon give me a place to sit. After a few moments in contemplative silence, I pull a breath from my diaphragm and speak as myself:

My mother is the Queen of Tampons. She has the super-mutant power to turn a Kotex into anything. I’m fairly certain that she’s years past menopause, but she keeps the tampons around for arts and crafts when she gets bored. It’s easy to deal with her uncanny talents today, but the story was much different growing up. Fall off my bike and cut my knee? Mom thinks a tampon with some duct tape is much more efficient and healthy than one of those antiquated Band-Aids. My friend spills milk on her brand new rug? Nothing can sop up a milk stain like one of her unused, extra-absorbent feminine napkins! Growing up, mom’s back supply of tampons became props for the war games my friends and I would play. Whenever we pulled the string and threw it toward our enemy, we’d imagine a big explosion would ensue. Incidentally, my mother’s backyard was covered in cotty feminine products. It was like Christmas year-round, only it smelled like a summer’s morning.
The burn of the lights become less harsh, the audience chuckles, and my clothing becomes less saturated. Navigating my way from one taboo to the next, I press on:

When I told my father and my stepmother, Joyce, “I’m gay,” they began to strategically place Georgia O’Keeffe paintings all over our house. They were actually cheaply framed Georgia O’Keeffe prints purchased from the Hobby Lobby that had words stenciled under them like “courage” and “determination.” The O’Keeffe prints began to cover the four walls of our dining room. I suspect my father was trying out some strange Pavlovian experiment on me, hoping the next time I came into contact with anything remotely resembling a vagina, I’d begin to whimper and drool like a hungry dog expecting his bowl of Puppy Chow when the crazy scientist rings the bell. I never ended up drooling over vaginas. I did, however, develop a hankering for bagels with lox whenever I came across a misplaced issue of *Hustler*.

I attribute my mother’s unabashed acceptance of my sexuality to my older brother, Randy. Randy is also a homosexual, but he uses his powers for evil. I’m afraid to talk back to Randy because I suspect he has powerful ties to the Gay Mafia. For those of you who don’t know, the Gay Mafia is an elite group of rich old women who live in River Oaks, the nicest area of Houston. They’re called the Gay Mafia because they financially sustain all the powerful gay interior designers in town. These gay designers are like the old women’s hit men, and my brother is well-versed in punching holes in fabric. I suppose I should thank him for making sexuality easy for me. I had little choice in the matter, like evolution.

Evolution is silent, as silent as a dog whistle. Why are we inclined to conflate silence with peace? Silence screams, yells, and wails like a banshee’s warning. There is no sound more silent, loud, or resonant than the one that follows the statement, “Mom, Randy molested me.”

After I tell mom this, after silence screams loud and high enough to pierce a dog’s ears, after I calculate the utility of such a statement, I watch my mother’s ears bleed. Somebody must be saying something awful about her. I watch her bleed, and I wish I could mop up the mess. Evolution is happening in our kitchen, and nobody has a rag to soak up the blood.

I paint this performance portrait to demonstrate that the mythologized family unit we protect with turned-heads and ears that refuse to hear exists only in our cavernous minds. Some fathers let their hands slip south when they embrace their daughters and some brothers confuse bondage for bonding. America, with your talk of values and kinship, this is the family you have created.

My parents had me institutionalized the day after my thirteenth birthday for sneaking out of the house every weekend and smoking pot, which would have been fine but it wasn’t even good pot! Robyn, my therapist, the dominatrix of kiddy discipline, believed I had “issues” resulting from my abuse, and thought the Charter summer camp for psychos would set me back on track to mental wellness. Like Susana Kaysen, I was *Girl, Interrupted*.

There are things you do in the institution while the nurse is looking the other way, like feel, cry, and dig into the truth. At thirteen, doctors told me that I would not be released until I shared the stories of my abuse in graphic detail, and I believed them, because everywhere I turned there were kids rotting away like fruit. There were children who had spent more birthdays inside institutions than out of them. At thirteen years of age, I was forced to relive my trauma in specific terms. It wasn’t enough to speak generally. General descriptions wouldn’t pay for my ticket back home.
At age twenty-six, when I told my grandmother what Randy did to me, she told me that there were two sides to every story; but the truth is more than just the other half of the story. The truth is a straight jacket being tightened like a noose around your six-packed torso, so constrictive you don’t know if you can breathe, scratch an itch, or think straight. The truth is found written in cracks on the walls of an institution while an army of degrees pass judgment, take notes, and are given new things to fantasize about as they fuck their pristine wives. Randy, the truth is found burned on your palms, marked on your dick, will be studied by scientists in your saliva when you die, and they will find pieces of me there that shouldn’t be, like cocoons in the barrel of a sawed-off shotgun.

The lights slowly fade as I waveringly recite the last line of the monologue. “Maybe” from the soundtrack to *Annie* fills the room with its stomach-upsettingly sweet and innocent melody. Without the protection of our parents and loved ones, we are all orphans.

* * *

Debbie, one of the technical directors for the show, shines a flashlight down on my frantic body as I clumsily slip into a cherry halter-top and secure a black t-shirt on top of my head. This makeshift drag reminds me of my childhood; back in the days when wigs remained out-of-reach, I improvised with flowing lemon and black shirts that gave the appearance of matted hair if I cocked my eyes just right.

The theater is filled beyond capacity; the audience’s collective body heat accompanied by the incessant blaze of the stage lights transforms our gentrified production space into a simmering sauna. A bodiless voice rings from the theater’s speakers, “Our next guest is a ten year old girl who claims she’s had multiple sexual partners, drinks, and smokes pot. April, are you ready to come out?”

My middle fingers extend from clenched fists as I begin my rant from behind the immediate view of the audience:

Fuck you! Fuck you!

Cued by a Powerpoint slide, the witnesses boo and jeer like so many of the audience members on the *Jenny Jones* show.

My name’s April, and I’m ten years old. I’ve had sex with fourteen guys. Yeah, I take money for sexin’ ’em, and! Sure, I drink forties and smoke pot. Don’t hate! It feels good.

She rubs her boney ass on the laps of unsuspecting men in the front row. The audible disdain for April increases to an uncomfortable decibel. Educated by television talk shows, my spectators perform their roles with impressive and disapproving fervor. April charges on:

My mom’s a bitch. I slap and kick her. She likes it! When she tells me to go to school, I call her a bitch and a slut. She likes it! Yeah, my clothes are too tight, but I look sexy. Jealous? When I grow up, I want to be a stripper and a prostitute! I like the feel of a man in me, and I don’t use protection. Jealous?
I ball up into a fetal position, placing my hands over my ears to block out the increasing disapproval of the audience. Projected on a wall behind me, a PowerPoint slide explains that, “Child victims of sexual abuse act out in a provocative manner at a young age, dress in age-inappropriate attire, experiment with drugs and alcohol, and become preoccupied with sexual activity years before their peers” (American Psychological Association 3).

Silence. Although I have been anticipating this beautiful and ironic moment for months, I have sunk far too deep into April to fully appreciate what is happening around me. Drops of tears tango down my cheeks. I/she struggle(s) to pull my/herself together. Worlds are colliding. She must show her strength.

Sure, shit happened to me when I was little. Back when I was eight, my uncle did stuff to me. Now that I’m older, I’m so tough that I have four middle fingers on each hand. When I flip you off, I fuckin’ mean it. My moms put me on Jinny Jones, but she’s a bitch, a trick, and a slut. She knew what was going on. My mom smoked cigarettes and drank booze when she was pregnant with me, and I’m gonna’ do the same when I have a baby. When I was a kid, I had friends, but now I have pimps and five dollar Johns. Don’t hate the playa’; hate the game.

It all started when my Uncle Arnie moved in. Uncle Arnie used to like watching cartoons with me and everything was great until one day...

All the lights dim down like little stars on their last days of life. Slowly, a single blue light shines down on the unraveling ball of contradiction I have come to know as April. Averting eye contact with the predominantly male front row that sits less than a foot away from my grimacing face, I continue:

We were sitting down on the couch watching Animaniacs and Uncle Arnie started looking at me strange.

The theme song from Jaws echoes from the speakers. She sees him looking at her from the corner of her right eye. Do not let him catch you looking at him! Smile. Scoot over on the couch. Smile. Smile!

My choreographed hand dance gives me a way to escape from the painful séance. I separate from April. My hands rip open my skinny and razor-burned legs. I picture a shark fin racing through the audience. My hands try to protect special places that have been sullied by a brother’s/uncle’s love. The music hits its crescendo. Incapable of guarding treasures that have been removed, my fingers turn to fists as I beat my head.

Yeah, we did something. And? Jealous?

I told my best friend, Trisha, what happened to me, and she told the whole school. One day, while we were playing Double Dutch a bunch of boys started saying that I had sex with my uncle.

She stares out at the audience with eyes filled with a well of tears that run deeper than Atlantis. She screams “Help me!” without uttering a single word. Nobody from the audience comes to embrace her. When I was a kid, my confession was met with similar ambivalence.
Is it unfair of me to expect that the strangers sitting in front would dare rush to my assistance? After all, this would break the rules of the theater! Right, Mom? Right, Dad?

April blocks out the bullies by concentrating on the jump rope that bounces around before her. She hops into the liminal space, where one wrong move could thrash a child’s skin. Jump; one, two. Jump; one, two. Jump. . .

When I was a kid, I had pigtails and played hopscotch. When I was a kid, I didn’t know how to protect myself. When I was a kid, I didn’t know what people were doing to me. When I was a kid, I thought it felt good. When I was a kid, I played mud pie and now I can’t scrub the dirt from my skin.

Jump; one, two. Jump; one, two.

I tear the black shirt from my head. My fingernails dig into my chest as I rip off the tight red halter top. Jump; one, two. Jump; one, two.

Once again, I talk in the comfortable pitch of my own voice:

When I was a kid, I was a lot like the kids you see on TV these days. When I was a kid, I used to hop around like a little jumping bean, because I was filled with secrets made of hot air.

When the ropes move faster than your little legs, you learn to sit and take it. Blackout.

* * *

Damn these strappy platform heels! I can never find the extra hole that we had to nail into the faux snakeskin to make sure the drag show circus stilts will stay on my skinny ankles. The hole blends in with the scales! The tiny silver bar finally penetrates the strap and I have grown six inches (in height!).

I place the Farrah Fawcett wig on my head, apply my lipstick, and push my spongy breasts over my nipples; the transformation is complete. Standing behind a scrim, my shadow is projected onto white cloth so that my audience can enjoy the sight of my added curves in black and white before they meet Saché, a drag queen filled with color. Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” fades out; she flaunts her way from behind the shadowbox.

Bless me father for I have sinned, but something tells me you’ve been much naughtier than me. Don’t get snippy with me! I watch the news. I read! Girl, can we turn this confessional booth around?

Sorry, I was just rehearsing the dramatic monologue I plan to deliver at my local Catholic church. Some fucked up shit is happening, and I’m not just talking about all the kids being molested. The thing with straight folks is they don’t want to take responsibility for any of their fucked up motherfuckers. Am I right? It’s like, “No my preacher is straight.” But the minute the motherfucker gets caught with his bishop in a turtle neck up a little boy’s chocolate starfish, the punk ass bitch suddenly becomes gay. I don’t think so! That’s yo’ shit! You can keep that motha’ fucka’ and take the Log Cabin Republicans while you’re at it!

Ew, preachers make my skin itch, like crabs. I used to love fucking with those crazy traveling preachers who used to walk the streets downtown:
Sinners repent! ’Bortion’s wrong! God hates fags and women folk who work!
Sinners repent! Women need ta’ be at home with their clothes soapin’ machines and
not at school. The end of the world is comin’. Homosexuals ‘er goin’ ta’ helllll!
I used to love listening to him scream about how homosexuals were going to hell,
because, as luck would have it, the hottest gay bar at the time was this really dark,
seedy joint called Heaven. So, the preacher would yell, “Blow jobs can’t get you into
Heaven.” Then I’d come back with some witty retort like, “No, honey, five dollars
gets you into Heaven. You get the blowjob in the bathroom after you’ve paid your
cover, uh-kay?”

I added Saché to the script at the last minute. I find/found myself enraged by how
stories of abuse in the church are commodified, packaged in slick and tidy primetime
news snippets, and consumed by an audience who has become increasingly
desensitized to violence and sex. It was also important for me to create a character
that dispelled the hollow and superficial myth that all homosexual males have
been sexually molested. Saché is ready and able to snap her way into existence and rip
her pointy acrylic claws through cleverly crafted pathologies disguised as scientific
“facts.”

Now, I was never sexually molested, but I have dealt with some fucked up men. For
example, I was at the Boom Boom Room with my friend, and this really hot older
man came up to me. He invited me to an after hours party. Well, the crazy shit is
that he is a twin, and I don’t normally date a guy if he’s a twin. Twins give me the
creeps! I hate the way they read each other’s minds! That’s just crazy! If I had a
twin, I’d kill it.

Anchylada, I arrived at the party and it was a bunch of old men in a swimming
pool. That shit reminded me of Cocoon. Seriously, that shit was like old, gay man
stew!

I brought my friend Moneefa with me. While she was entertaining the Golden
Girls, I had sex with the twin. It was the worst sex I’ve ever had. For real, fucking
him was like Waiting for Godot; he never came and I was happy when it ended, uh-
kay?

After the sex, I went into the living room, turned on Skinemax, and watched
some television. After about fifteen minutes of doing that, a real young looking boy
came in and sat next to me on the couch. His name was Matthew, and he couldn’t
have been more than sixteen. Come to find out, sixteen-year old Matthew had been
living at the house with the twin’s roommate, fifty-five-year old Roger. Sixteen-year
old Matthew told me that his daddy kicked him out of the house right after he
came out of the closet, and fifty-five year old Roger let him move in. I know lots of
gay kids with the same story. I call them “homeless-sexuals.”

Matthew and I chummed up real fast. We used to go to gay Luby’s on Monday
afternoons and feast on Luanne platters until we had to shit the rickety pipes out of
the joint. That boy would tell me stories that sixteen-year old boys should not be
telling. One day while we were sitting at Luby’s, I asked him what he did to pay his
rent. You can imagine my shock and dismay when he replied, “Roger.”

He told me that Roger wasn’t expecting him to do anything at first, but about
two weeks after he moved in, Roger started giving him the googly eye. Then he
started watching porno with Matthew. The rest is his/story.

Now, I’ve done some freaky deaky shit. I’ve done poppers, midgets, ecstasy, guys
with one ball. Shit, I’ve done it, but I don’t do kids. That’s bullshit! I won’t even
touch a guy until he’s twenty-one. I mean, once he’s twenty-one, I call blackjack,
but not until then. I wanted to kick Roger’s ass the minute Matthew told me what was going on, twisted mother fucker!

See, what pisses me off about what Matthew told me is that I know what it’s like to be a little gay kid with no older gay men to look up to. I know what it’s like to have guys old enough to be my daddy try to get into my pants. That is bullshit. Motherfuckers like that make all the rest of us look bad. I knew I had to do something right then. I called up the twin on my flip phone and told him that I had to speak to him right away.

As much as Saché may dispel the common (mis-) reading of a drag queen, I fear that her critique on queer culture may reinforce the popular notion that gay men are predatory on children. How might this portion of the monologue be misinterpreted, misread, and/or misappropriated? To ignore the phenomenon of which she speaks is to deny the experience of so many of us who have been misused by the proverbial bad apple. Dear Goddess, let there be a smart soul in the audience who wants me to clarify my position regarding gay men and youth!

Two hours later, the twin and I met up at the gay Baskin and Robbins on the corner of Hershey and Highway. Now, he must have thought I brought him there to talk about romance. Before I could even get a word out, he grabbed my hand and said, “I’m sorry. It’s not you.”

I said, “Don’t be sorry. Bitch, please! I KNOW it’s not me! I’m fabulous! I was only dating you because my friends DARED me. Shit, I’m glad you called it off! I didn’t want to have to buy all that pig blood my friends and I were planning to drop on your ugly head at the club tomorrow night, Carrie. Shit, I know it’s not ME, bi-atch! But that’s not why I’m here right now. I brought you here so that we could talk about Matthew. Did you know he has been sleeping with Roger?”

He told me, “Yes, I’ve been sleeping with Matthew, too.”

Well, I lost the shit right there. I picked up my pleather near-Gucci purse, cocked up my head like a rooster at daybreak, ate the last sprinkle on my ice cream, and prepared to walk out the door. I walked out of that Baskin Robbins and went immediately to the Don of the gay mafia.

Let’s just say, older gay men who stick their dickle pickles in the wrong jar wake up with horse heads in their beds that look a lot like their own penises. Little known fact, Lorena Bobbit was once a tired old queen named Lawrence. Don’t fuck with a drag queen, because we’ve got extensions and connections that can make just about any wrong, right.

The combination of nylons and my profusely sweating legs has turned my lower region into an oddly shaped juicy fruit. I am dying to slip out of my pantyhose. The theme song from Dynasty bursts through the theater. I methodically remove my clothing.

Despite the content and uncomfortable moments, the audience stands and claps. Although my back bends a bit, I do not feel comfortable bowing with the fervor of an accomplished writer or performer. My body is thirsty; it has been sapped of its nutrients and wealth. The lights go black. The silence broke, the words were written, and now we know what lurks in the shadows.
References
