Cringing at Benevolence

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Abstract

Engaging with Logan’s third chapter, on the American Seamen’s Friends Society, this piece reflects on what it means to cringe in the context of a benevolent or charitable relationship. People cringe when they are made painfully aware of the gap between their self-conception (and/or their ideal self) and the way others perceive them. Logan shows us, in her study of the ASFS, the cringeworthy nature of antebellum benevolent societies: they learned about the objects of their benevolence (in this case, sailors), performed rituals alongside them, and attempted to befriend them, and yet they did not ultimately want to be them or be like them but, rather, to change them.

Keywords

benevolence – Evangelicalism – cringe – publics

Awkward Rituals, more than any other religious studies text I have read, invites the reader to embarrass themselves. When reading scholarship, I feel many feelings, but embarrassment is not a common one. The contents of these pages, though, made me cringe. What is cringing? In a brilliant piece on trans identity and the cringe, Charlie Markbreiter explains, “cringe is the gap between how others see you and how you want to be seen, opening up the tricky ambiguities of how you see yourself” (Markbreiter 2022).¹ There are moments when that gap is laid bare and those ambiguities open up. It is that moment when you feel what Søren Kierkegaard called despair. For him, despair is the crushing awareness of the misalignment of one’s actual self – the self you are making

¹ Markbreiter is drawing here from Dahl 2018.
right now through your repeated actions – with the self you want to be (and that God wants you to be) (Kierkegaard 1983 [1849]). When you really perceive that gap, not just intellectually but affectively, when you feel it, what is there to do but cringe?

Perhaps Logan’s most unique and generative contribution – in a book packed with contributions – is to argue that the goal of a ritual is not always to close that gap. Sometimes it is to dramatize it. “After all,” she writes, “ritual is just as much about the failure to produce the life you want as it is about the successful reproduction of the life you think you should have” (118). What makes this book so simultaneously pleasurable and uncomfortable to read is this: there is a real thrill in perceiving that gap in other people, thinking with it and theorizing it, watching someone reckon with the fact that have failed to produce the life they want. It is a dynamic so common that, once I started thinking with Awkward Rituals, I started seeing it everywhere. The uncomfortable part, though, is that it is less pleasurable, for me at least, to perceive that gap in myself. That does not feel very good.

I could not help but think, reading this book while spending so much of my time and mental attention navigating the academic job market, about the intensely awkward rituals that arise as we dramatize our own failure to produce the life we want. I was also reminded of what I said once, when I was a finalist for a job I badly wanted and truly thought I could get, and the search chair called me on the phone, and I answered excitedly, and then she told me the bad news, and I said these exact words: “Ohh. This does not feel good.” Later that day, not really knowing what to do, I made sure my CV was up to date, and I reformatted my cover letter for no job in particular.

Awkward Rituals contains many stories of people perceiving the gap between their actual and ideal lives, and, not feeling good, devising rituals that dramatize the gap. Like writing a cover letter to no one, or doing chores just to keep busy, these rituals produce nothing not because they fail but because they are intentionally unproductive. However, Awkward Rituals also contains stories of people perceiving those gaps and then trying – how earnestly? That’s a different question – to close them, to make the tension resolve, almost to make it feel good. Those stories are particularly embarrassing.

The most embarrassing chapter is the third, on the American Seamen’s Friend Society (ASFS). They were a benevolent organization, in antebellum New York, comprised of white evangelicals who wanted to convert sailors. In the process, they attempted to befriend them. “Benevolence,” Logan argues, “is inextricable from the awkward sensations of coerced connection” (74). It is one thing to make a donation or serve someone a meal, but it is another to attempt to build a friendship on a foundation of charity. And it is yet another
when that friendship is, above all, a missionary tactic. The benevolent sailors’ friends hoped that the sailors would change their lives and become devout evangelical Christians. This is a very awkward sort of relationship; friendship does not feel like the right word for it.

Amid this awkwardness, perhaps the most cringe-inducing aspect of the ASFS’s rituals is how they dramatized – knowingly, but maybe not deeply so – the gap between themselves and the sailors, even as they expressed a sort of admiration for the sailors and a desire to understand them. Which is to say, the ASFS knew that sailors were cool. Their lives were interesting, dangerous, sweaty, and potentially sexy. (Logan reads the ASFS’s writings with disciplined restraint, but, she makes clear, these reformers loved sailors; deeper readings of these texts are available.) Sailors had cool jargon, and reformers learned it. And they lived on boats and docked in specific places, making them both easy to meet and difficult actually to live and work among. Seamen’s Friends went to these places and tried to get to know individual sailors as well as the generic category “sailor.” “Sailors’ distinctiveness as a group,” Logan writes, “inspired analysis and cataloguing by non-sailor society members who took great pride in knowing their subject inside and out” (82). To learn the jargon, relishing the details, became a way of knowing, some uneasy blend of friendship and mastery.

Learning about sailors, then, was an awkward ritual. In so doing, ASFS members dwelled in the distance between intention and reality, between head and limb: heads that knew about sailors and limbs that did not tie ropes or hoist sails or stand steady on a roiling sea. To their credit, on some occasions these benevolent reformers used their knowledge and power to make sailors’ lives materially better. They “lobbied the city to ensure that port fees went to the care of old and indigent sailors; at the national level, they lobbied to end legal justifications for corporal punishment in the merchant marine and the Navy” (85). And yet, of course, the real goal was always to convert them: for sailors to give up their carousing and drinking and swearing – all of which the reformers faithfully observed and scrupulously documented – and become pious. In other words, the reformers learned about sailors and hung out with sailors and obsessed over sailors not so they could join with them but, ultimately, so that sailors would become more like the reformers. However, Logan cautions, this was not a straightforward case of bad-faith manipulation. “Reformers’ desire to represent the sailor politically and through mastering their knowledge and style derived not from a simple need to control or dominate, but rather from a loving pull” (85). No, this was not an evenly reciprocal relationship, not really a friendship. But did the reformers think it was? In some ways, their rituals and learning and advocacy seemed to strive to close the gap between themselves
and the sailors. And yet, at the same time, the fact that they never did close the gap might suggest that that was not exactly the goal. In fact, a more accurate description might be to say that these activities dramatized the gap: the reformers did what they did precisely because they were not sailors.

On certain occasions, reformers and sailors participated in worship rituals together. In this setting, we might expect some sort of communitas or collective effervescence, in which walls of division dissolve and, for a moment, no one cringes. That is not quite what happened. Pious sailors at times raised a “Bethel flag” while in the harbor, signaling to sailors all around that prayer and worship services would take place on board. Seamen’s Friends also joined. There, the sailors and their friends, along with whoever else had wandered aboard, worshipped and prayed together. And they formed an audience to the preacher’s sermon. “The ‘you’ of his sermon addressed all present,” Logan writes (91). What is happening here, I would argue, was the realization of a public. In his essay “Publics and Counterpublics,” Michael Warner theorized three types of publics, one of which is “a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space” (Warner 2002: 66). Delimited by the physical space of the ship, occasioned by the raising of the flag, the sailors and reformers became part of the same “concrete audience.”

But something more happened, too. Another sense of “public,” for Warner, is a self-organized discursive community, called into being by a text (or a sermon), that exists “by virtue of being addressed” (Warner 2002, 67). By being physically present, and thus addressed as “you” by the preacher, each Seamen’s Friend participated, ritually, in something more than an audience. They were incorporated into the same body. The body politic, the body of Christ. And then, sliding from second person to first, to the other side of a speech act, the reformers could speak, as activists do, of what “we” want now. In other words, Logan shows us how reformers might imagine their participation in a momentary public to form the basis of more lasting affiliation – authorizing and authorized by their advocacy.

I am now going to do something very embarrassing: discuss my brief years as an earnest high-school evangelical. This is a story about an exceedingly awkward moment in my life, when I cringed hard at myself, and, indeed, am cringing as I write about it. This is a memory I hadn’t called up for many years until I read this chapter and the scene rushed back.

In my final year of high school, I volunteered at a homeless shelter, where I washed dishes and did some other kitchen work three or four days a week. When I graduated, my parents hosted an “open house” where friends and family could visit, eat a piece of cake, give me an envelope with money in it,
ask me what my college major would be, and frowned when I said “philosophy.” As we planned the event, I told my mom that I wanted to invite all the residents at the shelter. She asked why, and I told her that they were my friends. And she said, sweetly, “Do you think they feel that way? Do they think of you as a friend?” I experienced a sudden awareness of the gap between how I thought others perceived me and how they actually did, between the self I desired and the self I was actually becoming. Which is to say, I cringed. I thought about that as I read about the rituals under the Bethel flag, as the self-described sailors’ friends “shar[ed] spiritual experience with and distanc[ed] themselves from the sailors all at once. In this awkward form of solidarity,” Logan continues, “reformers could never truly pass as sailors, because in fact they did not want to be sailors” (93).

There is an enduring lesson here about the difference between mutual aid and benevolence. They rely of different models of incorporation. Unlike mutual aid societies, in benevolent societies “membership did not overlap with the benevolent subjects themselves” (96). Both models, mutual aid and benevolence, have their place, but it can be embarrassing not to know the difference.

This leads to my first question. Did the ASFS know the difference? Or, put slightly differently, how much of the awkwardness of these rituals was apparent to the seamen’s friends? We know they were awkward, but did they? I think that they did. But what exactly was their own perception of that gap, between who they were and wanted to be? Using another model of ritual studies, we might argue that what happened under the Bethel flag, when the reformers and sailors alike were addressed as “you” and momentarily formed a public, was an enactment of an ideal world, briefly bringing into being the world as it ought to be. But Logan teaches us to see instead the awkwardness: “An awkward ritual is an enactment of contradiction that goes unresolved; thus the contradictions perpetuate themselves” (19). In the ASFS’s ideal world, were they the same as the sailors? Remember, “in fact they did not want to be sailors” (93, emphasis added).2 But, did they want sailors to become reformers?

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2 This inability of individuals to identify totally with the collective “you” could be what makes the audience public. Warner writes, “the address of public rhetoric is never going to be the same as address to actual persons, and that our partial nonidentity with the object of address in public speech seems to be part of what it means to regard something as public speech” (Warner 2002: 78).

An additional reason I cite this essay is that Warner tracks a shift over the course of the eighteenth century in the address of the sermon. For Puritans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the sermon was a form through which God addressed an individual directly, convicting them privately, such that the sermon “resembles a shamanistic performance ... [as] the preacher ... [strives] to speak with something other than his individual voice, and to address the intimate hearer, creating a scene of hearing markedly different from the speech
Perhaps they were striving for mutuality, but only on their own terms. They could all be part of the same we or you, but only as reformers, not as sailors.

In the aforementioned essay on cringe, Markbreiter, citing Sianne Ngai (2020), considers the “gimmick” of the character of the contemporary SJW (social justice warrior). The SJW (an online and real-life figure), as imagined by their critics, loudly and proudly proclaims their affinity for certain causes without necessarily doing anything materially beneficial. It is a gimmick, “working too little (via labor-saving tricks, like having opinions to get likes) and, simultaneously, working too much (straining to get your attention). Cringe” (Markbreiter 2022). Markbreiter continues, “The critics had a point: for the post-woke leftists, SJWs are cringe because of the gap between what they think they want (justice) and what they actually want (narcissistic supply)” (Markbreiter 2022). This prompts a new question: what, exactly, did the ASFS want, and what did they think they wanted?

Sticking with Ngai’s Marxian line of critique, we should think more about the fact that the material circumstances of benevolence were entirely dependent upon the devalued labor of immiserated sailors. Members of the ASFS benefitted from – and did not really try to change – the larger structures that made sailors the way they were: rough, drunk, indigent, etc. Those rituals, of middle-class consumption, are ones that the reformers performed but, if they were described in such a way, likely would disavow. That is another kind of awkwardness, when “we find ourselves enacting practices we would never discursively endorse” (8). A starker way to put this is to argue that the members of the ASFS could only exist as benevolent reformers so long as they continued to exploit the labor of their objects of reform.3 The most awkward, embarrassing, and even shameful aspect of this relationship was not that reformers were obsessed with sailors but did not want to be sailors; it was that they did not truly want the sailors to become like them either. It had to be a benevolent, rather than mutual, relationship. And, as Logan shows, their rituals lived in that tension rather than resolving it.

Logan argues that “benevolence provides an opportunity to see ritual as a form of social cohesion that coheres unevenly” (97). This is an immensely

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3 This calls to mind Nancy Shoemaker’s definition of “missionary colonialism.” She argues that missionaries “deserve their own category for the distinctiveness of their purpose. They need native people to justify their existence” (Shoemaker 2015).
useful and widely applicable piece of analysis. But it also might raise a normative question. On the final page of the book, Logan tries “to imagine a form of American social enactment that feels both unpredictable and authentic” (124). Is it fair to describe this as an imagination of cohering more evenly, of mutual aid rather than benevolence?

The American Seamen’s Friend Society performed rituals of social cohesion that, all the while, reinforced the gap between reformers and sailors – and, at the same time, the gap between who the reformers were (moral scolds who benefited from the exploitation of the recipients of their charity) and who they perceived themselves to be (seamen’s friends). I am grateful, if a bit embarrassed, that this book showed me similar dynamics in my own institutional and social contexts. But I am also straining to imagine rituals that feel good, natural, and comfortable, because I know that more ethical, more just social enactments – these better rituals – also, though perhaps in different ways, feel awkward.

References


