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# If We're Mocking Anything, It's Organized Religion: The Queer Holy Fool Style of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

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IF WE'RE MOCKING ANYTHING, IT'S ORGANIZED RELIGION:  
THE QUEER HOLY FOOL STYLE OF THE SISTERS OF PERPETUAL  
INDULGENCE

by

Christina L. Ivey

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Communication Studies

Under the Supervision of Professors Damien Smith Pfister and Carly S. Woods

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2016

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Christina L. Ivey, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisors: Damien Smith Pfister and Carly S. Woods

Asking questions in and about the often rough terrain at the intersection of sexuality/gender and religion/spirituality, this dissertation seeks to excavate the concept of queer holy fool style as a fitting response to dominant Judeo-Christian narratives that marginalize LGBTQ individuals. To do so, I utilize the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (SPI), a drag performing community of “21<sup>st</sup> Century Nuns,” as a synecdoche; pulling examples of their communication and performances as evidence of queer holy fool style. In exploring three facets of stylistic study (embodied, textual/hypertextual, and sociological), I blend queer theoretical concepts (like camp, performativity, and disciplining) with rhetorical methodological frameworks (such as Burke’s [1969] four master tropes and parody). At the end of the analysis, I uncover counter narratives within the SPI’s communication featuring themes of sexual freedom, spirituality, and safety in coalescence.

Throughout the dissertation, I continually ask questions regarding queer holy fool style – some I answer, others I do not – as an attempt to engage the reader with the work. In this way, I perform the playful, yet disruptive nature of queer theoretical work. I conclude with suggestions to extend the study of queer holy fool style; primarily, the

inclusion of oral histories to identify intricacies within the style as well as an autoethnographic approach that would track the creation of an individual's performance of the style.

**DEDICATION**

For all the queer bodies who are struggling with their spirituality:

You are loved.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am a firm believer that, though being told countless times to write a dissertation means to isolate yourself from the world, there is NO way that someone could write one of these on their own. The few weeks following the submission of my ‘final’ draft to my committee were spent reflecting on those relationships that helped me complete the project; and, since I was too self-focused during the writing, I would like to thank all of them now for their help.

To Dr. Damien Smith Pfister: This dissertation would have never been completed without you. I cannot count the times that I emailed you, totally stressed out, worried about something that was not going as planned. I appreciate your patience during those moments, the kindness and wisdom undergirding your advice, and the way that I always left your office feeling as if things were better (even if they were not). Towards the end, your dedication to the project matched mine; I am fairly certain you were sending me revisions as quickly as I sent you revised manuscripts! Thanks for being the much needed push, while always reminding me that there *is* a light at the end of this tunnel.

To Dr. Carly S. Woods: I did not visit your office as frequently as I did Damien’s; and yet, I always *felt* your support. I knew your office was the safe space to go to if all I needed was to sit and not speak – just sit in silence in the presence of someone who understood that sometimes, all we need is a moment to collect ourselves. For the dissertation, your knowledge of literature still astounds me! I could email you about anything, and you would just respond, “Well, if you want to read more about that, [insert several book titles here].” Two of my primary texts for this work (Young and

Shuggart/Waggoner) came from you. In other words, while this dissertation may have been completed, it would not have been as informed (or as organized) without your guidance. Also, it would not follow Chicago as strictly as it should – thanks for being the style hammer and a walking library!

To both of you: There are still no words to express my gratitude for all of the ‘real-life’ guidance you two have given me. You performatively demonstrated what it is like to be in a healthy, *loving*, academic partnership. You have helped me through one of the most difficult personal (as well professional) times in my life. I will miss the two of you terribly.

The other members of my committee (Dr. Jordan Soliz and Dr. Emily Kayzak) were the picture of understanding. To Jordan, who insisted on asking at *every* defense “What is queer?”: my final answer is yes. Thanks for pushing me to define myself within my chosen subfield of Communication, and doing so playfully. Emily, thank you for the opportunity to work with you on your research. It was wonderful to catch a glimpse of research that I do not have extensive knowledge in due to my own area of study; it just demonstrated the depth of gender studies. Also, thanks for being a trooper when my topic switched! Both of you helped me situate this project in such a way that makes it more accessible across disciplines and paradigms; I am truly grateful.

The completion of the dissertation has made me reflect on my entire academic career. There have been several teachers that have inspired me to push through some difficult situations to get to where I am today, and they deserve recognition in these acknowledgements. Judith Butler describes “fictive” kin as existing when a child, who is given role models to emulate, can be born not through conception, but through social

construction. I feel as if all of these individuals have had a hand in transforming me into the person I am today.

It began with Penny Burdette. Penny was the first teacher who knew what was going on in my life outside of the classroom, and she seemed to know exactly what to do. She opened her home to me. She gave me a space where I first discovered my voice. She and her husband provided an example of a loving relationship. The care and love she gave her children was the same care and love she expressed towards me. Penny – I was too young/immature/blind at the time to know, but being a teacher has revealed exactly what you did for me. I am forever grateful.

Penny introduced me to Beth (Thomson) Huse, who guided me through oral interpretation. Her energy, patience, and kindness was so inviting that I traded in my high school weekends (usually getting at school at 5 AM) just to be a part of something she cared about so deeply. This developed into a love that would lead to college forensics, which became the reason I majored in Communication in college. Beth – you did not always get the credit you deserved because of other coaches on the team usually getting the spotlight. Know that I was *your* student on the team.

When I began college, I left my fictive family at home and, luckily, picked up more fictive kin. Dr. David W. Crawford pushed me past my inhibitions and gave me the tools (and confidence) to tackle any obstacle that came my way. Jacque Shackelford is probably the dearest woman I know, and a teacher/person I hope to emulate. M'Liss Hindman picked up where Penny left off, providing me with a place to stay on nights when I was not sure where I would sleep. (I am also indebted to her for introducing me to my partner!) Janee McGoff, my lovable Jewish grandma, always knew exactly what to



say to make me laugh (primarily at myself) and encourage me to keep going. She also gives the best hugs ever! I have thanked Connie McKee more times than I can count, and I am *still* nowhere near close to rhetorically repaying her for everything she has done for me. Dr. Soo-Hye Han – I am so sorry, and yet so happy, that I was your first advisee. I knew you were the right fit for me; I wish I had been a better advisee. I never would have fallen in love with queer theory were it not for Dr. Stacey Waite. Thanks for telling me I was wrong in the nicest way ever. Finally, my advisors, Damien and Carly, took me under their wings from the beginning. I am blown away by the amount of support they provided for me throughout the four years of my doctoral career. Thank you both. It is because of all of the people listed here that I am a teacher, and it is because of all of them that I approach my classroom with love, respect, and understanding.

Of course, my fictive kinships expand beyond the classroom. Rachel Stohr: thanks for being the crazy older sister that helped acclimate me to this crazy thing called “Ph.D. School.” Mandy Frank and Christa Ziegler – you are the two best sisters I could have hoped for. (And, luckily, never got me into too much trouble!) To my officemates, Kaitlin Phillips and Elizabeth (Biz) Flood-Grady, thanks for being OK with me crying to you at odd times during this process. Nick Solis, I owe you for giving me the one book I allowed myself to read outside of ‘scholarly work’ during this time. You will see the influence *The Tao of Pooh* had on me in the next reiteration of this work. And finally, thank you Aunt Liz for acting as a mother figure for me. You are the reason I go back ‘home.’

I would have never attended the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, much less started a page of this dissertation, without my partner, Amy Arellano. It is silly to think

how this long, arduous journey began on a dare and a belief that we both had: “I think *you’re* the smarter partner.” Two identical GRE scores, ninety-six graduate credits, and countless pages written later, and I think that we are *both* the smart one – you are just the stronger one. You told me not to include you in my acknowledgments, but that simply is not an option. I can, however, keep this brief: Island.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Hunky Jesus and Mocking The Church: Introducing the Sisters of Perpetual

#### Indulgence as Queer Holy Fools

It began with Hunky Jesus. A friend of mine living in the San Francisco area posted a picture on Facebook of a young man with long brown hair and a beard dressed in a loincloth. He was standing on a stage in front of a large group of people. Underneath was a simple heading: “Hunky Jesus Contest – Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.” *What on earth is a ‘Hunky Jesus,’* I thought. Having an interest in both queer happenings and religious identity, I researched the photo further and discovered the Hunky Jesus contest. A quick click of a Google link led me to a YouTube video of the latest contest held at the *Under the Golden Gate* Easter ceremony in San Francisco.<sup>1</sup>

The video began with a drag queen wearing a lime green nun habit. Bright white foundation, colorful eye makeup, and hot pink rouge completed the look.

“Coming up is the Hunky Jesus contest,” the Sister began. “The requirements to win are: 1. you’ve got to be hunky, and 2. you’ve got to *love* being Hunky Jesus. Alright everybody. Are you ready for Hunky Jesus?”

The crowd began to cheer loudly. *No*, I said to myself. *I am not ready.*

“Oh my literal God!” exclaimed the nun as the first contestant walked out. “Tell us which Jesus you are.” She placed the microphone in front of this version of Jesus, wearing nothing but a loincloth.

“Rez-erection.”

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<sup>1</sup> Under the Golden Gate, “The Sister of Perpetual Indulgence’s Hunky Jesus Contest in Golden Gate Park, 4/20 Easter 2014,” last modified April 27, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqeJhHQXRc4>.

“Oh my,” the Sister commented while fanning herself amidst the snickering of the audience. *What is happening here?* I asked myself. I shifted uncomfortably, not knowing whether to giggle with them or turn off the parade of blasphemy.

The next Jesus walked across the stage in nothing but a birthday hat, his birthday suit, with a cross-shaped package covering his...package.

“I got this gift from Dad. Not sure what it is. I’m going to open it later.”

“This doesn’t end well for you, Jesus,” replied the nun. The audience erupted once again.

One by one the Hunky Jesus contestants strutted across the stage, introducing themselves to the audience via the drag Sister and explaining their interpretation of Jesus. One final contestant claimed he was “Twerking Jesus,” and proceeded to dance while shouting, “Twerk it for Jesus! Praise the Lord! And drop it like it’s hot!” In the end, it was Twerking Jesus that captured the heart of the crowd.

“I love you San Francisco!!!” he cried, happily accepting his large golden trophy. As the video ended, I still did not know what to think about it all. Growing up among fundamentalist Christians that hewed closely to their faith, I had always yearned to see what religion offered beyond hell fire, brimstone, and strict guidelines. But did this contest push my boundaries too far? I scrolled across the videos on the right side of the screen, hoping to get a better idea of what sort of playful religiosity I was stumbling upon. As a result, I ended up watching numerous interviews with members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (SPI) and learned more about what they were doing.

Described as extending a tradition of “religious parody,” The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (SPI) identify as a:

leading-edge Order of queer nuns. Since our first appearance in San Francisco on Easter Sunday, 1979, the Sisters have devoted ourselves to community service, ministry and outreach to those on the edges, and to promoting human rights, respect for diversity and spiritual enlightenment.<sup>2</sup>

Dressed in wildly colorful habits and clownish make-up, SPI use humor as a means to “help LGBT folks to laugh at themselves: their religion, guilt, and shame. Thus, LGBT people begin to distance from their religious guilt and shame about themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

There are four ‘levels’ to becoming a Sister: Aspirant, Postulant, Novice Sister, and Fully Professed Sister. Each has its own required attire/presentation and the first three levels have set duties that must be completed to reach the next level. Many Sisters qualify as Emeritus or leave for a sabbatical and return to their appointment. On their website, the SPI celebrates the work of members that have passed away by placing their photo under a link entitled ‘Sister of the Above.’<sup>4</sup> Some of these Sisters achieve ‘Saintly’ status after their death and are labeled as such.

In regard to membership, all genders and races are able to become a part of the SPI, though the majority of members are white men.<sup>5</sup> In cities that have a more diverse population, there are more sisters of color. For instance, abbeys in Texas (Fort Worth,

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<sup>2</sup> “Welcome to the Sisters,” The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, accessed March 13, 2014, <http://www.thesisters.org>.

<sup>3</sup> Robert E. Shore-Goss “The Holy Spirit as Mischief Maker.” In *Queering Christianity: Finding a Place at the Table for LGBTQI Christians*, ed. Shore-Goss, et. al (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 110.

<sup>4</sup> “Welcome to the Sisters.”

<sup>5</sup> “Meet Us,” The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, accessed March 13, 2015, <http://www.thesisters.org/meet>. Please keep in mind that it is difficult to tell due to the elaborate face make-up, and the websites themselves do not specify.



Austin, and San Antonio) have more Mexican/Latin@ Sisters. There are also a few cis-women sprinkled in the mix, all of whom read as white in their profile photos on the websites.

In the ‘Meet Us’ link on the website, all the Sisters are individually featured. Clicking on a photo opens up the Sister’s individual profile. Each profile contains membership information, such as the name that was chosen when they became a Sister, the date they elevated to each level, their mentors, and their mentees. Some of the names are quite humorous, such as Sister Zsa Zsa Glamour, Sister Roma!, and Sister Bella de Ball. Another important piece of information about each Sister is what they identify as their religious affiliation. This ranges from “non-practicing Catholic,”<sup>6</sup> to “card carrying atheist,”<sup>7</sup> to “Spiritual. I definitely believe that there is more than this. Life is just too miraculous - and more amazing than we can understand while we’re busy living it.”<sup>8</sup>

“Being a native of San Francisco,” one Sister shared, “I have been seeing the Sisters and hearing about their good works for years; so, I just decided it was time to share in the joy and laughter and give back to the community.”<sup>9</sup> The phrase, “give back to the community,” repeated throughout many of their narratives. Through a “gay spirituality,” the Sisters considered themselves to be like “nuns of any faith” by ministering, reaching out to their communities, and fundraising for other organizations in the community.<sup>10</sup> Summing up my initial concerns about their actions, one Sister stated:

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<sup>6</sup> Sister Agnes Dei’afta Tamara

<sup>7</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa Glamour

<sup>8</sup> Sister Roma!

<sup>9</sup> “Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence,” directed by Alison Knox and Maxe Schimberg, last modified June 25, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmxxF5aES1c>.

<sup>10</sup> Knox and Schimberg, “Sisters.”

There's always going to be people who disagree with what you do, with what you say. One of the things we get a lot is people who ask us, 'Why do you mock nuns?' I think one of the things when people say that is all they react to what we look like and our name... I think it's a misconception that people think we are mocking nuns. If we're mocking anything, *it's organized religion*. It's dogma. It's rules that tell you who you are and who you choose to love are wrong.<sup>11</sup>

*Huh, I thought. SPI does not wish to mock spirituality (or one's connection to it) with their bold and shocking acts. The Sisters want to force people to rethink their religious choices and connections with a divine in a way that reflects their queer social positioning: queer camp and religious parody.* The tactics and strategies may appear foolish, but there is more than initially meets the eye.

The works of these 'holy fools' are valued in their queer communities. Holy fools—the long history of which will be detailed in this chapter—do not just work on physical ministry, such as fundraising and feeding those who are hungry. By relying on an alternative spiritual code that allows for the follies of those that follow, holy fools reach their communities in ways in which other institutionalized religions cannot. Foolery is a practice performed by many adepts, not just the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, usually with the intention of mocking institutionalized rituals. Often, this is done by breaking the “rules” of what society views as ‘normal’ religious behavior, but does so in “order to remind us that human beings made those rules and can turn them around.”<sup>12</sup>

Some queers especially feel the need to mock and question religious institutions, as The Church can be a site of pain for many LGBTQ individuals. Openly gay

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<sup>11</sup> Knox and Schimberg, “Sisters,” my emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Bayley, “‘Lord, What Fools These Mortals Be!’: An Exploration into the Relevance of the Trickster Figure, Foolery and Humour to the Theory and Practice of Dramatherapy” (PhD diss, University of Exeter, 1990).

Episcopalian Bishop Gene Robinson attributes the current rise in LGBTQ youth suicides to religious, often homophobic bullying from family and friends.<sup>13</sup> Those religious acquaintances who do not consistently remind LGBTQ individuals that their ‘sinful lifestyle’ is an ‘abomination’ unto God often sit silent on the issue, which can be far worse. Robinson claims that the silence acts as a disconfirming message, leaving the LGBTQ person to feel not only unsupported, but also abandoned.<sup>14</sup> If a young LGBTQ individual does not take their life, they are often told they are unwelcome in their own home, making those who identify as LGBTQ roughly 30-40 percent of the homeless youth population.<sup>15</sup>

The Sisters attempt to help LGBTQ individuals through humor. On their website, the San Francisco order of the SPI have a statement at the bottom of their home page which reads:

Since their first appearance in San Francisco on Easter Sunday, 1979, the Sisters have been accused of “Ruining It For Everyone” with their habitual injection of gaiety into serious affairs including human rights, political activism and religious intolerance. The Sisters consider it their mission to “ruin” all detrimental conditions including complacency, guilt and the inability to laugh at one’s self.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gene Robinson, “Bishop Gene Robinson: How religion is killing our most vulnerable youth,” *The Huffington Post*, October, 15, 2010, accessed November 2, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bishop-gene-robinson/how-religion-is-killing-o\\_b\\_764568.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bishop-gene-robinson/how-religion-is-killing-o_b_764568.html). Also, I will use queer (as in ‘queer bodies’) and LGBTQ often interchangeably in this project. While I understand that these are potentially separations in these categories, I used them together to reflect the population that the Sisters are catering to: queer individuals, many of who identify as LGBTQ.

<sup>14</sup> Robinson, “Bishop Gene Robinson.”

<sup>15</sup> Margot Adler, “Young, Gay, and Homeless: Fighting for Resources,” *NPR*, November 20, 2011, accessed November 2, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2011/11/20/142364493/young-gay-and-homeless-fighting-for-resources>.

<sup>16</sup> “Welcome to the Sisters.”

Seeing humor as a way to promote action, the Sisters notoriously challenge traditional modes of how the public thinks about religion. An example of such actions comes in the form of a protest in front of the members of the extremist Christian group Westboro Baptist Church (WBC). While WBC was protesting a high school production of *The Laramie Project* with their infamous “God Hates Fags” signs, the SPI stood across the street mocking WBC’s hateful words disguised as godly rhetoric by holding up their own signs, such as “Hell Must Be Totally FABULOUS!”<sup>17</sup> Laughing at the SPI’s comedic shenanigans helps onlookers to “distance from the hurtfulness of the protesters and see it for what it is – human foolishness to restrict God’s love and mercy.”<sup>18</sup> The juxtaposition of these two types of religious discourse provide a moment of reflection for the audience: why are these two messages that employ ‘godly’ rhetoric communicating two completely different concepts? While this is an extreme case (the WBC is hardly considered conventional religious rhetoric), it does demonstrate the power humor has in moments of disruption.

The Sisters confront problems of LGBTQ religious rejection by mocking the institution of religion. Mocking organized religion, however, poses risks, including stigmatization, verbal attacks, and even physical violence. For instance, an attack on a member led to the SPI suspending one of the Sister’s most well-known fundraising events, Pink Saturday. Pink Saturday is a block party held in San Francisco’s Castro district every Saturday before Pride begins. The SPI launched the event in 1995 to raise

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<sup>17</sup> Aaron Sankin, “Inside the Westboro Baptist Church’s Silly, Little Reddit Protest,” *The Daily Dot*, August 12, 2014, accessed May 4, 2016, <http://www.dailydot.com/politics/westboro-baptist-church-silicon-valley-reddit-protest/>.

<sup>18</sup> Shore-Goss “The Holy Spirit,” 111.

donations for the neighborhood. In 2008, the Sisters brought in roughly \$20,000 in donations. On June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014, while trying to promote their “Stop the Violence” campaign – a year-round drive to raise awareness and prevent violence against LGBTQ individuals in and around their neighborhood – at a Pink Saturday event, a Sister and her partner were verbally and physically attacked by seven individuals yelling homophobic slurs.<sup>19</sup> This incident was not an isolated event, and due to “an escalation in violence associated with the event,” the SPI has decided to cancel further Pink Saturday festivities until more precautions can be put in place to avoid more assaults.<sup>20</sup>

Though the particular motives of the assault are not completely clear, the Sisters are at risk for severe audience backlash with every event they sponsor. What do these potentially hateful responses say about the rhetorical style of those who engage in religious parody and what indologist Georg Feurstein calls ‘holy madness’?<sup>21</sup> This dissertation explores the style of contemporary queer holy fools by focusing on the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, which I take to be representative of contemporary queer holy foolery. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are in a synecdochal relation to the

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<sup>19</sup> Roy McKenzie, “Sister Attacked on Pink Saturday, Police Need Your Help,” *Hoodline*, July 1, 2014, accessed March 13, 2015, <http://hoodline.com/2014/07/sister-attacked-on-pink-saturday-police-need-your-help>. Cynthia Laird, “News in Brief: SJ Pride this Weekend,” *The Bay Area Reporter*, June 6, 2009, accessed March 13, 2015, <http://ebar.com/news/article.php?sec=news&article=3992>.

<sup>20</sup> Since the press release by the Sisters announcing that they would no longer be hosting the Pink Saturday event, the San Francisco LGBT Center has taken over and will host the festivities. They hope with the help of the San Francisco police department that the violence will be curbed this year. See Hamid Aleaziz, “Pink Saturday Returning to S.F. Pride with Greater Security,” *SF Gate*, March 19, 2015, accessed March 20, 2015, <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Pink-Saturday-is-back-on-at-San-Francisco-Pride-6145210.php>.

<sup>21</sup> Georg Feurstein, *Holy Madness: The Shock Tactics and Radical Teachings of Crazy-Wise Adepts, Holy Fools, and Rascal Gurus* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 3.

broader category of queer holy fools. Synecdoche, which Kenneth Burke asserts is synonymous with the term “representation,” refers to relations between part and whole: “part for the whole, whole for the part, container for the contained, sign for the thing signified.”<sup>22</sup> It is important to note, however, that because they are a representative, that does not mean the Sisters are *the* representative; future research will have to examine how other queer holy fools may approach the role differently. In analyzing the SPI as a representative example of queer holy fools, I aim to identify some *shared qualities* of this contemporary mode of foolery. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are an ideal group to study, as they perform the complex phenomenon of queer holy foolery in a way that is deliberately inclusive and accessible. In order to demonstrate that the SPI is representative of contemporary queer holy fools, I turn now to parsing out the separate, but additive, aspects of that label (fool, holy fool, queer holy fool). In doing so, I tell the story of how the SPI exemplifies the rhetoric of folly associated with holy fools.

## **1.2 The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence: Foolish, Holy, Queer**

In order to demonstrate that the SPI is indeed a useful example to use in elucidating the style of queer holy fools, I trace the history of foolishness, its association with the holy, and why a queer extension to this history is important.

### **1.2.1 “Fool”**

The word ‘folly’ is an Old English term that, in turn, originates from the Old French *folie*, meaning madness. In contemporary parlance, however, a simple glance at

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<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 507.

the definitions of the two words (folly and madness) implies that ‘madness’ denotes some type of mental illness, whereas ‘folly’ connotatively describes irrational, possibly lewd behavior. The first is more clinical, the second a thoughtless jest. In the context of my study, I rely on the connotation of the term ‘folly,’ but I also understand that historical investigations of fools will inevitably discuss madness as well.

The ancient Greek Cynics could have easily fallen under the label of fool. Content to do “away with...Logic,” the Cynics often committed acts that would be considered foolish by others in society.<sup>23</sup> Diogenes (referred to as “Socrates gone mad”) was the most well known Cynic.<sup>24</sup> An absolute humanist, questions of how to live ethically drove his actions—and often got him in trouble. While witnessing a thief being led away from a temple by Athenian officials, Diogenes is reported to have observed, “The great thieves are leading away the little thief.”<sup>25</sup> Through acts like this, Cynics sought to “dramatize their criticism of society,” especially through the rhetorical form of the diatribe.<sup>26</sup> A diatribe is an “extemporaneous sermon” attempting “to criticize, to entertain, to shock and to convey impression of public figures.”<sup>27</sup> Often, these sermons included parody, so as to make the normalized seem ridiculous. The diatribe demonstrates that whoever supports those orthodox beliefs is “contemptible, hypocritical, or stupid.”<sup>28</sup> Though the ‘truth’ expressed through the diatribe may seem at first to be unreasonable (and perhaps

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<sup>23</sup> Laertius Diogenes, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1925), 63. As cited in Theodore Otto Windt, Jr., “The Diatribe: Last Resort for Protest,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58, (1972): 5.

<sup>24</sup> Diogenes, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 55. As cited in Windt, “The Diatribe,” 4.

<sup>25</sup> Diogenes, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 47. As cited in Windt, “The Diatribe,” 5.

<sup>26</sup> Windt, “The Diatribe,” 7.

<sup>27</sup> Windt, “The Diatribe,” 7.

<sup>28</sup> Windt, “The Diatribe,” 8.

even offensive at first), the purpose of their message was to critique the stultifying norms of society. Diogenes was often associated with the dog.<sup>29</sup> He accepted this association, stating, “I fawn on those who give me anything, I yelp at those who refuse, and I set my teeth in rascals.”<sup>30</sup> When he passed away, Athenians erected a marble statue of a dog on his grave.<sup>31</sup>

Drawings of fools often depict them with a nightmarishly elongated neck—symbolizing that their thoughts take a long time to reach the brain. This extended time, however, allows the fool to dwell on the information for longer, which was thought to bring about a special kind of wisdom.<sup>32</sup> Hence, the cultural fascination with fools: they can be disconcerting, abrasive, and even scary, but they can also be wise. On the one hand, madness is believed to highlight the beastly side of humanity, reflective of pre-Edenic times where an almost animalistic instinct prevailed because of “the sterile madness that lie in men’s [sic] hearts.”<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the knowledge associated with foolishness represents a “difficult, hermetic, esoteric learning.”<sup>34</sup> It is a forbidden form of wisdom – one in which the fool can enjoy all of the desires of paradise with no

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<sup>29</sup> Actually, the name ‘Cynic’ derives from the Greek *kynikos*, meaning ‘dog-like.’ Donald Dudley asserts this term became representative of Cynics due to their indifference for public decorum (eating, sleeping, making love in public, etc), their shamelessness, the ‘guarding’ of their philosophies, and their ability to “distinguish between its friends and its enemies.” Diogenes, however, would perhaps better fit the description feral; barking/snapping at both friend and foe. Donald R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the 6<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.* (London: Methuen and Company Limited, 1937), 2.

<sup>30</sup> James Miller, *Examined Lives: From Socrates to Nietzsche* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 7.

<sup>31</sup> Windt, “The Diatribe,” 5.

<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1965), 10.

<sup>33</sup> Foucault, *Madness*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Foucault, *Madness*, 21.



fear of hell fire and brimstone. The SPI, too, focus on an enjoyment of pleasure free from persecution. The proof is in their name. The performative diatribe reflected in their decision to dress as drag *nuns* can be shocking for those who first witness their performances. Couple the performance with their emphasis on pride (one of the seven deadly sins) and the Sisters' dramatic critique of religious practices provides a radical alternative to conservative orthodoxy.

A move from the ancient world to the modern further complicates the history of fools, folly, and madness. In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault tracks the modern history of foolishness, equating the term to 'madness.'<sup>35</sup> As he narrates this history, individuals began to be labeled 'mad' when the figure of the leper no longer functioned as the typical outcast – an analogy to how society treats those who are deemed "subhuman" and/or "beastly."<sup>36</sup> Yet, this abandonment by society acts as a form of "salvation" for the marginalized, offering opportunities in which to bond with those who are like minded and avoid those who would persecute them.<sup>37</sup> This abandonment became literal as time progressed, leading to what Foucault refers to as 'Ships of Fools.' Aboard these ships, hundreds of individuals who were labeled as dangerous or unsuitable for society were cast off in the hopes that the boats would continue to roam the seas and never return. Foucault believes that it is possible that these ships "which haunted the imagination of the entire early Renaissance, were pilgrimage boats, highly symbolic cargoes of madmen in search of reason," a commentary that later played out in

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<sup>35</sup> Foucault, *Madness*. Recall the etymology of 'folly' originates in Old French. Since Foucault himself is French and a devoted history student, the use of 'fool' and 'madness' interchangeably echoes the genesis of his study.

<sup>36</sup> Foucault, *Madness*, vii.

<sup>37</sup> Foucault, *Madness*, 7.

Renaissance theatre and other arts.<sup>38</sup> In theatrical farces, ‘madmen’ were given roles in which they delivered social criticism and even parodied religious rituals (much like the Cynics) through statements and actions that allowed the actors to tell the ‘truth,’ even if it was perceived as unreasonable. The Sisters are the mad-nuns of our time, spouting for some what seems to be unreasonable truth about the Church. Yet, as this dissertation explores, such “unreasons” resonate with queer publics in meaningful ways.

While comical depictions of the fool prevail in contemporary scholarly and popular literature, not all aspects of foolishness are purely joyful. The sad clown, a trope commonly portrayed in movies, is a fool that feels an immense amount of grief, but chooses to externalize that struggle in a humorous fashion. For instance, Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* functions as the sad clown – making jokes even as he lays dying. His death seems to signal a death for comedy, as the rest of the play continuously becomes more dark. Fools are ostracized, verbally harassed, and beaten for their actions - revealing an underlying motive of sadness and seriousness behind the humor. As apparent in the example of the Cynics, fools are often driven by their deeply held beliefs concerning the status of humanity. The special wisdom garnered through foolishness does not leave one unscathed by the more horrific aspects of current cultural practices and norms. Contemplating the state of affairs leads some fools to a more brooding personality, commonly referred to as melancholy.<sup>39</sup> As a matter of fact, Diogenes is described as

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<sup>38</sup> Foucault, *Madness*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Emily Brady and Arto Haapala, “Melancholy as an Aesthetic Emotion,” *Contemporary Aesthetics* (1, 2003), <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=214>. As discussed in

having a “pessimistic and misanthropic” perception of the world.<sup>40</sup> It is thought that this perspective is not necessarily a detriment; but rather, the memory of past struggles has the potential to push individuals to unite against the oppression that haunts them.<sup>41</sup>

Melancholy, in classical Greek uses, is often thought to be necessary in order to balance other affective responses that may appear to be more oppositional.<sup>42</sup> There is a balance, too, in foolishness, as the special wisdom that accompanies it perceives everything as being equal: “false for the true, death for life, man for woman.”<sup>43</sup> This difference in equilibrium can be explained through perception: melancholy’s affective responses are thought to directly correlate with the *internal*; the foolish is concealed behind the immediate reactions by *others* to their “feigned disorder.”<sup>44</sup> The SPI also conceals good works behind the elaborate costumes and wild events. Many in the LGBTQ community know of their good deeds, but those that focus on their spiritual ‘disorder’ only see the religious mocking. The Sisters, however, try to balance the queer camp of their spirituality with the good works for their community. Melancholy is thus one affect that helps explain the “odd” habits and the deep emotional pain felt by some LGBTQ individuals because of their experiences with religion.

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<sup>40</sup> Windt, “The Diatribe,” 5.

<sup>41</sup> Jose Munoz, “Photographies of Mourning: Melancholia and Ambivalence in Van Der Zee, Mapplethorpe, and *Looking for Langston*,” in *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, ed. Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 355-356.

<sup>42</sup> Damien Smith Pfister, *Networked Media, Networked Rhetorics: Attention and Deliberation in the Early Blogosphere*, (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 112-113.

<sup>43</sup> Foucault, *Madness*, 33.

<sup>44</sup> Foucault, *Madness*, 34.

Even the sadness associated with the fool can be linked to divine ways of knowing. Keats describes the tension between melancholy's "alertness to the world" with "the anxiety of knowing" as the "wakeful anguish of the *soul*."<sup>45</sup> Continuing the soulful rhetorical framing to describe melancholy, Max Pensky explains that the continuous contemplation and reflection generates a "heightening or intensification of a certain power of *spiritual perception* or insight into the nature of the world."<sup>46</sup> Jurgen Habermas posits that in the current "enlightened modern age" (which has attempted to divorce itself from religious dogma), society has yet to find a secular replacement for coming to terms with the fine "*rite de passage* which brings life to a close."<sup>47</sup> This failure, according to Habermas, can be interpreted as an "expression of melancholy over something which has been irretrievably lost."<sup>48</sup> Perhaps, through combining the terms "holy" and "fool," societal responses to the loss of religious identity can be addressed.

So, are the Sisters fools? If we return back to the two aspects of societal fascination with fools (appearance/unique wisdom), the answer is yes. For those that only pay attention to their appearance and the comic approach to religion in general, Catholicism specifically, the SPI is dangerous, blasphemous, and downright offensive. The practices the Sisters mock are based on traditions held for centuries and should not be questioned (and certainly not *queered*); therefore, fear of this mockery leads to

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<sup>45</sup> This interpretation of Keats' comes from Pfister, *Networked Media*, 113, my emphasis.

<sup>46</sup> Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 19. As cited in Pfister, *Networked Media*, 113, my emphasis.

<sup>47</sup> Jurgen Habermas, Michael Reder; Josef Schmidt; Norbert Brieskorn; and Friedo Ricken, *An Awareness of What is Missing* (Malden: Polity Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>48</sup> Habermas, *An Awareness*, 15.

aggressive action against the Sisters and what they stand for. On the other hand, those who know of the Sister's good works respect the SPI for the unique spiritual wisdom they have cultivated by standing in the cross hairs of spirituality and queer embodiment.

Depictions of the SPI do not feature them with elongated necks, but rather with colorful habits portraying a seemingly forbidden form of knowledge: religions can (and *should*) be mocked in order to highlight their flaws and enhance deeper spiritual understandings of the Divine. In this way, the Sisters seem to enjoy all of the desires of paradise while disregarding the hellfire and brimstone that many associate with this form of indulgence.

### 1.2.2 “*Holy Fools*”

The addition of the term ‘holy’ might relegate the phrase ‘holy fool’ to something that is strictly for sacred purposes. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for ‘holy’ (*qodesh*), however, simply means to ‘set apart’ or ‘separate;’<sup>49</sup> it does not specifically denote what is to be separated is meant for the Divine. In fact, the Hebrew for *qadesh* (translated as ‘Sodomite’) *also* indicates that which is to be set apart. Of course, the confusion of *qodesh* (holy) and *qadesh* (Sodomite) has potential implications for a group of queer drag nuns, especially nuns that primarily focus their good works on proper education of and protection against sexually transmitted diseases in the LGBTQ community. The New Testament also features a rhetorical doubling in regards to the term ‘holy.’<sup>50</sup> *Hagios* – which can mean both ‘holy’ and ‘accused,’ two thoughts that are

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<sup>49</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 192.

<sup>50</sup> Words with contradictory meanings, like holy, invite controversy for audiences in which individual members know only one interpretation (like god-like) but hear the other (to be set apart). In *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Kenneth Burke explains the grammatical problem demonstrated by the dual uses for the terms. By nature, the word's existence implies that the opposite must also exist; so, the “*motives* for such an act must eventually

seemingly contradictory in nature, is of Greek origin.<sup>51</sup> The connotation of the word ‘holy’ as sacred is only suggested by its usage and not one of its original uses or meanings.<sup>52</sup>

Is this doubling of meaning evident in the rhetoric of the SPI? Multiple meanings of terms rely on “terministic screens,” or filters through which the words are understood and interpreted based upon context and framing by the rhetor.<sup>53</sup> The “verbal tangle” of dual interpretation, therefore, is “a purely terministic equivalent of the problem of choice,” and “the question of de-terminism narrows down to a kind of term that within itself contains two slopes (two different judgments or ‘crises’).”<sup>54</sup> For those terms that contain seemingly contradictory interpretations, the rhetor can choose to invite that

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somehow be referred to the *scene*...which thus somehow contains the principles that make a ‘bad’ act possible” (Burke, 129). In *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Burke specifically uses the terms “order” and “disorder” to illustrate his point. The use of the term ‘order’ implies that there is a “possibility for disorder,” which suggests the opposite of the term by its use. What makes the Greek and Latin origins of the term ‘holy’ different is that the two oppositional interpretations are consumed by the use of just one term, not two: that which is sacred and accursed are described with the use of *hagios*. In essence, a closer examination of a term (and the alternative that its existence suggests) reveals motivational factors attributing to the term’s usage by the rhetor. Purpose drives the ways in which language is used, and that language then directs attention in particular ways. Burke demonstrates this further by using the example of the intentions of textbook authors: “A textbook on physics, for instance, turns the *attention* in a different direction from a textbook on law or psychology” (Burke, 450). Burke uses this concept throughout his entire corpus, but I find his explanation in *Language* to be especially helpful. 45.

<sup>51</sup> The same can be said about the Latin equivalent: *sacer*. Both languages (which are arguably the foundation for Biblical origins) have dual interpretations for what the English-speaking world knows as ‘holy.’

<sup>52</sup> “Word Study: Hagios,” last modified October 4, 2008, <http://www.fether.net/index.php?page=2008/10/04/word-study-hagios/>.

<sup>53</sup> Burke uses this concept throughout his entire corpus, but I find his explanation in *Language* to be especially helpful. Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 45.

<sup>54</sup> Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 192.

controversy into the usage of the term. I argue that the phrase ‘holy fool’ does this in that in order to complicate the understanding of spirituality. In other words, adding ‘holy’ to the term ‘fool’ implies an individual who is often set aside due to the dueling/dual nature of their personality as highlighted by the two aspects of societal fascination with fools. For the SPI, is the societal fascination and seemingly combative existence shown through the queer mocking of institutionalized religion the reason why they are met with hostility?

Holy fools are a particular type of adept that utilize their holy madness in a radical stylization of “teaching or demonstrating spiritual values.”<sup>55</sup> Using shocking tactics, holy fools seek to rise above conventional ways of thinking and inspire faith in those who witness their acts. Feuerstein creates a list of three simple motives for all adepts seeking to live eccentrically with the status quo, yet concentrically with their God:

1. To simply ‘drop out’ of conventional society in order to be able to focus attention on spiritual matters;
2. To investigate social opprobrium for the sake of cultivating humility;
- and
3. To instruct others in spiritual values.<sup>56</sup>

All elements of holy madness have these motivations, though to varying degrees. Often cast out due to their excessive and seemingly irrational behavior, holy fools are considered to be “liminal characters who travel to no-man’s-land [*sic*] between sanity and insanity or normalcy and abnormality.”<sup>57</sup> It is important to

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<sup>55</sup> Feuerstein, *Holy Madness*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Feuerstein, *Holy Madness*, 207.

<sup>57</sup> Feuerstein, *Holy Madness*, 237.

note that the job of the holy fool is to playfully deviate from, not polemically challenge, religious thought in order to divert attention away from *themselves* and toward spiritual *works*. Though the Sisters choose not to drop out of conventional society; they put an emphasis on their fundraising and other good works within their various communities.

Like any identity, holy fools are shaped by the culture that surrounds them.<sup>58</sup>

Drawn from the writings of Saint Paul, holy foolishness during early Western Orthodox Christianity alludes to both feeble-mindedness and a childlike approach to a relationship with God.<sup>59</sup> In 1 Corinthians, Paul stated: “*We are fools for Christ’s sake*, but ye are wise

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<sup>58</sup> The mythological precursor to holy madness within early spirituality is the trickster. Usually portrayed as male, the trickster represents the “juxtaposition of carnality and spirituality;” the liminal space between cleverness and irrationality (Feurstein, p. 3). Often using the body as a disruptive marker, the trickster infamously commits crude, suggestive acts as an attempt to demonstrate the absurdity of rationalizing natural chaos. Sacred clowns (also called religious or ritual clowns) also play a part in the historic foundation of holy madness. Here, the cleverness of the trickster is subtly transformed in order to produce humor and laughter. Unlike his/her circus cousins that depict either a white-faced civility or a heavily made-up immorality, ritual clowns can embody both personalities. The duality of his/her personalities cause the religious clown to seem more ambiguous than the trickster; though, the reliance upon physicality and the balancing act between foolishness and saintliness still remains. “If the clown/trickster stuff is residue from an earlier draft, you can footnote this as analogues to holy fool.”

While I do not wish to conflate the labels such as ‘trickster,’ ‘sacred clown,’ or ‘holy fool,’ it is important to recognize their similarities under the heading of ‘holy madness.’ Some scholars believe that lumping them all into one large category ignores the subtle differences that exist due to each label’s cultural differences. There are also those researchers who believe that behavioral patterns exist and those patterns should be the focus of scholarship. Since my work includes explorations from both sides of the debate, I have chosen to primarily focus on holy fools, yet occasionally mention ‘holy madness’ as a link to other cultural labels such as trickster and sacred clown. In this way, I seek to acknowledge the cultural precursors to holy fool while extending the foolishness of spiritual connection.

<sup>59</sup> Uta Frith, *Autism: The Elegant Enigma* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1989).



in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honorable, but we are despised.”<sup>60</sup> ‘Fools in Christ believed this statement completely, and were willing to do anything to follow in the footsteps of Christ in their spiritual journey. As such, a holy fool sought to give up all of their possessions in order to replicate Christ’s devotion to spiritual leadership and sacrifice. Due to this uncommon lack of regard for material possessions and proper social graces, holy fools were often publically humiliated and scrutinized.’<sup>61</sup>

In Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the holy fool (*yurodivy*) not only seeks to follow Christ’s desire to live without material possessions, but they may “pretend to be silly,” or “provoke shock or outrage by his [sic] deliberate unruliness.”<sup>62</sup> The difference between Western and Eastern Orthodox understandings of holy foolishness surfaces when addressing the intentionality of the foolish conduct. Eastern (primarily Russian) versions attribute the foolish behavior to a deliberate act in order to avoid direct praise for their piousness. The willingness to remain anonymous, revealed only after the righteous one’s death, aids in others focusing specifically on the good works, not the one doing them. The *yurodivy* commonly invoke the traditional holy fool aesthetic, merging “numerous features of Siberian shamanism” with the “traditional Christian ascetics,”<sup>63</sup> such as appearing mostly naked with nothing but a large cap to cover any part of the body.

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<sup>60</sup> 1 Corinthians 4: 10 (KJV), my emphasis.

<sup>61</sup> Jean Larchet, *Mental Disorders & Spiritual Healing: Teachings from the Early Christian East*, (San Rafael: Sophia Perennis, 2005).

<sup>62</sup> S. A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>63</sup> E. Poulakou-Rebelakou, et. al, “Holy Fools: A Religious Phenomenon of Extreme Behaviour,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 53 (2014): 95-104.

Saint Simeon, the patron saint of holy fools and puppeteers, fit the aforementioned description of a holy fool's tendencies. During the sixth century, Simeon was a Christian monk who was told by God to go to Emesa to aid His people in finding salvation. While there, Simeon demonstrated unorthodox behaviors: throwing nuts at holy men and women, dragging dead animals into a play area for children, overturning tables during meals, repeatedly appearing naked in public, among other disruptive acts. He (like many Sisters today) was often verbally and physically assaulted, but refrained from retaliating against his abusers. Under the guise of insanity, Simeon also enacted deeds worthy of sainthood, but minimized his association with them so as to focus attention on the acts instead of himself.

While the concept of the holy fool flourished in Russia, exemplars were less prominent in Western Orthodox Christianity. Thompson contends that this minimal appearance in European social life and literature may be due to the fact that the Western fool was battling other stereotypes of foolish behavior: the *agroikos* of Greek comedies as well as “the courts of Roman nobles who kept both madmen and dwarfs as part of their entourage for the sake of the amusement these unfortunates gave them.”<sup>64</sup> More appropriately represented as jesters than mystics, the focus on these particular fools seemed to be less on the spiritual communication of the fool and more on the lack of rational comprehension the fool possessed.

Shakespeare, however, smuggled a more Russian interpretation of holy fools into his works. While Shakespeare's holy fools are employed as a means to cause laughter at

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<sup>64</sup> Ewa W. Thompson, “The Archetype of the Fool in Russian Literature.” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* (15, 1973), 247.

moments of high stress, they also relieve the other characters and the audience of those dramatic situations. For example, in an infamous scene in *Macbeth*, after it is discovered that Duncan has been murdered, the porter enters and comically rambles a soliloquy. When he exits, Duncan's body is discovered. At first glance, the porter's scene seems out of place, random, nonsensical gibberish in between two emotionally charged scenes. Shakespeare knew, however, that his audience could not handle the emotional intensity for an extended length of time. The porter is meant to bring comedic relief: a humorous character and scene created to break up the emotional climb of an otherwise serious or tragic work. By doing so, Shakespeare's holy fools act as spiritual physicians, showing through folly how one can carry on after extenuating circumstances.<sup>65</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, representations of holy fools in the Eastern Orthodox tradition declined, which produced a gap in the timeline of holy foolery.<sup>66</sup> The disappearance could possibly be attributed to a rise in secular thought after the time of Descartes, given his insistence upon separating the rational and the emotional sections of the self that consigned bodily and affective behaviors (such as art) to the realm of the irrational. Contemporaries of Descartes, and even present-day philosophers, attempted to discipline the body and spirit for the sake of the mind, valuing rational thought above experiences driven by emotional and spiritual connection. Perhaps neglecting spirituality in favor of science stems from the difficulty of testing notions of the spirit. Indeed, Robert Shore-Goss argues that, "the reason for its underdeveloped theology of the Holy Spirit is because it is a dangerous theology, full of novelty, mischief, laughter, creativity,

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<sup>65</sup> Sandra J. Pyle, *Mirth and Morality of Shakespeare's Holy Fools*. (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998).

<sup>66</sup> Feurstein, *Holy Madness*, 13.

and marginality.”<sup>67</sup> A separation such as this led to a concentration on the ‘fool’ aspect of the term as opposed to ‘holy’ in more contemporary uses of the term: if the concept of the spirit is relegated to the religious few due to its ‘danger,’ the literature risks becoming scarce as well as inaccessible to those who do not hold degrees in theology. The fool, on the other hand, is still a cultural fascination and is continually exploited.

Even though holy foolishness is witnessed across the gender spectrum, most literature on holy fools paints a picture of a male-dominated history, with very few female representations.<sup>68</sup> Possible reasons for this could be attributed to feminist criticisms of heavily patriarchal structures (such as religion). Are female holy fools less likely to outwardly perform holy foolishness for fear of antagonizing feminist audiences? Another reason for the lack of representation stems from the performative label of fool: Such a grandiose stylization may come more easily for men than women, as “the latter is always, in effect, to perform a little less, given that femininity is already cast as the spectacular gender.”<sup>69</sup> If it is easier for queer men to tap into the spectacle of the transcendent transformation, it makes sense that women are not often *labeled* as holy fools even if that is how they identify.

In the twentieth century, the idea of the holy fool was revived and expanded far beyond the realm of religion to focus more on ‘chaotic’ behavior (a more ‘foolish’ focal

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<sup>67</sup> Shore-Goss, “The Holy Spirit,” 98.

<sup>68</sup> For instance, Saint Isadora is one of the few documented and frequently mentioned examples of a female holy fool. Feurstein, *Holy Madness*, 11. de la Huerta, *Coming Out*, 49.

<sup>69</sup> Judith Butler, “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification,” in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, et. al. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 32. and Judith/Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 57-59.

point for the term). Artists such as Jim Morrison, Allen Ginsberg, and Terry Gilliam were given the title of ‘holy fool’ as a nod to their disruptive behavior and artistic contribution instead of their belief in a particular spirituality.<sup>70</sup> In a progressively more secularized culture, the rhetorical disassociation from religion seems to parallel the social divergence from religion. Recently, however, there has been a surge in those seeking to revive a spiritual focus, a trend that has ushered us into a post-secular age.<sup>71</sup> In this emergent post-secular era, I argue, those who were either hurt by institutionalized religious practices or were never given the opportunity to explore religious/spiritual inquiries are searching for a way to engage that aspect of self. Moving into this post-secular age reverses the effect that the modern secular period had on holy fools: they will once again be associated with a religious or spiritual perception. In regards to the balance of mind and spirit, Georg Feuerstein highlights the need for stability between the two:

It is true that the known world appears to be patterned in a certain way, so that some of its processes are intelligible to common sense and scientific reason. But it is also true that we can perceive, if we care to look around, a great deal that is inexplicable and chaotic. Both points of view need to be taken into account to avoid slipping into simplistic world views of either optimism or pessimism. To speak of the totality of existence as chaos is, then, a heuristic device that reminds us of our ever-present proclivity to make sense of everything, to give it form, to explain and rationalize.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> For more information on these individuals cases, see: David Dalton, *Mr. Mojo Risin’: Jim Morrison, The Last Holy Fool*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991).; Deborah Baker, *A Blue Hand: The Beats in India*, (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008).; and Bob McCabe, *Dark Knights and Holy Fools: The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam*, (New York: Universe, 1999).

<sup>71</sup> Habermas, *An Awareness*.

<sup>72</sup> Feurstein, *Holy Madness*, 214.

It is important to note that while Feuerstein urges a balanced perspective, restoring that balance often necessitates a firm push from one direction or another; if the pendulum is at the far right, then achieving balance would require a push from the left.

Despite the secular undertow of modernity, religious belief and practice persists. Rhetorics of religion may offer not just a source of meaning for individuals, but also facilitate social justice on larger scales. Habermas stresses the historic element a study of religion brings, emphasizing that religions “contain indispensable semantic elements which differ fundamentally from philosophy and which may be important for the just ordering of modern societies.”<sup>73</sup> Habermas, sensing the return of religion to the public sphere, claims we are currently in an era of post-secularization, where individuals are beginning to re-establish spiritual connections and relationships.<sup>74</sup> Religion’s role, as Allport explains, still holds a great deal of power in this age, but more so in terms of political influence and moral motivation as opposed to how individuals perceive themselves in connection with their spirit.<sup>75</sup> The social role of religion, then, should be continually scrutinized and monitored so as to ensure a productive dialogue with the public.<sup>76</sup> The SPI, in providing an institutionally critical, queerly parodic representation

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<sup>73</sup> Habermas, *An Awareness*, 5-6.

<sup>74</sup> Habermas, *An Awareness*, 6.

<sup>75</sup> Allport claims that “religion is a highly personal matter; it has quite different meanings in different lives,” (Allport, p. 451) making the use of religiosity unique to each individual, but in conjunction with their social identity. Please see: Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York: Perseus Books Publishing, 1979); and Gordon W. Allport and J. Michael Ross, “Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 5 (1967): 455.

<sup>76</sup> Judith Butler, Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion and the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 4. and Habermas, *An Awareness*, 7.

of queer holy foolery, aids in broadening the dialogue of spirituality and extending/creating a role for religion.

The post-secular era is not just identified by a need to investigate religion's social role: it also highlights a yearning to seek spiritual fulfillment. Queer spiritual author Christian de la Huerta states that society falsely connects the terms 'spiritual' and 'religion' in ways that stunt spiritual growth and identification.<sup>77</sup> Feuerstein agrees with this assertion, and believes it to be the reason why religion's hold on society has left much to be desired:

Our epoch has rightly been characterized as 'post-Christian' and even 'post religious,' but it is also 'prespiritual.' That is to say, the total 'revalorization of values' envisioned by Nietzsche remains unaccomplished. The new age he heralded has yet to begin because, as a culture, we have so far failed to understand that the end of the tyranny of the old patriarchal God has set us free to find the real God, the transcendental Reality beyond religious dogmas and mere belief.<sup>78</sup>

Here, Feuerstein is referring to Nietzsche's infamous proclamation, "God is dead!"<sup>79</sup> Of course, Nietzsche did not mean that God is literally dead; but rather, the cultural connection between the concept of god and morality is inherently flawed due to the problems within institutionalized religion. Feuerstein argues that in order to fully actualize Nietzsche's ideal moral objective, society, in embracing the spiritual aspect of self, must recognize that spirituality does not have to be tied to the Church. Because of this, a discussion surrounding post-secularism is not complete without engaging in literature about the *spirit's* role in our social relationship with religion.

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<sup>77</sup> Christian de la Huerta, *Coming Out Spiritually: The Next Step* (New York: Penguin Press, 1999), 45.

<sup>78</sup> Feuerstein, *Holy Madness*, 167.

<sup>79</sup> Frederich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 120.

How, then, can we begin to account for spirituality in a post-religious society? In doing so, can we bridge the gap between body, mind, and spirit in a way that challenges preconceived notions of the separation? Within this new era, religion will still exist; yet, it will look vastly different than it did previously.<sup>80</sup> Holy fools will have a key role to play in this post-secular cultural moment: critiquing The Church (or, institutionalized religion predominantly consisting of Judeo-Christian doctrines) as it is now in order to make way for the new forms of religion. Robert Shore-Goss, a queer theologian, suggests that analyzing the spirit's embodiment through holy fools allows scholars to see how the spirit drives behaviors. According to Shore-Goss, manifestations of holy fools will reveal "unpredictability, spontaneity, rashness, selflessness, creativity, resourcefulness, foolishness, unorthodoxy, mischief, and apparent drunkenness," all attributes that hold the potential to challenge the split between the mind, body, and spirit.<sup>81</sup> Being a *queer* theologian, Shore-Goss' interpretation of holy fool inherently links to notions of queer practice, and he uses the SPI specifically as an example of holy foolishness due to their combination of foolishness with their spiritual underpinnings.<sup>82</sup> He is not the only theologian to seek queer spaces within religion and spirituality, and the rise of this type of work coincides with what Habermas' labels post-secularism. Connecting queer practices

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<sup>80</sup> Habermas, *An Awareness*, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Shore-Goss "The Holy Spirit," 98.

<sup>82</sup> Shore-Goss goes into length in his article to (re)introduce the concept of the holy fool into scholarship. This article was the inspiration for my work, but Shore-Goss stops short of making any explicit connection to queer theory or rhetorical/communicative implications. I would argue the moves he make in his analysis are queer, but using the vernacular of queer and rhetorical theories helps mutually inform the study of holy fools. It allows theologians to consider how these theories work within their study, and provides an opportunity to queer religion/spirituality. While I think his article helped point out the potential of labeling a contemporary 'holy fool' with the use of SPI, he did little to excavate exactly *what* that means in contemporary culture.



and literature with that of the holy fool is the logical next step in advancing a new idea of religion and spirituality.

### 1.2.3 “*Queer Holy Fool*”

Queering as a theoretical practice is inherently disruptive. Reflection with a queer lens shifts “ways of being and knowing that stand outside of conventional understandings of success.”<sup>83</sup> In this context, queering refers not just to gender issues but the act of disrupting normative thought – a type of ‘foolery’ of its own.<sup>84</sup> Queering performances challenge normative perceptions, “revel[ing] in the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion, and that seeks not to explain but to involve.”<sup>85</sup> Surprise, shock, and ruptures are uncomfortable, yes, but they are also more engaging than complacency. Applying queer theory to the idea of holy foolery requires an understanding of the theoretical frameworks that are meant to describe those particular disruptions in order to engage in a “language of critique and a language of possibility.”<sup>86</sup> Queering Christianity through the spiritual performances of holy fools seems to be one way in which a post-secular age can disrupt a mind/body dualism, as it provides alternatives for a spirituality that is an extension of the collapse of mind and body.<sup>87</sup> For instance, the SPI seeks to provide spiritual resources for the queer community, while simultaneously passing out condoms and discussing logical reasons for taking care of queer bodies. Queering can

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<sup>83</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Art*, 2.

<sup>84</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York University Press, 1996).

<sup>85</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Art*, 15.

<sup>86</sup> Bryant Alexander, “Querying Queer Theory Again (or Queer Theory as Drag Performance),” *Journal of Homosexuality* 45 (2003):352.

<sup>87</sup> Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliars, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 157-158.

either be done argumentatively (through inverting the substance) or through a specific style (actively performing the queer inversion of the normative). Though both are important aspects of the queering process, this dissertation specifically looks to the style through which the SPI engages audiences as stylistic elements have historically played a part in identifying holy fools.

Indeed, this appears to be one key historical function of holy fools. For example, Ewa Thompson explains that in the Russian history of foolishness, an individual who was considered to be a holy fool could “consciously decide to feign madness in order to produce religious or moral reflection in others.”<sup>88</sup> Disrupting normative ways of thinking in order to produce a series of effects directly parallels Butler’s notion of gender performativity. Butler clarifies that gender, being something we do as opposed to something we are, can be socially constructed in a way which places expectations on how we can perform it.<sup>89</sup> For example, it is socially acceptable for a cis-gender female to wear a dress to a formal dance; it is less appropriate for a cis-gender male to do the same. Beyond the wearing of clothing, the repetition of expressions of gender solidifies a particular way of looking at gender norms. In order to break the hold normative expectations have on the way a society thinks, individuals must perform gender in such a way that society begins to question why a particular practice is considered to be ‘normal’ in the first place. Extending Thompson’s hypothesis about the function of holy fools in light of Butler’s performativity, I claim that a holy fool acts as a means to “produce

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<sup>88</sup> Donald Fiene, “Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture by Ewa M. Thompson Review by: Donald M. Fiene.” *The Slavic and Eastern European Journal*, 32 (1988), 152.; also Thompson, “The Archetype,” 247.

<sup>89</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

religious and moral reflection.” Acting as a holy fool is a way in which individuals can challenge normative views of religion by disrupting ways in which society views that particular religion.<sup>90</sup> This momentary fracture inspires moments of reflection in which individuals can question what and why a particular spiritual connection is ‘normal.’

What is or is not perceived as ‘normal’ in The Church stirs tensions on a variety of levels. E. Patrick Johnson claims that The Church can be “not just a space of condemnation, but also one of celebration and recognition.”<sup>91</sup> He further explains that many individuals will compartmentalize their identity when hearing homophobic messages, either by telling themselves the messages do not apply to them or by acknowledging that everyone has their own sin. Bohache’s approach takes this one step further, positing that within this identity gap, it could be possible to develop an “unapologetic queer Christology,” or a Christianity created through a queer lens.<sup>92</sup> His work on queer Christology is mainly focused on interpretations of Christ as an example for the queer community; a reclaiming of Christian narratives for application and appropriation in queer lives. This approach not only addresses the homophobia in The Church, but also the christophobia lurking in the identity gap: a potential contribution to the ‘self-hating queer’ phenomenon. Christophobia, or the “deep-seated feeling among many gays and lesbians that Jesus Christ is not an option for them,” is undoubtedly caused by rejection and wrongs done to queer individuals by the church, and can lead to

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<sup>90</sup> Shore-Goss “The Holy Spirit.”

<sup>91</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, “After You’ve Done All You Can, You Just Stand: On Queer Performance and Censorship,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33 (2013): 212.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas Bohache, “Embodiment as Incarnation: An Incipient Queer Christology,” *Theology and Sexuality* 10 (2003): 16.

feeling of depression and instability within religious identity.<sup>93</sup> Undoubtedly, this phobia also stems from harms—physical, psychical, and rhetorical—done to queer Christians within The Church. Bohache suggests that it is imperative that Christology be queered as well as queried in order to problematize hetero-patriarchal norms and reveal a way in which reconciliation can occur between both gender and religious identities.

While there is undoubtedly a friction that exists between queer individuals and organized religion,<sup>94</sup> many queer theologians and scholars see the benefit of reclaiming God and religious morality before it is used oppressively against LGBTQ persons.<sup>95</sup> Much work on religious/spirituality studies that utilizes a queer lens has sought to find the queer voices within sacred texts by interpreting problematic passages as queer friendly.<sup>96</sup> As with most elements of queer theory, this is meant to ‘ruffle a few feathers’ so to speak, but never in a way that is offensive or oppressive to another form of theology (or lack thereof). Much of this work is done to create a possibility of being and form a relationship between the lessons in scripture and the divine. Queer theologian Peter Cheng furthers this conversation in his book *From Sin to Amazing Grace* by describing the elements of a “Queer Christ,” or one that embodies certain attributes that bring them

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<sup>93</sup> Bohache, “Embodiment,” 12.

<sup>94</sup> Bohache, “Embodiment.”

<sup>95</sup> de la Huerta, *Coming Out*, 50.

<sup>96</sup> According to Peter Cheng, there are typically four foundations that theologians adopt when incorporating queer ideas: apologetic, liberation, relational, and queer. Finding inspiration with queer theorists, theologians who view queer theory see sex and gender as fluid identities that should be allowed to shift as necessary. This is an important element, as a label of a queer identity does not necessarily mean that the person is enacting a form of queer theology. See: Patrick S. Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ* (New York: Seabury Books, 2012).

closer to the spiritual.<sup>97</sup> Some theologians, with extensive interpretations of Biblical passages as proof, go so far as to claim Christ himself was queer.<sup>98</sup> Melissa Wilcox incorporates more critical aspects into her work on religion and gender, including the notion that the Sisters are controversial due to ushering their sexuality and spirituality into the public sphere.<sup>99</sup>

Not only do the Sisters test traditional views of religion, but they also confront normative understandings of the Divine. Family, specifically family that is co-constructed and not tied to biology, is an important part of the LGBTQ community. As stated earlier, many queer individuals who come from a religious household are asked to leave the home once they come out of the closet. Their family of origin, then, stays connected to the original Church. The Sisters provide a type of fellowship that embraces the community as family, bringing a familial blessing to those who need it – a special type of Divine. Their queer social positioning allows them access to this fictive kin conceptualization, stretching the notion of holy fool in the process. If holy fools were traditionally loners and social outcasts, what does the Sisters new application of a *familial* connection mean for queer holy fools?

Holy fools demonstrate a more radical way to establish a balancing or transcending of dualisms, a practice I take to be inherently queer.<sup>100</sup> While fools can

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<sup>97</sup> Cheng, *From Sin*, 5.

<sup>98</sup> Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002).

<sup>99</sup> Melissa M. Wilcox, “The Separation of Church and Sex: Conservative Catholics and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence,” *emisférica* 12 (2016).

<sup>100</sup> Here, I am speaking of the insistence of both/and as opposed to either/or, forcing what could be a dualism to live together. Queer theory imagines and provides space to allow for the multiplicities of being that occur in a single entity (such as queer *and* Christian). I

provide new perspectives and information when such ideas are desired, “it is not practically possible to maintain such a state constantly.”<sup>101</sup> Feuerstein contends that the only purpose of those wielding holy madness is to awaken individuals who need a spiritual transcendence; yet, holy fools encourage self-reflexivity:

Holy Fools remind us that the social, political and cultural assumptions run so deep that we consider them universal truths but that they are not and that Life has a spiritual dimension that we can experience by creating a different spiritual relationship with the Macrocosmos; that there are times when we might gain insight by leaving our positions of rationalization and welcome the circumstances, experiences and events that the apparently ‘crazy’ world of Unknown and ‘bizarre’ might show us.<sup>102</sup>

Drawing attention to their bizarre nature can create a divide between those who only see the conventional interpretation (economically unsound/irrational) and those who are spiritually sensitive to the deeper meaning behind the dramatic behavior.<sup>103</sup>

Melancholy, too, finds a place within queering holy fools. Damien Smith Pfister argues that Freud, in muting the dialectical dynamic of melancholy by psychoanalyzing its connection to the ego, “set late modern public culture down a crooked path that led to the medicalization of melancholy (and the consequent mood-managing drugs).”<sup>104</sup>

Though this result proves detrimental to the understanding of mental illness/disorders for years to come, Freud’s explanation of melancholy also informs later interpretations of queer literature. Using her own interpretation of Freud, Judith Butler defines melancholy

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argue that this stance considers ‘real life’ scenarios: two conflicting identities could co-habitat, so why force their division?

<sup>101</sup> Bayley, “Look What Fools.”

<sup>102</sup> Bayley, “Look What Fools.”

<sup>103</sup> Feuerstein, *Holy Madness*, 207.

<sup>104</sup> Pfister, *Networked Media*, 114.

as “the *unfinished* process of grieving, central to the formation of those identifications which form the ego itself.”<sup>105</sup> Much like the fool, Butler’s description of the grieving process arises from the predicament of living within a particular culture that has in some way hurt the individual or seems incapable of empathy. For queer bodies, this hurt comes in the form of the disciplining of their bodies and the inability to live as the other gender; melancholy is literally a “mourning of unlived possibilities.”<sup>106</sup> Recall Habermas’ previous statement regarding melancholy and religious performances: does the queer holy fool serve to mourn traditional religious practices while celebrating new spiritual possibilities? Do they invite possibilities of spiritual identification for those who are ostracized due to religious dogma?

The original video of the Hunky Jesus contest shocked me in a way that I was not expecting. I hate to admit it, but I was initially offended by the video and thought about writing a project based on their clear mockery. As I continued to research, however, I discovered that the troubles I grappled with had nothing to do with the presentation, but more with my own conceptualization of how Jesus and other holy images are *supposed to be* depicted. It was refreshing to play with my spiritual identity. To challenge it. To *queer* it. This project is meant to get a sense of how individuals have been doing this same practice since the inception of the holy fool and what it means now that we are coming into an era that is post-secular. How has it evolved? What possibilities does this style hold for those willing to play with their own spiritual identity? How does the Sister’s

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<sup>105</sup> Butler, “Melancholy Gender,” 21.

<sup>106</sup> Butler, “Melancholy Gender,” 22.

style of queer holy foolery contribute to understandings of current post-secular/pre-spiritual and queer movements?



## CHAPTER TWO

### Conceptual Framework: Situation, Style, and the SPI

What is style? Beginning to answer that question requires understanding situation, for styles respond to situations at the same time that styles transform situations. The rhetorical situation, or “the context in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse,” requires an exigence, or a situation that requires action.<sup>1</sup> An exigence is what motivates rhetoric: rhetoric exists as a mode of “altering reality...the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action.”<sup>2</sup> Situations shape the production of rhetorical style: they invite “a *fitting* response.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, different rhetorical situations call for particular rhetorical styles. Rhetorical style, according to Robert Hariman, is a “*coherent repertoire of rhetorical conventions depending on aesthetic reactions for political effect.*”<sup>4</sup> These rhetorical conventions are often based upon certain interests, ideologies, and motivations of the rhetor. Styles are thus culturally bound, becoming a reflection of the particular rhetor’s worldview and beliefs. As a result, studying rhetorical style is a method to understand the dynamics of a particular culture. Hariman also argues that each style “requires repeated reproduction of a limited number of motifs.”<sup>5</sup> Like gender, the repetition of these motifs produces intelligible effects.

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<sup>1</sup> Lloyd Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1 (1968), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” 4.

<sup>3</sup> Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” 10, my emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Hariman, *Political Style: The Artistry of Power* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4, original emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> Hariman, *Political Style*, 11.

Since all rhetors draw on stylistic choices in determining the appropriate responses to particular situations, then “literally, our world is styled.”<sup>6</sup> If that is the case, how can scholars possibly study such a phenomenon? Much scholarship on style focuses on formalized delivery, specifically, public address.<sup>7</sup> Arguing for the impact of style, Anna Young operationalizes style as an extension of *logos* – “the discourse of our moment, an argument intellectuals make for (or against) broader relevance.”<sup>8</sup> Viewed as logical argumentation, it is clear why some audiences react favorably or unfavorably to particular stylistic choices. Style, Young posits, functions as *logos* due to the thought that goes into deciding on the stylistic choices that will best represent the rhetor’s fitting response. Each aspect of style performs an argument about the rhetor’s position on the subject.

Reframing Bourdieu’s explanation of *habitus* as a way to understand the *logos* of style, Young explains that there are three elements of style to consider: physiological, psychological, and sociological.<sup>9</sup> The physiological dimension is the performative aspect of style – what is happening to embody the rhetorical aspects of the intended strategy. Imitation is important to this element, and occurs when the rhetor senses that particular culturally bound shifts are occurring, and proceeds to aesthetically react in order to

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<sup>6</sup> Anna M. Young, *Prophets, Gurus and Pundits: Rhetorical Styles and Public Engagement* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2014), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Young, *Prophets*.

<sup>8</sup> Young, *Prophets*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Young never explicitly reveals her interpretation of *habitus*, but it appears to be operationalized as cultural norms that become internalized and impact action, thinking, and feeling. These can become everyday routine, but can resist so if we stray from our normal environment.

“create a system of meaning.”<sup>10</sup> The stylistic dimensions of this system of meaning convey the ideology, interests, and perhaps even the arguments that the rhetor is attempting to produce.

The psychological element acts as a check on the coherence of the rhetor’s words and performance: when what the person says matches their physiological representation, they are actualizing their psychological style. For Young, “style is as much about identity as identification,” making it necessary “for others to be comfortable” in the representation of that identity.<sup>11</sup> According to Young, physiological style is malleable and liminal, changing as fads go in and out of fashion and flows along with salient pop culture/current event topics. Psychological style, however, represents the essence of a particular style.<sup>12</sup> Psychological style can also be molded by culture (as it stems from a particular *habitus*), but it tends to resist change more than the physiological.

Because style can contextually help identify and comprehend a culture, it is naturally a social and public performance. Style is how a rhetor interacts with other individuals, and “must be publicly visible and performed as well as publicly acknowledged as successful or unsuccessful.”<sup>13</sup> Sociology, as the third and final element of Young’s *logos* of style, is how an argument manifests itself for an audience, which inherently includes audience reaction to the stylistic choices made in argument presentation. In regards to rhetorical situations, the sociological element accounts for the audiences (both intentional and unintentional) that relate to the rhetor. Primarily, when

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<sup>10</sup> Young, *Prophets*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Young, *Prophets*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Young, *Prophets*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Young, *Prophets*, 10.

Young uses the term “sociological,” she is not referring to the field of sociology, but rather, the social consequences (both positive and negative) of a style’s interaction with an audience.

While Young’s elements of style offer useful guidelines for an analysis of a particular style, I revise her terminology slightly in order to examine the three elements that constitute a *queer holy fool* style in the three chapters that are the heart of this dissertation’s analysis. The inspiration for this revision is drawn from queer theory. I assume, first, that who you are is “partly a matter of how you speak, how you write, as well as a matter of embodiment – how you look, how you hold yourself, how you move, and so forth.”<sup>14</sup> Identity, following a line articulated by queer theorists, is best expressed as *identification* – a process, performance, or performative. As Butler notes, performatives also describe symbolic action, or our verbal utterances and communication. Discourse articulates power relations *through* performatives.<sup>15</sup> Take, for example, when a doctor exclaims, “It’s a girl!” after the moment when a child is born. That performative utterance powerfully labels the child as ‘girl,’ which begins the process of gender disciplining.<sup>16</sup> If style is performed through discourse about the body and discourse

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<sup>14</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 159.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, “Critically Queer.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Queer Studies* 1 (1993), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Here, performance vs. performativity implies a common argument within the performance of identity. Performance, according to Butler, can denote simply the putting on/taking off of an identity (much like an actress puts on/takes off her costume following a play). Performativity, on the other hand, suggests much more commitment – it is the *repetition of performances* that lead to a series of effects based on those actions. It is important to note that both performance and performativity can also refer to speech as well as speech acts, so both physical and vocal action can be classified as either performance or performativity. In regards to the check in Young’s psychological, looking

uttered by the body, then analyzing textual and hypertextual modes of communication is crucial in deciphering elements of style. Given these assumptions, I depart from Young in analyzing bodily performances as “embodied” rather than “physiological.” Similarly, since the psychological connotes internal cognitive processes rather than externalized communicative processes, I am more focused on analyzing rhetorical texts that have been produced by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. I do concur with Young’s conceptualization of “sociological” style as the consequences of interacting with an audience, and use her term as my third element of style.

Young offers a useful breakdown of particular parts of style, but *why* is identifying particular styles worthwhile for critics? Quite simply, by analyzing style in its embodied, textual/hypertextual, and social dimensions, I hope to illuminate the fittingness of the SPI’s rhetoric in responding to their particular situation and features of the queer culture that they cultivate. To provide a methodological insight for a study about queer style, I turn to Erin Rand’s exploration of the Lesbian Avengers. In her analysis, she examines how the Lesbian Avengers grapple with the tensions between homophobic perceptions of same sex parents and the hip quality of lesbian chic.<sup>17</sup> Rand begins by describing the Lesbian Avenger’s strategy for gaining visibility through both textual and visual representations.<sup>18</sup> Here, she elucidates various ways the Lesbian Avengers communicate with each other as well as their audience through examining

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at a comparison of text and embodied demonstrates whether the rhetor truly represents what they say.

<sup>17</sup> Erin J. Rand, “An Appetite for Activism: The Lesbian Avengers and the Queer Politics of Visibility,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 36 (2013).

<sup>18</sup> Erin J. Rand, *Reclaiming Queer: Activist and Academic Rhetorics of Resistance* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014), 93.

accounts of their creation and descriptions of events. Looking to an analysis of rhetorical tropes to guide her analysis, Rand found that the Lesbian Avengers employed a party trope – which can be seen in descriptions of fundraising events as “fun and sex: rather than applying for grant money, their primary fundraisers were ‘wild, creative, insane parties.’”<sup>19</sup> Her findings contribute to an understanding of the Lesbian Avengers textual style. Next, Rand describes practices that are identifiably a part of the group’s rituals. Fire eating, for instance, has become part of the group’s repertoire of rhetorical action. Actions like this are common practices at their protests, leading Rand to describe them as having a “carnavalesque nature.”<sup>20</sup> These rituals provide examples of what Rand labels the Lesbian Avengers’ “*embodied* tactics for garnering attention and visibility” – similar to the SPI.<sup>21</sup> Finally, Rand analyzes the publications (both queer and mainstream) that pick up stories about the Lesbian Avengers. She initiates a critique about *how* the media focuses on their style, specifically honing in on the “lesbian chic” that is fetishized through the more mainstream forms of media.<sup>22</sup> This last aspect of her analysis provides a glimpse of the Lesbian Avengers interaction with an audience, and acts as a guide as I uncover responses to the SPI’s sociological style.

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<sup>19</sup> Rand, *Reclaiming Queer*, 91, my emphasis. Rand is citing the Lesbian Avenger handbook.

<sup>20</sup> Rand, “An Appetite,” 123.

<sup>21</sup> Rand, *Reclaiming Queer*, 94, my emphasis. The use of “embodied” here aided in my renaming of Young’s first aspect of style.

<sup>22</sup> Rand, “An Appetite,” 124. Lesbian chic, or a superficial fascination with lesbians in the media, is embraced by The Lesbian Avengers, and they often use it to garner media attention. Rand explains that this stylistic choice to embrace lesbian chic introduces “a queer excess or indeterminacy that calls into question the political effects of visibility and underlines the extent to which visibility always works both within and against dominant cultural formations.”

The way Rand refers to The Lesbian Avengers (“eye-catching,” “audacious,” and “spectacle”) is similar to the summation of the SPI given by Shore-Goss (“clown mirror,” “bold,” “parody”).<sup>23</sup> The two groups are alike insofar as both desire visibility. Rand’s approach is a model for studying the style of queer holy fools by blending traditional rhetorical analysis and queer theory; yet, to account for the spiritual dimensions of the Sisters, I integrate work by Christopher Campbell and Johan Cilliers on the rhetoric of folly employed by holy fools. This rhetorical strategy “interrupts the conventions and rationalities of the old age and creates a liminal space at the juncture of ages,”<sup>24</sup> creating new perspectives while challenging old ways of thinking about religion. A commonly used anecdote to illustrate this concept is the character of the Ridiculous Man in Dostoyevsky’s *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*.<sup>25</sup> In the story, a man decides to completely give up on the world and falls asleep wrapped in ideas of cynicism and dejection. While asleep, he dreams he comes face to face with salvation (which he sees as universal harmony), but because there is no Christ in his dream world, the opportunity for salvation is easily destroyed. When the man awakes, he realizes that his dream could never come to fruition as he believes there is a Christ that made salvation possible. He comes to the conclusion that though the despair he felt in the dream parallels the despair he feels when he is awake, there is still hope because there is salvation. Preaching and living his life to the fullest now becomes the man’s only wish; yet, when he *tries* to communicate the dream, words fail him and he often appears to be babbling when trying

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<sup>23</sup> Rand, “An Appetite,” 122.; Shore-Goss, “The Holy-Spirit”, 106, 112.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell and Cilliers, *Preaching Fools*, 181.

<sup>25</sup> Fyoder Dostoyevsky, “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man: A Fantastic Story,” in *The Best Short Stories of Fyodor Dostoyevsky*, trans. David Magarshak (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

to describe his dream. “They call me a madman now,” the man proclaims, stressing that due to his unconventional way of knowing about Christ, his audience is unable to see his homiletic for what it means.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the difficulties that holy fools may have in communicating with their audience, Campbell and Cilliars argue that the rhetoric of folly opens up spaces for potential dialogue amongst the audience members, if not between the fool and their audience.<sup>27</sup> Since this strategy relies on ambiguity and indirection, folly is risky, as the motivation for disruptive action may or may not be perceived by the audience. Rhetorics of folly, though, are needed when religious practices become stagnant, or as in the instance of the Ridiculous Man and his cynicism about the world, when there is only one way of viewing life.<sup>28</sup> Typically, this strategy is adopted by rhetors who have themselves been fooled by elements of religious discourse, a disruption they feel needs to be present in their own actions.<sup>29</sup>

Individual wielders of a rhetoric of folly *must* find a way to master the gospel in their own words.<sup>30</sup> The rhetorical strategies of each foolish preacher will thus vary depending upon their unique personality. Campbell and Cilliars explain how Desmond Tutu performs rhetorics of folly by sharing this famous anecdote about Tutu: “when Dr. Piet Koornhof declared boldly during a visit abroad that ‘apartheid is dead,’ Tutu retorted, ‘Apartheid, we were told by Dr. Koornof, is dead. Sadly, we have not been

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<sup>26</sup> Dostoyevsky, “The Dream,” 263

<sup>27</sup> Campbell and Cilliars, *Preaching Folly*, 183.

<sup>28</sup> Campbell and Cilliars, *Preaching Folly*, 210.

<sup>29</sup> Campbell and Cilliars, *Preaching Folly*, 181.

<sup>30</sup> Campbell and Cilliars, *Preaching Folly*, 183.



invited to the funeral nor have we seen the corpse.”<sup>31</sup> In this example, Tutu used irony as a way to disrupt the notion that apartheid had ended in South Africa. By positioning a response ironically, Tutu demonstrated the absurdity of the concept that apartheid was dead by allowing those who heard his statement to ponder the funeral.

The rhetoric of folly is one way that holy foolishness is enacted in order to lampoon convention and generate alternative insights into the nature of spirituality and religious community. However, I am interested in identifying and understanding the style of rhetoric employed by holy fools beyond the rhetoric of folly. I argue that the rhetoric of folly is too limiting for understanding contemporary holy fools because it does not account for the various intersections of identity; specifically, those who engage in *queering* their spirituality. While Campbell and Cilliars give examples of Christian leaders and organization that employ particular strategies, they do not go beyond the Gospel to help explain what is happening. In other words, they utilize Christianity specifically in their exemplars, not allowing other influences to inform their work. Adding queer theory invites an exploration into marginalized gender identities, raising questions that conventional analysis of the rhetoric of folly does not acknowledgment. Thus, while I ground this study in rhetorical style, I juxtapose work on the rhetoric of folly with queer theory in order to sketch out key rhetorical features of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

## 2.2 The SPI’s Queer Holy Fool Style

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<sup>31</sup> Campbell and Cilliars, *Preaching Folly*, 196.

In this section, I explicitly connect these theoretical and methodological insights to the SPI in sketching out the rest of this dissertation. First, I consider the Sisters' rhetorical situation, before moving to my methods of rhetorical analysis. Then, I break down how the three elements of queer holy fool style (embodiment, textual/hypertextual, sociological) aid in illuminating the SPI's communication of their fitting response to a queer, post-secular situation.

The rhetorical situation which helps define the style of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence is constantly in flux.<sup>32</sup> Though their usual audience consists of members of LGBTQ communities who are yearning for the Sisters' type of queer spirituality, their audience (and their situation) changes continuously through various forms of media. Whether it is physically seeing them at their festivities or viewing them via news coverage, the Sisters' audience expands greatly when factoring in the recording of many of their soirees and broader internet viewership. For this larger, and largely unknown audience, the Sisters are taking what is normatively understood as religious or spiritual and crafting it into their own style of holy foolishness.

To begin defining the queer holy fool style, I locate "mirror texts," or case studies that "equip the reader to analyze general patterns of identification that operate across the diverse and often fragmented episodes of modern politics."<sup>33</sup> As Rand's account of the Lesbian Avengers shows, these texts can include textual/visual excerpts, rituals, as well as historical accounts and comparisons.<sup>34</sup> My method thus requires the pulling together of

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<sup>32</sup> Barbara A. Biesecker, "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of Difference," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 22 (1989), 126.

<sup>33</sup> Hariman, *Political Style*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> The case studies may seem fragmented: a series of discourses from or about the chosen artifact. Any "apparently finished discourse" is, in reality, a "dense reconstruction of all

these various fragments in order analyze and theorize a contemporary queer holy fool style. By analyzing the group's performances, texts/hypertexts, and interaction with their audience, I create a text to mine for rhetorical choices that relate to style. To narrow the specific fragments for my analysis, I not only look to particular performative actions and ways in which the group communicates with their audience, but I also rely on Young's three elements of style. The Sisters' are infamous for their challenges to religion, and as the interview in the introductory chapter states (and the title of this work implies), they *know* they are mocking traditional religious conventions. Thus, Campbell and Cillier's rhetoric of folly is undoubtedly located within the sociological consequences of style. Keeping in mind the critique of style as an inherently performative resource, I adjust my elements of style to embodied analysis, textual/hypertextual communication, and how audiences relate to the style (sociological).

In the next three sections, I give a more detailed sketch of each case study chapter, focusing respectively on what it means to do an analysis of embodiment, texts and hypertexts, and the sociology of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. In each section, I explain the theoretical resources that I draw from and the objects of analysis that is featured in each section. I use the SPI's multi-modal website as a hub for the various texts, and follow the discursive tendrils available. In other words, all of the artifacts that I

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the bits of other discourses from which it was made." In other words, streaming fragments together allows the critic to construct the story of the analysis, articulating pieces of the puzzle until the picture of the artifact is complete. Michael C. McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990).

use to investigate the Sisters can be traced back to the website or the organization's YouTube page.

### ***2.2.1 Embodied Analysis***

In chapter three, I focus on the rituals, performances, and overall aesthetic of the SPI's typical look. All three elements (rituals, performances, dress) demonstrate the *embodied* queer holy fool. To analyze their embodiment, I turn to Butler's notions of performance and performativity, the queer camp aesthetic, and the use of rhetorical parody as a means of critiquing normative performances of religion.

Embodiment, for the purposes of this study, includes those physical performances of queer holy foolishness that exhibit the political style of that identity. The Lesbian Avengers used rituals to acquire attention and present themselves and their mission to their audience.<sup>35</sup> The centrality of performance is a major contribution of queer theory: gender is viewed as a series of effects that result from particular performances which, over time, begin to congeal and create a perception of a specific gender label (masculine, feminine, androgyne, for example). Queer theory is useful in examining moments in which normative performances of gender are playfully executed, thus opening a space to interrogate their acceptance as 'normal' practices.<sup>36</sup>

One such presentation of style is what is known as 'camp.' Queer theorists employ the use of *camp* to perform a unique type of humor.<sup>37</sup> Camp is an aesthetic

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<sup>35</sup> Rand, *Reclaiming Queer*, 91.

<sup>36</sup> Gender is but one example of queer theory querying identity. Queer theorists challenge many normative identities, including but not limited to: ableism, race, and body size.

<sup>37</sup> de la Huerta, *Coming Out*, 16.; Nancy Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in ed. William Phillips *Partisan Review* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964), 12. Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egly Waggoner, *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008).

perspective, a particular stylization that “converts the serious into the frivolous.”<sup>38</sup> The idea of camp can be demonstrated through clothes, movies, people, etc., such as the flamboyant wardrobe worn by Liberace, the over the top antics within the film *Hairspray*, and the fabulous drag queen RuPaul. Obviously, the Sisters’ dress acts as a marker of embodied stylistic choice. Their colorful make-up and wild choices for habits make them the center of attention at events. The appearance is playful, but also intentional, and helps communicate a part of each Sister’s role in the organization. The use of make-up (or the absence of make-up), the color of the habit, and even the shape of their head covering all convey something about the nun wearing it.<sup>39</sup>

Camp encompasses a variety of rhetorical strategies: parody, aesthetics, and resistance.<sup>40</sup> All of these elements offer ways to investigate the SPI - parody in particular explains how performances can challenge conventional ways of knowing through strategic juxtaposition.<sup>41</sup> As a characterization of style, tropes are “heuristic uses of language’s inherently symbolic nature traditionally associated with poetic language, but extending into the everyday lexicon as well.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, tropes make salient the

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<sup>38</sup> Nancy Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 2.

<sup>39</sup> The SPI website features pictures of habits from orders all across the globe. Each shape is different depending on where the Sister is from. For instance, Sisters from Texas must incorporate a cowboy hat shape in their headwear. “World-Orders,” The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, accessed April 18, 2015, <http://www.thesisters.org/world-orders>.

<sup>40</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 29.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Hariman, “Political Parody and Public Culture,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94 (2008), 247. To clarify, Shugart and Waggoner define “anchor” and “foils” as those characters which provide context to the situation in order to label the rhetorical strategy “camp.” Specifically, “foils” are those “characters that serve as the contemporaneous backdrop against which camp emerges,” and “anchors” are “characters that also serve to define camp performances, albeit via ironic congruence rather than contrast.” Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 58.

<sup>42</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 50.

conventions of language and performance that are taken for granted in individual language games. The SPI uses the traditional trope of a Catholic nun and strategically juxtaposes that with conventions used in drag. Relying on a physical marker that most people know (the nun), the SPI's particular brand of camp does not require the audience to know a great deal about the Catholic church, they just need to know that a nun is representative of The Church. Doing so forces the audience to think about the normalization of certain religious practices, highlighting the human-made (not natural or Divine) aspects of such a performance.

What does the style of queer holy fools look like? The apparent mocking of habits worn by catholic nuns is clearly camp, but is only the surface level embodying the SPI's *logos*. Videos of the SPI's rituals, such as Project Nunway, along with other events available on the website, demonstrate their performances. One of those videos, called *Angels in Whiteface*, is a collection of older video footage of the Sisters at Pride Parades, inductions of new Sisters, and interviews with members discussing why they joined and what they believe the SPI represents. A newly minted Saint (Saint Reel 2 Real 4 Realz) has recently released a documentary about the Sisters which features select members discussing the organization as they are putting on make-up. This process of putting on make-up transforms the individuals from 'normal' people into the queer holy fool. Such videos give insight into the ways in which members of the SPI use their bodies and ways of dress (or, not dress) to communicate.

### ***2.2.2 Textual/Hypertextual Analysis***

Whereas the dominant tradition in rhetorical studies is to analyze public addresses through formal 'podium speeches,' analyzing the rhetoric of contemporary queer holy

fools requires looking at contemporary modes of public address, i.e. websites. Websites are now a valuable resource for scholars wishing to gain insight into the history of particular groups, and those wishing to study holy fools are no different. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence have a main website which features the ‘Sistory’ (the group’s written history), YouTube videos (including their contribution to the *It Gets Better* campaign), as well as links to other Abbeys all across the globe.

In “Critically Queer,” Butler asserts that the provisional success of any form of communication requires an echo of prior action; specifically, “no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force.”<sup>43</sup> This means that embodiment and rhetoric are linked (the embodiment being the action, the term or statement being the linguistic rhetorical response) and require similar features in order to function (context, symbolic history, interpretation), so combining the two is both inevitable and necessary for my analysis.

The connection between rhetoric and queer theory can be understood by beginning with the problematic attempt to stabilize language. Stabilizing language assumes that a particular word only has one specific meaning; yet, words themselves rely on context to derive their meaning. In other words, the meaning of a word lies not in the word itself; but rather, the interpretation of the receiver. Specific words that seem to carry only one meaning do so because of the conditions surrounding their use; therefore, language can develop into a universalized meaning.<sup>44</sup> The governed, universalized

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<sup>43</sup> Butler, “Critically Queer,” 18.

<sup>44</sup> The façade of universal meaning makes rhetorical work the study of “misunderstanding and its remedies.” I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford, 1936), 10.

meaning developed from cultural understandings inform rhetorical conventions and speaking patterns.<sup>45</sup> “Repetitions, literary and historical allusions, and emotional appeals” are only a few of the conventions that reveal cultural norms.<sup>46</sup> Because rhetorical strategies are also connected with *cultural* practices, style reveals both personal and public aspects of the rhetor. Textual analysis, for this dissertation, refers to those rhetorical conventions which expose cultural and identifying qualities of the rhetor that inherently link to style. This definition of textual refers to linguistic as well as visual, as visual rhetoric also acts as a “means of persuasion.”<sup>47</sup> The difference between my analysis of the embodied and the textual is that embodiment refers to the physical performance of the body (speech act), while textual is the visual or linguistic rhetoric (speech).

For instance, four rhetorical figures (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony) speak to the rhetor’s effort to have the audience perceive various perspectives.<sup>48</sup> Metaphor allows the audience to view “something in terms of something else,” (e.g. The first line of the Sister’s history is “Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Inc. – A *blow-by-blow* account.”) and metonymy makes “some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible” (Their names often evoke something religious or spiritual, making

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<sup>45</sup> Carolyn Boiarsky, “The Relationship Between Cultural and Rhetorical Conventions: Engaging in International Communication,” *Technical Communication Quarterly* 4 (1995), 246.

<sup>46</sup> Boiarsky, “The Relationship,” 247.

<sup>47</sup> Franklin Haiman, “The Rhetoric of the Streets,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (1967), 99.

<sup>48</sup> Burke, *Grammar*. David Tell, “Burke’s Encounter with Ransom: Rhetoric and Epistemology in ‘Four Master Tropes,’” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34 (2004), 37.



that Sister herself a metonymy, i.e. Sister Celeste L. Powers).<sup>49</sup> Synecdoche, as I have already discussed, deals with representation (Calling the San Francisco Abbey the “Mother House,” though they admit that the cultures are different around the world). In the case of the SPI, I am using the physical Sisters as a representation of the concept queer holy fool style. Finally, irony speaks to how these terms interact with one another, how the terms hold “conflicting perspectives in productive tension” (“The “Play Fair” section of their website discusses safe sex practices, which begs the question: Is ‘indulging safely’ still ‘indulging?’).<sup>50</sup> I also look to the Sister’s use of visual rhetoric to examine how they position a ‘fitting’ response to call the community to their events. Though not discussed, changes in these particular textual examples (if archived) should be noted to trace the style. Rand demonstrates the difference between old and new feminisms, but did the Lesbian Avengers change their style over time? How has the SPI’s style transformed? My study investigates the SPI’s archived differences in order to track stylistic changes.

The Sisters’ website offers a veritable cornucopia for textual and hypertextual study. Not only is the SPI’s historical archive available there, but the website also archives fliers, allowing a visual analysis of the text as well. Following Rand’s lead, I look to rhetorical strategies employed by the SPI. Drawing heavily on the four major

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<sup>49</sup> Though “blow by blow” may seem to initially be double entendre as opposed to metaphor, the use of body parts can cross into metaphor. In the Proverbs, for instance, the use of the mouth is suggestive (the mouth as “container or pleasing receptacle that is pleasing to enter”), and scholars call it the “Container” metaphor. M.B. Szlos “Body Parts as Metaphor and the Value of Cognitive Approach: A Study of the Female Figures in Proverbs Via Metaphor,” in ed. Pierre van Hecke *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* (Dudley, MA: Leuven University Press, 2005), 193.

<sup>50</sup> Burke, *Grammar*, 512-513 and Tell, “Burke’s Encounter,” 47.

tropes described by Burke, I closely analyze the text to identify the rhetorical conventions used by the SPI on their public website. Unpacking the intertextual relationships implied in the text illuminates the conversations the SPI wants their audience to have. Such investigation leads directly into chapter five: a discussion of the Sister's sociological style.

The Sistory is a collection of fragmented narratives from various members in history. While bits of historical information are gathered on the group's website (and, most of the time, just one section of the website), the written histories themselves are a conglomeration of textual pieces written by a variety of authors/members of the groups. Similar to how Rand's use of "Lesbian Avenger Handbook" allowed her to construct a progression of The Lesbian Avenger's style, I examine this information to get a sense of the genesis of the SPI and how their style and discourse evolved over time. For example, in 1999 the SPI changed their background information from the title 'History' to 'Sistory.'<sup>51</sup> This is an important difference, as the change highlights an understanding of the unusual past of the Sister's spiritual identification. Comparing current rhetorical choices with past rhetorical choices allows me to track the evolution of the Sister's style. Since style is culturally bound, the creation of the group and change in discourse can help explain why the Sisters chose particular rhetorical devices to add to their repertoire.

### ***2.2.3 Sociological Analysis***

In the first two case study chapters, I examine the embodied and the textual/hypertextual in order to see how the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence shape their

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<sup>51</sup> "Archive," The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, accessed April 15, 2015, [https://web.archive.org/web/\\*/http://www.thesisters.org/](https://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.thesisters.org/)

style to respond to the rhetorical situation that they perceive. To say that a rhetor is choosing a ‘fitting’ response to a rhetorical situation is to imply that there is an audience that is going to hear/see the communication. Campbell and Cilliaris acknowledge this, pointing out that, since a rhetoric of folly includes a dialogue between the fool and audience, understanding holy fools requires understanding how their transgressive rhetoric is read by others.<sup>52</sup> In chapter five on the sociology of style, I shift my attention to the audience to see how the responses of the audience reflect the ‘fit’ of the SPI’s style. Each of those components to the sociological style are needed for the establishment of the queer holy fool. I investigate “ideological clawback” and rhetorical disciplining evident in the comments and feedback from audiences in regards to the SPI.

To examine interaction between the rhetor and audience, finding communication (both embodied and textual/hypertextual) that is directed toward an audience is required. In identifying styles in her book, Young examined the ways in which her synecdochal examples addressed their respective audiences. For example, her exemplar of the Prophetic style, Cornel West, critiqued those who had “sinned,” and offered a “road to a new covenant” for those wishing to repent.<sup>53</sup> She then explains that West accomplished this rhetorical task through denigrating the “rhetoric of the Bush administration and its allies as false truth,” and elevating “prophecy and the prophetic tradition as the ‘real truth.’”<sup>54</sup> She then pulled passages of West’s speeches about the Bush administration and demonstrated how his responses echoed the style of prophets in the Bible in a side by side comparison. In another chapter describing the Guru style, she uses Deepak Chopra’s

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<sup>52</sup> Campbell and Cilliaris, *Preaching Fools*, 172.

<sup>53</sup> Young, *Prophets*, 52.

<sup>54</sup> Young, *Prophets*, 52.

public blog and book (in place of a speech or sermon) as a way to investigate how that stylistic choice directly addresses an audience.<sup>55</sup>

Examining rhetorical style by portraying direct quotations highlights the rhetor's ability to communicate to an audience, but exactly how is the analysis Young provides different from looking at the embodied or textual/hypertextual? If style does in fact involve co-construction with an audience, I argue the investigation of audience participation (whether positive or negative reactions) is an essential component to the sociological examination of style.<sup>56</sup> What are the implications of queering traditional notions of the holy fool, specifically when looking at the audience? To view how the style functions as a fitting response to a particular situation, it is necessary to examine how particular arguments and public discourses react to they rhetorical choices of the SPI. Inspired by John Sloop's approach to studying public argument, I study press coverage and comments about the media coverage, as well as YouTube videos, to reveal dialogue between the audience(s) and the Sisters.<sup>57</sup> The Sister's website includes press packets, news stories featured on other websites, and responses to media coverage from outside perspectives. Due to the co-constructed nature of sociological style, viewing the Sisters' responses to audience interaction is also important. As such, textual fragments also include moments to analyze the SPI's application of style when confronted with their audience. These provide the fragments needed to capture the sociological element of style.

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<sup>55</sup> Young, *Prophets*, 70-71.

<sup>56</sup> Young, *Prophets*, 70.

<sup>57</sup> John Sloop, *Disciplining Gender: Rhetorics of Sex Identity in Contemporary U.S. Culture*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004) 2.

Overall an analysis of the SPI's queer holy fool style requires a mixture of queer and rhetorical theory, as well as an understanding of the rhetoric of folly. All three aspects of style (embodied, text/hypertext, and sociological) provide a multi-faceted, complex description of the style. Chapter Three begins the investigation, focusing on the Sisters' embodied style.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Stylish Nuns and Religious Drag: The SPI's Embodied Style

Though the ethereal and ineffable threads through many Judeo-Christian religions, the body is often a key focal point for practitioners and theorists of religion. Theologian and sexuality scholar James Nelson believed that our “body-selves” are innately part of our spiritual experience; specifically, he refers to John 1:14 (“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth...”) to argue that an understanding of our bodies and sexuality is crucial to truly connecting with the Divine.<sup>1</sup> To make this claim empirically, he cites the work of psychotherapist Carl Jung, who claims that when individuals have questions about their sexuality, they are often linked to religious problems and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> Nelson also posits that embodiment is the means through which the rest of the world is known:

Our body-selves give shape to the way in which we feel about the world and others. If I do not realize the profound sense in which I *am* a body, if in a false spiritualization of my self-hood I deny my embodiment, I also tend to minimize the personal significance of activities which I carry on through my body...the world becomes eternal and foreign.<sup>3</sup>

Queer bodies have historically been hurt by actions performed by The Church, making their relationship with The Church complex and potentially hostile.<sup>4</sup>

Previously, The Church has used formal performances to model and enforce

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<sup>1</sup> James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979) 8. Citations from the Bible are cited in his work.

<sup>2</sup> Nelson, *Embodiment*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Nelson, *Embodiment*, 20-21.

<sup>4</sup> Remember: My use of The Church refers to the institution of religion; specifically, the prominent Judeo-Christian influences. While a large part of the institution is the Catholic Church, it is not the only influence.

normative behaviors across a variety of social identities. During medieval times (roughly 700-1300), drama became a powerful tool used by The Church to present liturgy and convey doctrine. “Drama were statements of Christian faith and belief,” and, unfortunately, Church playwrights grew to learn that “audiences’ actions are more easily manipulated by hatred and fear than by love and trust.”<sup>5</sup> Mostly, these plays were aimed at spreading anti-Semitic messages.

That is not to say that all liturgical dramas were serious or harmful. On the contrary, many celebratory feasts utilized comic elements in their dramas, including female impersonating choirs that added obscene lyrics to sacred chants.<sup>6</sup> After a mocking of the bishops’ sermons, these feasts usually ended with a burlesque performance in which “women emptied chamber pots and threw garbage from windows onto masked priests burning old shoes in censers.”<sup>7</sup> The point of these festivities was to allow the public to vent their frustrations and hostility through resistant performances. Thought to be overtly sacrilegious and destructive to The Church’s reputation, they were abolished not long after the Medieval period.<sup>8</sup>

Early Church plays had to navigate the gender politics of the period. Playwrights and Church elders sought to bring “iconographical, rather than

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Kuritz, *The Making of Theatre History* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1988), 128.

<sup>6</sup> Kuritz, *The Making*, 128. One of these was The Feast of Fools, in which community shamans became “like clowns,” and young boys of age were circumcised. This example helps historically tie foolish antics and sexuality that is prevalent in the Sisters’ work.

<sup>7</sup> Kuritz, *The Making*, 129.

<sup>8</sup> Kuritz, *The Making*, 129.

individual, representations of Biblical characters,” specifically focusing on realistic interpretations.<sup>9</sup> However, no women were allowed to take part in the more serious liturgy dramas, so female roles were played by males in ecclesiastical garb. To aid in the staged transformation from male to female, actors wore an “*amice*, a white linen cloth worn around the neck and shoulders and drawn over the head to conceal sex.”<sup>10</sup>

This abbreviated history of how both orthodox and resistant performances thread through the history of The Church hints at the way in which performances are capable of re/producing belief through modulations of *style*. The stylistic choice to prevent women from accessing the stage reaffirms the patriarchal Church; similarly, the adding of bawdy lyrics to sacred chants is a stylistic choice that adds a parodic dimension to ritual. Perhaps *any* resistant performance seeks to playfully trouble normative assumptions—but this is especially true of a queer holy fool style that disobeys many of The Church’s most sacred cows. Part of enacting the queer holy fool style, then, requires the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence to confront problematic Church practices and defy normative mindsets that lead to stereotypical expectations through their rituals and dress. As I will show, this defiance is played out on the Sisters’ bodies.

Anna Young argues that physiological style consists of performances “enacted through the symbolic medium of the body.”<sup>11</sup> In this chapter, I extend that concept to help account for the stylistic knowledge garnered through *enacting* the performance.

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<sup>9</sup> Kuritz, *The Making*, 127.

<sup>10</sup> Kuritz, *The Making*, 128.

<sup>11</sup> Anna M. Young, *Prophets, Gurus and Pundits: Rhetorical Styles and Public Engagement* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2014), 8.



Tami Spry explains that “embodied knowledge” is the “body’s interaction with culture” demonstrated through a “telling, of what does and does not go into the body, and why.”<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, a study of bodily performances can help reveal the normative and the non-normative, the stereotypical and atypical. Taking up a study of bodily performances, this chapter examines the embodied aspects of the queer holy fool style, focusing on the dress, events, and rituals of the SPI. First, I explain the relationship between performance and queer camp. Next, I illustrate the Sisters’ use of parody. Finally, I describe how the ‘nun’ trope functions as a performative opportunity for the SPI.

### **3.2 Performance, Performativity, and Camp**

Before I can fully explore the performative elements of queer holy fool style, I must clearly define what I mean by “performative.” Gender relies on repetition in order to be established - one in which oppressive forces can be attached. For Judith Butler, gender is a matter of *doing* as opposed to *being*: all identifications of gender occur when someone presents themselves through dress, mannerisms, and speech. Drag is a canonical example: disruptive forms of troubling gender come when the audience begins to question the gender of the performer.<sup>13</sup> The effects that are present during such disruptive performances are what Butler refers to as performatives. Performatives are those performances or speech acts that constitute the “temporalized scene of gender construction and destabilization.”<sup>14</sup> There is a difference between a performance and a performative: the latter is repetitive, potentially subversive, and not *necessarily* a

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<sup>12</sup> Tami Spry, *Body, Paper, Stage*, (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2011), 63.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), xxii.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Queer Studies* 1 (1993), 21.

conscious choice. Having said this, there will be places where I refer to rituals and events as “performances.” Unless I state otherwise, I am assuming that those performances in and of themselves are performative. In other words, a performance *can* be performative, but not necessarily. Performative more closely resembles what I mean when I say ‘embodied,’ as a performative is not something an individual can just take off on a whim. Rather, a performative is undergirded by the cultural and political influences one would have in providing a ‘fitting’ response that reflects their own style.

Though the use of drag may seem like a helpful example, drag is often misunderstood to be simply a performance where members of a particular gender dress in another genders’ clothing as opposed to a repetitious, performative act. Butler addresses this misuse, and admits that not all drag is performative. Drag that *is* performative, Butler says, attempts to resignify the norms of heterosexual culture in such a way as to force the audience to begin to question the weakness of those norms.<sup>15</sup> Performative drag portrays the “failure[s] of heterosexual regimes” by becoming the “allegorization of heterosexuality and its constitutive melancholia.”<sup>16</sup> The drag performers hyperbolize the idiosyncracies of heterosexuality, highlighting what is taken for granted when normatively thinking about gender. In doing so, drag threatens the dominance of heterosexuality. Butler claims that once the audience begins to critically think about heterosexuality, they begin to also question its naturalness.

As I previously noted, camp is a stylistic choice that participants in queer culture can use to disrupt normative ways of thinking. Camp is a visual style marker which seeks

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<sup>15</sup> Butler, “Critically Queer.” See, also: Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 125.

<sup>16</sup> Butler, “Critically Queer,” 26.

to separate what is ‘natural’ from what is ‘human-made,’ providing a potentially resistive space for the rhetor. Of course, camp, with its roots in queer expression, deviates *playfully* through humor. Humor is a common occurrence in camp, often used to neutralize polarizing and potentially hostile discourse.<sup>17</sup> As such, analyzing camp can reveal the ways in which resistance transforms discussions of controversial topics. Drag is one kind of camp performance: bold, humorous, and transgressively mocking gendered stereotypes. There are some, however, that argue that though drag mocks gender, it may also reify the traditional notions of gender.

Common features of camp style are flamboyant clothing and humorous interpretations of pop culture iconography. Though the convention frequently appears, it manifests inconsistently in representation.<sup>18</sup> Camp can vary in function, approach, and specifics. Similarities in camp tend to center in discussions of marginalized gender and sexual identities and how those discourses can be negotiated and renegotiated.<sup>19</sup>

Because treatments of gender are tied to symbolic action, challenging gender requires a particular kind of activism, one that challenges discourse as well as policy. Performatives are described as “special kinds of speech that also qualify as official social acts,” with the potential to be the activism needed to challenge the discourse surrounding

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<sup>17</sup> Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egly Waggoner, *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 3. Christian de la Huerta, *Coming Out Spiritually: The Next Step* (New York: Penguin Press, 1999), 16. De la Huerta also states that because humor is not always perceived as threatening, it functions as a conduit through which messages that seem intolerable are able to be heard.

<sup>18</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 3.

gender issues.<sup>20</sup> After all, “an attack on discourse involves an attack on categories themselves.”<sup>21</sup> Camp attempts to attack those categories in a queer, playfully deviant manner. For the SPI, not only are gender categories challenged, but so are normative understandings of what makes religion: the Sisters attempt to trouble religious performances so that we may question what is ‘normal’ religious practice.

Susan Sontag famously claimed that camp focuses solely on the outrageous, neglecting to engage in “content,” which makes camp an apolitical form of communication.<sup>22</sup> I contend, however, that camp does not completely lack content if the broader scene is politicized. For instance, the Sisters protest religious dogma and stand against queer oppression – a highly political move full of content relevant to their cause. The SPI draws on campiness to provide a juxtaposition for the audience’s interpretation: there is *meaning* behind the Sisters’ use of traditional religious habits, and that meaning

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<sup>20</sup> Riki Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory* (Bronx: Magnus Books, 2004), 144.

<sup>21</sup> Wilchins, *Queer Theory*, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in ed. William Phillips *Partisan Review* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964), 2. As Shugart and Waggoner argue, however, “[Sontag’s] argument is itself predicated on the assumption that style precludes content – that that which is aesthetic cannot be political – and although some share those sentiments, other have registered vigorous dissent, implicitly and explicitly” (17). Essentially, camp has the potential to transgressively demystify the ‘natural,’ and offer ways to transcend oppressive performances. Though Sontag would say that camp is not a political style, I agree with Shugart and Waggoner (and the other numerous theorists they cite) (36): Andrew Britton, “For Interpretation: Notes Against Camp,” *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Cleto (pp. 1-42) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 136-142.; Fabio Cleto “Introduction to Queering the Camp,” *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Cleto (pp. 1-42) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Jonathan Dollimore, “Post/modern: On the Gay Sensibility, or the Pervert’s Revenge on Authenticity” *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Cleto (pp. 1-42) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 221-236.

can be played with.<sup>23</sup> By standing for an important cause through their outlandish choices, they force the audience to question the normalcy associated with those choices. As such, the performance of the Sisters challenges traditional Church practices and acts as a *religious* drag, or a moment in which a parody of traditional religious conventions and attire enables a radical, political critique of assumed dogmatic norms.<sup>24</sup> The following sections unpack the queer holy fool religious drag performed by the SPI through examining camp performances, with a special focus on parody and trope.<sup>25</sup>

### 3.3 Parroting The Church, Performing Resistance

Imitation, as I expressed earlier, can critically address foolish dispositions—dogmas that have become uncritically accepted. To be more specific, rhetors rely not on mere imitation, but rather parody, to performatively address the hegemonic forces of oppression. The difference lies in parody’s tendency to not only imitate, but also exaggerate what is normatively understood. Parody has the power to threaten that which is mimicked by producing two texts: the original and the parody. By doing so, it “strips its target of individuality,” leaving the audience to question the power and supposed uniqueness vested in original version.<sup>26</sup> More importantly, parody highlights inconsistencies in the original text, taking claims to their logical and absurd conclusion or

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<sup>23</sup> Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 5.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, vii and 141; Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 37.

<sup>25</sup> I took these three concepts from Shugart and Waggoner’s *Making Camp*. The authors name these three concepts in their deconstruction of female camp, and as I expect a majority of the Sister’s style will reflect camp, I find these concepts to be useful. Shugart and Waggoner, “*Making Camp*.”

<sup>26</sup> Robert Hariman, “Political Parody and Public Culture,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (2008), 247.

exaggerating conventions in a way that leads audiences to question them. Parody is a strong rhetorical tool to help educate individuals' critical sensibilities.<sup>27</sup>

When applied to political discourse, parody reveals hidden ideologies undergirding such discourse. Robert Hariman explains:

The world's first truth as told through the direct discourses of the Church, the universities, and other official voices that this life was fallen, miserably corporeal, hopelessly inferior to the life after death that was distant and perhaps lost forever. Against this background of divine judgment and ecclesiastical control, laughter revealed a second world within the first, a heaven on earth of sensory pleasures, the simple joys of association, and the insistent resurgence of every kind of life regardless of whether it served any higher purpose or not. First, a world defined by a cosmic drama of sin and salvation, then 'the second revelation of play and laughter.'<sup>28</sup>

Hariman argues that this original role of parody, to mock the purported truth of The Church, is no longer the most important function of this style of communication; rather, he suggests, parody should reveal the hidden atrocities of contemporary political figures. As Hariman states: "satire on behalf of social justice is better than humor used to enforce hierarchies of domination."<sup>29</sup> The SPI, acting as a generator of "laughter" amidst "ecclesiastical control," encourage audiences to examine dominant discourses, and in so doing let us identify social, religious, and spiritual assumptions that continue to marginalize certain populations. As I will show, their juxtaposition of dominant Catholic

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<sup>27</sup> Hariman, "Political Parody," 264. Hariman uses examples of particular media geared toward adolescents that use parody, such as *Mad* magazine. The reason adolescents easily accept parodic literature is because of the ease of understanding of new genres, according to Hariman. This also further connects camp and parody, and both rely on humor as a means to transfer difficult messages.

<sup>28</sup> Hariman, "Political Parody," 265. Hariman is citing Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 84.

<sup>29</sup> Hariman, "Political Parody," 247.

rhetorics alongside more campy elements highlights the problematic aspects of institutionalized religion.

The Sisters rely not on exact religious practices but rather pop culture or broad (perhaps surface level) definitions and understandings of nun iconography. For instance, Mother Superior Sister Roma is often featured at events like *Mister Act*, a “most holy and hilarious preshow parody” of the 1992 classic *Sister Act*.<sup>30</sup> Not only does the drag show mock the film, but it precedes a screening of the original film. The choice to focus on more broadly based understandings of religion does not mean that the Sisters are not challenging the more complex religious dogma. Yet, by boiling those practices down to how they are represented in mainstream identifications, the Sisters are questioning *why* those are the main properties of religion that are heralded as sacred. Sister Zsa Zsa Glamour regularly purchases new vestments on eBay, that are meant to be sold to current priests/ministers/preachers, but which have “flamboyant colors and patterns.”<sup>31</sup> Their reasoning is simple: “It’s gender fuck. A man dressed as a woman dressed as a man.”<sup>32</sup>

Not only does Sister Zsa Zsa’s use of actual religious vestments provide a “gender fuck” for the audience, but the parody makes them consider why those vestments are the norm:

You have to ask why clerical people still wear outfits that they wear. It makes no practical sense, it makes no fashion sense. The only reason it’s kept up is there’s an allusion that you’re closer to God. That’s how people in this era think that’s how people in the olden days dressed. There weren’t any disciples...priests are wearing things from the 1500’s, and there weren’t any miracles. There weren’t disciples, there weren’t any books of the Bible written during that time period, but we’ve chosen that

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<sup>30</sup> Peaches Christ’s Sister Act with “Mister Act” *Facebook* event page, accessed February 10, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/events/591355451021574/>.

<sup>31</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa, interviewed by Christina L. Ivey, Oral history interview, May 29, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa.

time period as the way that we perceive people in the religion business dress. And if it's not broke don't fix it is apparently why we continue to do it because people see the Pope with that big hat and they say, [gasp] He's closer to Jesus. That nun wearing that habit, that means she's serious, she's not fooling around.<sup>33</sup>

Sister Zsa Zsa is explaining how dress is one performative that indexes a much broader field of interrelated performatives. Parodize the dress, as the Sisters do, and you end up parodizing the broader system of belief.

Religious dress, then, becomes a fulcrum that leverages a much broader critique. As Shugart and Waggoner note, camp appropriations of oppressive religious doctrine, “may in fact be strategically rendered in order to actively articulate conventional ideologies” that are harmful to their cause.<sup>34</sup> This is not the case with the Sisters:

Sister Vish tells a story... they're moving to San Francisco and he's packing up all his drag, he's going through all his costumes and says, 'Should I take this? Should I throw that away?' And threw the habits in his suitcase and says, 'I don't know what I'm going to do with them, but this could be fun.' He says we could have just as well have been... Cheerleaders of Perpetual Indulgence. It just so happened that that Easter weekend they put on these nun habits and went running around just to cause trouble.<sup>35</sup>

Though Sister Vish *claims* they could have easily been the ‘Cheerleaders of Perpetual Indulgence,’ the stylistic choice to adopt a parodic version of the nun costume came about during a tumultuous moment for queer bodies. This moment was defined by deadly physical threats and insidious spiritual ones. Though these choices to adopt religious

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<sup>33</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa.

<sup>34</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 60. The intersection here between camp, popular culture, and historical context adds to the argument that camp is indeed a political form of communication. The planned incongruity seems like a playful nod, but is a direct juxtaposition to normative performances.

<sup>35</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa. Sister Vicious Power Hungry Bitch (Sister Vish for short) is one of the founding members of the SPI.



dress may not have been totally thought out and planned by the original Sisters, they reflected a need for queer spiritual connection. For instance, Sister Zsa Zsa explains in an interview that though they had done drag for several years prior to becoming a Sister, they were treated differently when they dressed like a nun: “It’s the dirty little secret that works for us. That’s the reason Catholic nuns dress like that, it’s the reason that every preacher and priest and clerics dress like that because they know that it works.”<sup>36</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa describes being thanked by several individuals while they were dressed in ecclesiastical drag for what they were doing and their spiritual presence. These occurrences would not be likely to happen if the Sisters were dressed in standard drag attire. As Sister Zsa Zsa explains, “There’s times where people will come up to you and confess their heart out and say that the Sisters have changed their life.”<sup>37</sup> The dress of priests and nuns imbues them with a sense of power that is culturally familiar. In other words, the wardrobe “works” by signifying the wearer’s supposed relationship with the Divine. For the Sisters, the parody temporarily inverts power structures and reveals how autonomic normative performances occur through slight exaggerations of presentation and implicitly critical additions to the performance.<sup>38</sup>

The SPI also draws on pop culture understandings of nun iconography to ground their critical statements about The Church. For instance, Project Nunway, a parody of the hit show *Project Runway*, is one of the San Francisco Sisters’ biggest events of the year. Project Nunway was initially a part of the Big Idea Night, a series of art parties that coincided with the Sister’s 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary and featured at the Yerba Buena Center for

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<sup>36</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa.

<sup>37</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa.

<sup>38</sup> Hariman, “Political Parody,” 249-50.

the Arts.<sup>39</sup> For the first show, designers were encouraged to create high fashion looks inspired by the theme, such as *Ritual and Redemption*, out of recycled materials, and paired with a Sister that showcased the look on the runway.<sup>40</sup>

The first show took place on a typical runway, with a large screen above the curtain opening that revealed the names of both designer and the Sister chosen to wear the creation. An emcee announced their names, too, as the audience clapped and cheered. The looks ranged from the high-fashion wardrobe representative of runways, to the cheeky lower fashion garments that were better described as ‘campy’ than ‘high fashion.’ Some of the looks and performances sought to shock the audience. For example, Sister Zsa Zsa Glamour glided down the cat-walk in a large gown made of glow sticks and a floor length bedazzled rosary around her neck.<sup>41</sup> They also held a vintage video camera in one hand, and a leash in another. Attached to the leash were two men wearing leather harnesses. When they reached the end, Glamour let the men go and blew a whistle, signaling the men to proceed to kiss and grind each other. The audience roared as Sister Zsa Zsa pretended to film the men in the act. Other looks simply mocked traditional religious garb. Sister Sara Femme’s attire from the neck down seemed to be a typical nun

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<sup>39</sup> The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, “Sistory of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence,” *Tiki Toki*, last accessed March 17, 2016, <http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/52067/Sistory-of-the-Sisters-of-Perpetual-Indulgence-Inc/>.

<sup>40</sup> “Sistory.” Project Nunway’s *Facebook* page, accessed November 29, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/ProjectNunway/>.

<sup>41</sup> The Epistle – Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, “Sister Selma Soul’s Surprise/Project Nunway,” last modified June 7, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z11bkrBUjvk&list=PL84049B09A95ECC85&index=9>.

frock.<sup>42</sup> This element of the look was barely noticeable, however, due to their habit, which extended like wings about three feet on each side of their head. Attached to the end were small poles which they used to flap the wings up and down.

Since the debut of Project Nunway in San Francisco in 2009, the event has become a yearly event for the Sisters, in San Francisco and other Abbeys across the country.<sup>43</sup> Sister Baba Ganesh and Joel B. Tan created the event, heavily inspired by the “ecclesiastical fashion show” in Federico Fellini’s 1972 film *Roma*.<sup>44</sup> The foundational use of this particular film is key to understanding the resistive nature undergirding the SPI’s contemporary project, as the film’s trailer claims that “Fellini examin[es] the fall of the Roman Empire, 1931 to 1972.”<sup>45</sup> As some critics have noted, the film reveals a temporal side to The Church (which typically symbolizes “the unchanging, the rock”) and the “phallocratic hollowness of Catholicism” in such a way that causes the audience to question what is real and unreal.<sup>46</sup> The primary way in which Fellini accomplishes this is through the portrayal of an elaborate papal fashion show.

A description of Fellini’s fashion show demonstrates the close connection between the two. In *Roma*, the show features a runway, an emcee, and an audience,

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<sup>42</sup> Sister Helen, “Sister Sara Femme at Project Nunway,” last modified June 11, 2009, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaQ\\_MA5r4pY&list=PL84049B09A95ECC85&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaQ_MA5r4pY&list=PL84049B09A95ECC85&index=3).

<sup>43</sup> LA in 2011, Portland in 2012, Facebook, Inc., “Project Nunway’s Facebook page.”

<sup>44</sup> “Sistory.”

<sup>45</sup> “Trailer ‘Roma’ (Fellini, 1972),” last modified January 22, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uF9oUf-1RoI>.

<sup>46</sup> Roger Ebert, “Fellini’s Roma,” *Reviews*, accessed November 29, 2015, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/fellinis-roma-1972>. Frank Burke and Maguerite R. Waller, *Federico Fellini: Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 78.

which includes *The Cardinal*.<sup>47</sup> At the beginning of the show, eerie, yet upbeat music begins which resembles a mixture between carnival music and church organ.<sup>48</sup> The looks begin simple and traditional enough, with the focus being on practicality. The emcee points out the practical elements as particular looks walk past, such as “boots are in leather and suede and come in two colors, navy blue and black for harsher climates.” Even the more outrageous looks, such as the “Tourterelles Immaculees,” a habit with long, floppy wings that resemble a ceiling fan, (which clearly inspired Sister Sara Femme’s winged habit), is explained as being “useful in environments with poor air circulation.”<sup>49</sup> Other models are differentiated not by their garments, but by their actions. For instance, during the model for “Little Sisters of the Purgatory’s Temptation” (as the look is labeled by the emcee), the nuns solemnly walk down the catwalk, but once they reach the end, they proceed to shake their bottoms from side to side in front of the audience. The film then cuts to an audience member who says, “The world must follow the Church and not vice versa.”<sup>50</sup>

From here, the looks become more “casual,” flamboyant, and campy as the emcee claims that these new wardrobes are capable of pushing us “quicker to paradise” by accommodating roller skates or bicycle riding.<sup>51</sup> Three priests come out performing

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<sup>47</sup> *Fellini’s Roma*, directed by Federico Fellini (1972; Culver City, CA: MGM, 2001), DVD.

<sup>48</sup> This music is also in the background of many of the first Project Nunway’s walks. Sister Helen, “Sister Sara Femme.”

<sup>49</sup> *Fellini’s Roma*. “Tourterelles Immaculees” roughly translates to “immaculate doves,” which would explain the flapping wings. The difference between this habit and Sister Sara’s is that in *Roma*, the wings flap simply by bobbing motion of the nuns’ walk.

<sup>50</sup> *Fellini’s Roma*.

<sup>51</sup> *Fellini’s Roma*.

elaborate tricks with thuribles. Costumes grow wilder, and begin to include fur, lights, and an enormous amount of chiffon. Suddenly, the music becomes darker and the audience stands. A gold painted, very elaborately decorated archway is lowered onto the beginning of the runway, as the red curtains in the back part. As a figure comes forward, everyone sits but the Cardinal. “He comes back!” someone from the audience yells as the music crescendos. “He’s with us once again. Our Pope The Holy Father.”<sup>52</sup> The figure is revealed to be a man on top of a long set of white stairs with a large, golden, sun-like construction behind him. There are slots cut into the sun-like structure, and a reflective structure behind it rotates so that the sun appears as if it is radiating. The man is adorned with an elaborate white and gold mirrored Pope hat, and his face is painted white with gold eyeglasses. His vestments are in the same fashion as his hat. Many audience members hold up their hands near their faces in an open position, some eyes wide, some eyes closed, all arms trembling. “Don’t ever leave us! Don’t ever leave us!” Other audience members bow their heads and/or look solemnly up at the ‘Pope.’ The man stares at the audience, unmoving but with a slight smile. In the end, all raise their hands to the ‘Pope’ as the scene cuts away and the music decrescendos. The last image seen is a fade out on the face of the ‘Pope,’ still making the same facial expression.

The subversive potential inherent in parroting the ecclesiastic aesthetic can be found in a scene censored out of the original release of Fellini’s *Roma*. During the procession of the flamboyant ‘Missionary Nuns,’ which features a nun in light, airy clothes appropriate to missionary conversion in tropical climes, one audience member turns to another and says, “So we end up with the tooth fairy? Everyone’s so good and

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<sup>52</sup> *Fellini’s Roma*.

silent, they're all lined up. Are you telling me that you would confess to a priest dressed like a cook?" The other audience member quickly replies, "You shut up, you heretic!...Play less and pray more!"<sup>53</sup> At the time of the movie's release, this particular sequence was seen as too controversial and potentially damaging to the Catholic Church. Although difficult to ascertain the exact reason as to *why* the scene considered damaging, this particular line made explicit the whole point of the ecclesiastic fashion show: the emphasis on particular aspects of dogmatic ritual (such as dress) is unnecessary to perform 'religious' acts. Perhaps this is the strategy behind the anchoring of each Project Nunway title, such as LA's 2013 'Worship at the Altar of Beauty,' and San Francisco's sixth '666 – Heretics of Fashion.'<sup>54</sup>

The spectacle of SPI's Project Nunway ranges from contemporary queer culture fads (with risqué and colorful attire) to more traditional garments sold to priests and preachers that come in "flamboyant colors and patterns."<sup>55</sup> Project Nunway is a menagerie of the wildest Sister looks. Not only does it marry high fashion (which has a unique, ostentatious spectacle all its own) with camp, but it also requires the use of recycled material in the vestments. The result is over the top looks with a variety of glows sticks, oddly shaped habits, and miss-matched fabrics; all of which produces the on-screen fashion show that inspired the event. Many looks even incorporate broken mirrors that are similar to the Pope's costume at the end of Fellini's show.

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<sup>53</sup> God Spanker, "Vatican Fashion Show – Federico Felinni (Roma)," last modified May 20, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMQ4JicUs1A>.

<sup>54</sup> Project Nunway's *Facebook*.

<sup>55</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa.

Throughout the event, the mixing of religious and queer signifiers throughout the runway is echoed in the range of outfits that appear onstage. Though camp often utilizes brash humor to criticize the norm, the spectacle is meant to invoke “a nostalgic affection for and homage to the subjects of its performances.”<sup>56</sup> Essentially, for those enacting the queer holy fool style, “parodic excess” - spectacular depictions - are necessary to draw attention to alternative modes of spirituality.<sup>57</sup> If *Roma*’s finale serves to “contaminate the Catholic Church with the syntax of the fashion show,” then the parallelism between *Roma*’s fashion show and Project Nunway updates this critique.<sup>58</sup> In many ways, the SPI is pushing the parodic limits beyond *Roma*, delivering a pointed and poignant critique of institutionalized religion, while still raising money and providing a space for up and coming artists within their communities to be featured. The choice to create an event using this specific film is no accident: linking the film to their embodied style solidifies the similar critique they share of The Church.

### **3.4 Performing the Trope of The Church**

The key to the resistive potential of SPI’s performances relies not only on the parodic humor, but on the use of highly recognizable tropes of The Church.<sup>59</sup> Traditionally, trope has been categorized within rhetorical studies as a figure of speech which “use the word in a way other than the literal.”<sup>60</sup> More contemporarily, tropes have

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<sup>56</sup> Shuggart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 34.

<sup>57</sup> Shuggart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 58.

<sup>58</sup> Frank Burke and Marguerite R. Waller, *Federico Fellini: Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 78.

<sup>59</sup> Shuggart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 49.

<sup>60</sup> Clarence H. Holman & William Harmon, *A Handbook of Literature* (New York: MacMillan, 1992), 485. As cited in Shuggart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 49.

also been employed in literary and critical studies as a means to investigate genres and particular rhetorical form due to tropes' attention to semiotic relationships. An in-depth analysis of the traditional use of trope occurs in Chapter 4. In this chapter, however, I use trope similarly to Shugart and Waggoner: as "recurrent and repetitive discursive patterns" that result in a cultural semiotic relationship."<sup>61</sup> The best way to understand exactly what I mean is to explore examples from Shugart and Waggoner's study. Though the authors establish four accounts of female camp tropes, I limit my description to two: the "gendered archetypal female superhero," and the "malignant rich-bitch socialite."<sup>62</sup>

The gendered archetypal female superhero trope is one that can be described as "hypermasculine," "physically powerful, and apparently invincible."<sup>63</sup> To aid in the audience conceptualization of this trope and its relation to camp, Shugart and Waggoner summon the image of Xena: Warrior Princess. Xena, the main character in a spin-off of the television show *Hercules*, is a villain turned heroic warrior living in a mythological world. Women like Xena show physical strength, but that strength comes second to their aesthetically pleasing appearance. When envisioning this trope, the picture comes easily: "tall, statuesque women manifesting a feminine ideal with large breasts, small waists, long legs, flowing brunette hair, and conventionally attractive features."<sup>64</sup> The particular trope is common, going back as far as Lynda Carter's portrayal of Wonder Woman in the 1970's. In fact, that "nostalgic conjuring of the trope" within older pop culture makes the archetypal female superhero so adored and, in turn, a perfect representation of kitschy

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<sup>61</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 51.

<sup>62</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 64 and 81.

<sup>63</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 65.

<sup>64</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 66.



camp.<sup>65</sup> More importantly, this particular trope is a “media staple in lesbian culture” – a demographic not normally associated with camp.<sup>66</sup>

Another powerful, campy trope discussed by Shugart and Waggoner is the rich-bitch socialite. Karen Walker from the television series *Will and Grace* embodies the ideal here. The rich-bitch socialite is an upper class woman with sophistication “in equal measure to her wealth.”<sup>67</sup> Despite (or, perhaps *because* of) her higher class society upbringing, Karen has a “distinctly malevolent edge,” and is “extremely superficial, self-centered, and grossly insensitive to others,” often name dropping celebrity confidants and judging others for not being as superior.<sup>68</sup> Karen, Shugart and Waggoner note, differs from the historical women who represent this trope (like Joan Collins’ character in *Dynasty*) in that she is “not beholden to the wealthy man who finances her lifestyle.”<sup>69</sup> She is, however, defined by another man: her overly flamboyant gay friend Jack. The two are equally nasty and rude to each other, but are also compassionate if they sense the other is hurt. In her performance, Karen queers the origins of the rich-bitch trope by utilizing a distinctly gay male camp sensibility.<sup>70</sup> As a privileged, upper class, heterosexual, cisgender woman, that particular performance is a significant extension to camp.

Viewing these examples (Xena and Karen Walker), tropes can be seen as a stereotypical way of viewing a person or context. Stereotypes act as a point to which

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<sup>65</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 67.

<sup>66</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 77.

<sup>67</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 82.

<sup>68</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 83-84.

<sup>69</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 85.

<sup>70</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 98.

clichés cluster; an aggregate not for actual people, but the symbols associated with surface level understandings of a culture. Within a semiotic relationship, tropes allow rhetors to rely too heavily on the symbol as opposed to the symbolized.<sup>71</sup> Though this provides a heuristic use of “language’s inherently symbolic nature,” relying too much on the symbol is not necessarily a good thing, as a grasp of stereotypes prove. If you divorce a stereotype about a particular race/gender/sexual orientation/etc. (symbol) from the individuals who identify as such, you have shifted your epistemological framework to see them not as human, but as the stereotyped symbol.<sup>72</sup> The trope changes how the symbol is perceived.

Like normative gender practices, tropes are so powerful largely due to their “recurrent nature,” or the repetitious, semiotic connection between the performance and what the performance means.<sup>73</sup> For instance, traditional nuns and their ‘costume’ are associated with purity, seriousness, and ecclesiastic life. Because of the rhetorical force given to these tropes and their repetition, they function, as Shugart and Waggoner explain, as “mnemonic sites for those who consume them...The result is a particular framing effect for interpretation, one imbued with an aspect of cultural logic and, because of its reliance on established conventions and commonplaces, with hegemonic

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<sup>71</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 50. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 716.

<sup>72</sup> Burke, *Grammar*, 506. See also David Tell, “Burke’s Encounter with Ransom: Rhetoric and Epistemology in ‘Four Master Tropes.’” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* (2004), 41.

<sup>73</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 52.

proclivities.”<sup>74</sup> Repetition allows these tropes to act as hegemonic signifiers *if* they are tied to an oppressive signified meaning.

The spectacle of camp is performed *through* enacting the cultural markers of the trope – making this perception of trope inherently embodied. Visibility is key, and when I speak of spectacle, I am referring to the “highly ornate,” “superficial,” and “dazzling artifice” that is reminiscent of queer camp.<sup>75</sup> The excessive nature of camp spectacle enables the audience to focus on the aesthetics, and the aesthetic elements “which are only recognizable as a deviation from a norm; without the norm, camp would cease to exist.”<sup>76</sup> By doing so, spectacle justifies the connection between audience and the trope by providing the stylistic markers of the cultural signifier.<sup>77</sup> Notice how both examples used by Shuggart and Waggoner demonstrate the common attributes of the trope; yet, due to their camp-inspired spectacle, each example also extended to the trope. Using camp, Xena brought the gendered archetypal female superhero into lesbian culture, and Karen Walker demonstrated how heterosexual women could be campy. Spectacle can also extend upon the conventional tropes and/or generate new tropes that might be more empowering.

The Sisters perform the trope of the ‘nun’ by artfully playing with the pageantry of religious vestments and events. The SPI uses spectacle to dramatize tropes, making spectacle the vehicle to render tropes visible. As I mentioned above, the ‘nun’ trope employed by the Sisters certainly *looks* like traditional Catholic nuns, but also contains a

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<sup>74</sup> Shuggart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 52-53.

<sup>75</sup> Shuggart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 54-57.

<sup>76</sup> Shuggart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 57.

<sup>77</sup> Shuggart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 54.

mixture of pop culture nun references. Rebecca Sullivan describes how nuns are portrayed in American nun films, noting their prevalence with American media during the late fifties and sixties: “audiences apparently could not get enough of the convent.”<sup>78</sup> The image propagated of nuns during this time was an “idealized, industrious femininity as well as a benign, comforting religiosity.”<sup>79</sup> Here, femininity is not a particular aesthetic of a gender, but rather, the nurturing and compassionate nature that is traditionally perceived as feminine characteristics. The repetition of this specific image made some sisters feel as if they were represented differently than the reality of their situation; or, as one sister explains “Sisters are not known as persons: ‘reserved, sweet, genteel’ – all these adjectives are used to characterize sisters but they make the nun almost a minus sign as a person.”<sup>80</sup> As the depiction grew in popularity, it became difficult for nuns to break the stereotyped caricature that media created. This process of repeating an image so much that it results in a separation of individual experiences exemplifies the definition of trope as I am employing it here. A further description of *how* the nuns were depicted provides the outline necessary to define the ‘nun’ trope.

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<sup>78</sup> Rebecca Sullivan, “Celluloid Sister: Femininity, Religiosity, and the Postwar American Nun Film,” *The Velvet Light Trap* (2000), 58. I am basing much of my trope analysis off of Sullivan’s article. Yes, a common take of this trope utilizes the nun as a strict disciplinarian, rapping knuckles of schoolchildren, but the SPI focuses on the *aesthetic* of nuns, which was formed during the initial creation of the trope (around the ‘50’s and ‘60’s). The Sisters also focus more on the nun trope as I have described it, and do not attempt to revive the disciplinarian role (as a matter of fact, it seems as though they are attempting to stay far away from that change in the trope).

<sup>79</sup> Sullivan, “Celluloid Sister,” 58.

<sup>80</sup> Sister M. Aloysius Schaldenbrand, *The Changing Sister*, (Notre Dame: Fides, 1965), 161. cited in Sullivan, “Celluloid Sister,” 58.

The nun represents a more “accessible, compassionate view of religion” than other more dogmatic depictions due to her lack of real religious authority within The Church.<sup>81</sup> This trope allows for the relationship with the Divine through hard work and sacrifice. She exudes a “fierce courageousness” in the face of spiritual war, and acts as an inspirational beacon to those seeking spiritual guidance.<sup>82</sup> Often, characters featured alongside nuns do not necessarily agree with the religious devotion of the sister, but feel a certain “insurance” simply by “attaching [themselves] to her indomitable faith.”<sup>83</sup> Though compassion and nurturing are traditional feminine qualities attributed to the nun trope, they are typically thought of as asexual, deliberately downplaying many of normative gender identifiers. Prior to 1972, nuns would go through the process of tonsure, or a ritual signaling “a lifelong intention to remain celibate and reject the call of sexual desire.”<sup>84</sup> During the tonsure, the nun’s hair (a historic symbol of sexuality) would be shaved, transforming her into an asexual woman and bringing her under the “monastic gaze.”<sup>85</sup> The asexuality is suggested further through the use of modest clothing, traditionally, a habit. Though the actual practice of tonsure is no longer performed in Catholicism, nuns still take vows of celibacy as a part of their initiation and are depicted in films as asexual. Even in popular culture the term ‘nun’ is used to describe one who is

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<sup>81</sup> Sullivan, “Celluloid Sister,” 59.

<sup>82</sup> Sullivan, “Celluloid Sister,” 64.

<sup>83</sup> Sullivan, “Celluloid Sister,” 64.

<sup>84</sup> Kim Gutschow, “What Makes a Nun? Apprenticeship and Ritual Passage in Zanskar, North India,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (2001), 196.

<sup>85</sup> Gutschow, “What Makes a Nun?,” 196.

asexual. Expressionist artist Agnes Martin renounced sex, leading many to refer to her artistic persona as the “art nun.”<sup>86</sup>

The symbol of the ‘nun’ acts as an easy visual marker to signify the trope of The Church for the SPI. As the above pop culture references demonstrate, the aesthetic of the traditional nun is easily identifiable and associated with The Church. The Sisters willingly relate themselves with ‘nun’ (“21<sup>st</sup> Century Nuns,” to be more specific) throughout their website and interviews:

We always say that we’re 21<sup>st</sup> century nuns, and we mean it: we think we’re nuns. Cause we think that what we’re saying teaches talking about love and not discrimination and taking care of the gay people and you know, helping them out and doing fundraisers. Nun work.<sup>87</sup>

Here, the connection to the nun trope is obvious, as the Sisters rely on stereotypes surrounding “Nun work”: compassion (regardless of sexual orientation) and servant leadership (or the idea that in order to best change the community, one must serve the people). Embodying these behaviors through community work troubles the stereotypical notion that *only* those who prescribe to a particular brand of ‘nun’ can perform “nun work.”

Pushing the disruption of ‘nun’ further, many of the Sisters view donning a nun habit as a transformational, embodied performance in itself:

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<sup>86</sup> Ela Pryzbylo and Danielle Cooper, “Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (2014), 309.

<sup>87</sup> Dee Ireland Lewis, “ANGELS IN WHITEFACE,” last modified September 4, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6WLYwsKVnY>. The Epistle – Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, “Sister Selma Soul’s Surprise/Project Nunway,” last modified June 7, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z11bkrBUjvk&list=PL84049B09A95ECC85&index=9>.

It's a lot of spiritual ministry when you put on the nun habit. So, we're garish and theatrical. You can look at it just on the outrageous and the superficial level. Bringing joy is a beautiful thing to be able to do and now and it begins with you.<sup>88</sup>

Notice how the ministry begins *when* the Sister “put[s] on the habit.” The habit does not change the “garish and theatrical” nature of the individual Sister; but rather, allows them to perform the work. In other words, the “garish and theatrical” can also be the ‘saintly’ and the ‘nun-like.’ Focusing on the external dress (performance) without acknowledging the repetitive good works (performative) is merely “superficial,” and ignores an important element of the SPI. The conventional nun look itself is a spectacle that can be mass produced, but the Sisters’ varied looks and good works in the community are unique in the way that only a body can be.

The habit represents a direct connection to the ‘nun,’ but the white face paint worn by the SPI stands out as an extension to the trope. Choosing to paint the face not only connects their actions to the drag community (who are known for their elaborate make up), but also acts as a ritual in the transformation. For instance, in the documentary *Sisterhood: A Look at the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence* created by Saint Real 2 Reel 4 Realz, Sisters reflect on this ritual as they put on their greasepaint:

A lot of Sisters will set sacred space, maybe burn candles, incense, maybe they listen to a certain kind of music. I personally just like absolute

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<sup>88</sup> Lewis, “ANGELS IN WHITEFACE.”

stillness when I'm getting ready. I just set my space by taking a moment to breathe.<sup>89</sup>

Not only does the ritual result in a unified aesthetic, but it also unifies the Sister's spiritually by stripping them from the "baggage that they've been carrying."<sup>90</sup> Like the meditative quiet time practices performed by monks and nuns, this sacred ritual before the performative transformation acts as a moment to reflect on the connection to the spiritual work. The Sisters also wear the white face because it makes them stand out in larger public events. "Photographers gravitat[e] toward it. It look[s] more dramatic in photographs" – a point which emphasizes the centrality of spectacle.<sup>91</sup> The paint has become one of the most recognizable features of the SPI's style.

Traditional drag, as I have mentioned, is notoriously criticized due to the potential to reify normative gender expectations. For the SPI, it is not necessarily a question of whether or not they reify *gender* appearance – the nun trope does not focus on standard gender aesthetic. Because of the *religious* drag, the Sisters receive many comments about the apparent 'mocking' of nun attire – an action that seems to mock religion in the way that traditional drag mocks gender. Actually, the original habits brought to San Francisco by Sister Vish were *authentic* habits previously worn by nuns. Sister Vish explains:

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<sup>89</sup> Fred Gebhardt, "Sisterhood: A Look at the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence," last modified April 12, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19Er6GiWZkw>.

<sup>90</sup> Gebhardt, "Sisterhood."

<sup>91</sup> Sister Vish, "Sisters and the History of Whiteface," *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, last accessed March 31, 2016, <http://thesisters.org/sistory-by-sister-vish/222-sisters-and-the-history-of-whiteface>. Originally, Sister Vish also claims to have worn it in order to disguise them from "potential sexual partners." At the time, drag was something to be kept hidden, and an occurring thought in the queer community was "'We have to be acceptable so they will give us our rights.'" This reinforces the dangers of foolishness even within ones' social group.



In 1975 in Iowa I founded a drag theater troupe called, “The Sugar Plum Fairies.” ...As we sat around planning our next performance, Susan Short, one of the troupe's members, said she knew the Mother Superior in a Catholic convent in Cedar Rapids. When nuns died in that convent, they kept the habits. She told the Mother Superior we were doing a production of *The Sound of Music*. She borrowed the habits and we never returned them... In June 1977 I went back to Iowa to collect my clothes, and I remember sitting there with a garbage can on one side of me and a suitcase on the other side. All my drag went into the garbage can until I got to the habits.<sup>92</sup>

The story, from here, continues by stating when Sister Vish arrived in San Francisco, they were “bored” with their other looks, so they decided to “throw [the habits] on and go terrorize the streets.”<sup>93</sup> Of course, the reaction they received was bigger than expected.

Sister Zsa Zsa shares their moment of realization about the nun trope:

They realized that whoa! People react to nuns. Not just drag, they react to nuns. They didn't even put on make up, they just put on the habits. That's the key to all of this...It wasn't until I got involved in this that I realized, oh, you can just buy a shirt with a collar? I thought it had to be like, consecrated that someone gives you a shirt with a collar. Or, you know, up until a few years ago, I had no idea that you could just buy vestments. Anybody could buy, you didn't have to show an ID or anything. [laughs] Particularly when Catholics say, ‘you're mocking nuns,’ my response is, Well, show me the copyright. Show me the trademark. No Catholic order of nuns dresses alike.<sup>94</sup>

While they think that they could have easily been called The Cheerleaders of Perpetual Indulgence, they willingly admit that their clothing holds a special power. They are *treated as* nuns by those seeking spiritual inspiration and a connection with the Divine, demonstrating the strength of the ‘nun’ trope. They are not mocking the more spiritual attributes of the ‘nun’ (the unconditional love and servant leadership mentioned above) –

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<sup>92</sup> Sister Vish, “1977: From Origins to Founding,” *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, accessed April 12, 2016, <http://thesisters.org/sistory-by-sister-vish/212-from-origins-to-founding>.

<sup>93</sup> Sister Vish, “1977.”

<sup>94</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa.

they are performing those with no difference from non-queer nuns. What they are mocking is the presumed sanctity that those who wear ecclesiastic attire can, through an association with the institution of The Church, make special claims to spirituality.

The strength of the ‘nun’ is not as simple as “oh, you can just by a shirt with a collar,” however. The choice to don the habit as opposed to anything else taps into a spiritual semiotic relationship, whether or not the act was intentional. The addition of the habit and wimple add a “political aspect” to their look that has been “expropriated by SPI for [their] own purposes.”<sup>95</sup> This thought is echoed in Saint Real 2 Reel 4 Realz’s documentary:

I think the iconography of the nun is really powerful. It allows people to understand a certain amount of safety, without necessarily having to verbally express it. I also think that for queer people, it was really important to sort of skewer something that was hurtful and damaging. And try to skewer it in such a way that it became useful.<sup>96</sup>

Not only is the nun iconography important to the reaction from their audience, but it also allows the Sisters to turn the oppressive relationship with The Church into something peaceful and safe. As this quote from Sister Agnes Deiafta Tamara in the documentary suggests, the performance of nun-ship creates catharsis, converting something “hurtful and damaging” into something “useful.” The Sisters perform that conversion to their audience so that other queer individuals can heal from their painful interactions with The Church. The SPI *embodies* a transformative, performative ritual that is indicative of queer holy fools.

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<sup>95</sup> Sister Vish, “Sisters and the History.”

<sup>96</sup> Gebhardt, “Sisterhood.”

In sum, the Sisters resist essentialism playfully, perhaps even mischievously. They focus on progressive modes of identification all while refusing to calcify any religious identity. Doing so normalizes the rhetoric used to describe them as well as the possibility of the performance. Holy fools are known for their mischievous tactics that often lead to humorous approaches to spiritual settings.<sup>97</sup> To those who engage in holy foolery, “humor and sexuality are at the root of spirituality...they are transcendental experiences that take us beyond morality.”<sup>98</sup> The Sisters are no exception, as their camp-filled performances force the audience to question what is real. Through performative choices, flamboyant aesthetic, and resistive parody, the SPI’s embodied style acts as a first encounter many people have with the Sisters. The next chapter focuses on textual/hypertextual style and the way in which the SPI attempts to shape their communication digitally and visually.

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<sup>97</sup> According to Shore-Goss, manifestations of holy fools will reveal “unpredictability, spontaneity, rashness, selflessness, creativity, resourcefulness, foolishness, unorthodoxy, mischief, and apparent drunkenness,” all of which have a tendency for the comic. Robert E. Shore-Goss “The Holy Spirit as Mischief Maker.” In *Queering Christianity: Finding a Place at the Table for LGBTQI Christians*, ed. Shore-Goss, et. al (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 110.

<sup>98</sup> de la Huerta, *Coming Out*, 17.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Blow by Blow: The SPI's Textual/Hypertextual Style*

*“Thus the expositor and teacher of the Divine Scripture, the defender of right faith and the enemy of error, should both teach the good and extirpate the evil.” - Saint Augustine<sup>1</sup>*

Embodied and textual elements are intrinsically linked in the production of style. If, when addressing the body and embodiment, we understand the performative to be that which signifies *being* as opposed to *doing* (performance), then we can understand performative speech as the language games which *constitute* action. Butler gives an example of this process through the example of a court case:

The Court's willingness to treat the burning cross in *R.A. V. v. St. Paul* as potentially protected ‘speech’ suggests that the nonperformative view of speech can be extended to defend certain kinds of racist conduct, a defense that manipulates the distinction between speech and conduct in order to achieve certain political aims. Similarly, MacKinnon's appeal to the state to construe pornography as performative speech and, hence, as the injurious conduct of representation, does not settle the theoretical question of the relation between representation and conduct, but collapses the distinction in order to enhance the power of state intervention over graphic sexual representation.<sup>2</sup>

“Speech” and “conduct” (or, language and embodiment) are intricately linked together, one often prompting the other. Exploring hate speech provides a good foundational understanding of this link as it speaks to another connection between embodiment and

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1958), 120.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Hove: Psychology Press, 1997), 21.

text: the performative implies an effectual relationship with culture.<sup>3</sup> Just as corporeal performances are constructed by cultural tropes, so, too, are the textual and hypertextual. The study of such constructions aid in learning more about dominant and resistant cultures.

The study of style, as I have previously mentioned, reflects not only the rhetor's 'fitting' response, but also articulates aspects of culture and identity that influence such choices. The composition and structure of symbolic "communicative designs" are a part of these choices, and so each text chosen by the critic can highlight how "specific, quotidian conventions of address and display can impel, influence, and prevent action" for the style.<sup>4</sup> Styles contain a collection of notable, repeated rhetorical figures (or tropes) that mark the positionality of the rhetor. The previous chapter focused on repeated tropes as performative markers, necessitating the viewing of 'trope' as a compilation of performances that are disseminated throughout mass media. In this chapter, I elucidate the tropes used by the SPI in their textual and hypertextual stylized communication.

Robert Hariman employs a similar method for uncovering four political styles (realist, courtly, republican, and bureaucratic) by examining tropes found within texts from chosen representatives of each style. For instance, he discovers that, "the republican style is reflected in Cicero's letters to Atticus...Cicero's place for crafting a persona emblematic of public life."<sup>5</sup> Essentially, through examining Cicero's letters and other works, Hariman excavates the primary rhetorical figures that he claims are identifying

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<sup>3</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 158-159.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Hariman, *Political Style: The Artistry of Power* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 11 and 4.

<sup>5</sup> Hariman, *Political Style*, 5.

markers of the republican style, such as the reliance on public speaking as a primary form of communication. Similarly, he discusses Machiavelli's *The Prince* as representative of the realist style, arguing:

The influence... begins with its author's artistic concealment of his artistry, a master trope opposing nature and ornament, a real world and the distractions of a text. Machiavelli's skill at aligning himself with signs of a natural world is evident in his following *metaphor*... Here, Machiavelli is addressing a classical question of decorum: How does one speak to one of higher station?<sup>6</sup>

Metaphor, a trope often examined by rhetorical critics, establishes "nature vs. ornamentation" immediately in the text, which undergirds much of what Hariman labels as realist style. This process involves probing rhetorical figures to determine what dominant tropes are used to inaugurate the rhetor's fitting responses to their individual rhetorical situations.

Applied in this traditional sense as rhetorical figures, tropes not only pinpoint key identifiers of the style, but they also provide a tension which allows styles to work against the competing influences of other styles.<sup>7</sup> Returning to Hariman's realist and republican style, this antagonism becomes apparent:

Tension begins with the opposition between master tropes of style: Where the realist assumes power is extrinsic to political discourse, the republican finds it in successful public address. This opposition can be helpful, as it can correct the republic too disposed to assume that words will be followed by actions or remind the realist to not overlook the power stored in language.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, rhetors employing the realist style urge individuals to be skeptical of political rhetoric; whereas, the republican *uses* such rhetoric as a means of

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<sup>6</sup> Hariman, *Political Style*, 19, my emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> Hariman, *Political Style*, 47.

<sup>8</sup> Hariman, *Political Style*, 47.

interacting with their audience. The result of juxtaposing the two reveals how they each function, in a way, to correct the other; providing insights into areas not considered by the other. The corrective nature of tropes can be utilized to work against more powerful, perhaps oppressive forms of style – demonstrating how certain prominent styles do not account for marginalized voices. The etymology of ‘trope’ provides insight into this transgressive power: the Greek *tropos* meaning “that which turns.”<sup>9</sup> The subversive disruption of ‘turning’ also describes queer theory, making the focus on tropes in queer holy fools style an easy match.

In Chapter Three, I discussed how the SPI uses embodiment as a way to deviate from normative spiritual/religious practices and playfully challenge The Church. In this chapter, I argue that the texts (both visual and linguistic) and tropes created by the Sisters confront traditional assumptions about sexuality and religiosity made prevalent by texts like Dante’s *Inferno* in order to establish a new relationship with LGBTQ individuals and spirituality/religion. In line with their ‘turning’ nature, the tropes designed by the SPI attempt to transgressively correct other rhetorical figures that compete for influence within religious/spiritual discourse. First, I describe the concept of contrapasso as a dominant religious spectacle. Next, I explain what is entailed in the SPI’s textual/hypertextual style. Finally, I unpack tropes within the Sisters’ rhetoric.

#### **4.2 Contrapasso and the Relationship of Spectacle**

While the rituals and attire of the Sisters may seem outlandish, spectacle is not uncommon in the history of religious visual imagery. Julia Mason asserts that much of

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<sup>9</sup> “Trope,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed April 8, 2016, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=-trope>.

“apocalyptic imagery is admittedly bizarre,” which allows it to draw “attention to its outlandishness rather than hiding behind a veil of nature.”<sup>10</sup> For instance, artists such as Hieronymus Bosch and literary works such as Dante’s *Inferno* are infamous for their distinct spectacle of apocalyptic imagery. Both utilize the concepts of Hell as a background and the sinner as characters while constructing strikingly odd, yet oddly easy to interpret, texts. As Mason notes, “these images are not only effective because of their sensual content – their striking visual nature – but because these images are intelligible to the viewer within a world shaped by classical and Christian discourses.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, unlike surreal texts which share a similar form, these particular texts are easy to understand due to a prevalence of religious discourse and imagery within Western culture.

As I explained in the previous chapter, outlandish spectacle acts as a crucial tool in the SPI’s queer holy fool style. Recall my use of spectacle as that which can draw attention to the particular relationships between the audience and tropes. Guy Debord suggests that spectacle is “not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people and mediated images.”<sup>12</sup> I agree that spectacle contributes to the relationship between the audience and a particular rhetorical message. I have already established that style is a communicative choice particular to rhetorical situations and based upon identity and culture. The choice to use the concept of “stylized spectacle” reveals the particular standpoint of the rhetor. Because spectacle suggests the relationship

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<sup>10</sup> Julia Mason, “Rhetoric After the Fall: Sin and Punishment in Christian Visual Culture,” *Visual Communication* 13 (2013): 102.

<sup>11</sup> Mason, “Rhetoric After the Fall,” 103.

<sup>12</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 1983), 5.



between the audience and the rhetor, a study of style also showcases how projections of that standpoint connect the rhetor and the audience. In other words, the SPI's performance of spectacle, both in embodiment and textual communication, builds a relationship between spirituality/religiosity and those that witness the spectacle.

Christian visual culture works to establish a relationship as well – one between sinner and The Church – in which dominant religious ideologies convey the teachings of The Church. Many of these teachings focus on what makes for a good, appropriate life and the consequences of not following specific standards.<sup>13</sup> Often, the absurd consequences revealed in the textual and visual images employ *contrapasso*, or a “retributive principle whereby everyone must suffer in the afterlife according to the sin he or she has committed on Earth. In other words, the punishment fits the crime.”<sup>14</sup> *Contrapasso* can either directly reflect the sin or portray a mirror image of the sinful act. For instance, in Dante's *Inferno*, fortune tellers, soothsayers, and astrologers were placed in the ninth circle of Hell to spend eternity with their heads twisted backwards on their necks.<sup>15</sup> This was a fitting punishment, as implied by Dante, due to their life's devotion of trying to reveal the future. While in Hell, they are unable to see what is in front of them. Obviously, this example of *contrapasso* reflected a fate similar to the act committed in life. In circle two however, Dante paints a picture of Paolo and Francesca, two lustful sinners obsessed with each other sexually. Because of their lust, they spend eternity in Hell with their bodies bonded together in a sexual position. Their story represents the

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<sup>13</sup> Mason, “Rhetoric After the Fall,” 96.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Brand and Lino Pertile, *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 63. as cited in Mason, “Rhetoric After the Fall,” 103.

<sup>15</sup> This is the example that Mason uses. Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Inferno* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

mirrored reflection of the sin committed: in life they never wanted to be apart, in death they desperately yearn to be separated.

The relationship between sinner and The Church expressed through these texts is manifested in the contrapasso's reflecting and mirroring nature: one's 'sin' will become a painful punishment in Hell if not atoned. While visualizing such a text might make it easy to assume that the viewer is acting as a passive spectator, the depictions were cited by The Church to provoke a meditative reflection of one's own sinful behaviors; thereby serving as a tool to discipline sinners. Such a form of discipline, or 'semio-technique,' predates the industrialized prison complex, making the insinuated punishment more intuitive and understandable.<sup>16</sup> Punishment works as an "art of effects;" and, in the case of contrapasso, the effects sought by witnessing corporeal punishment are the prevention of sinful acts and the establishment of The Church's authority.<sup>17</sup> These effects are also demonstrated on the body in visual texts. In a way, we witness the sins of the sinner

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 93. Mason, "Rhetoric After the Fall," 105. Though I recognize that Foucault (and much of queer theory) conceptualizes disciplining as a productive force (as opposed to repressive), I situate 'disciplining' in my study as an act that attempts to shame and ostracize particular individuals. My rationale for this decision comes from the queer holy fool style performing a 'fitting' response to dominant Judeo-Christian narratives that use disciplining in this way. In other words, due to the Sisters need to counteract the contrapasso, it becomes important for the impacts of The Church's rhetoric (shame, guilt, and potential suicides within the LGBTQ community) to be discussed here.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 93. Gary Genosko, "Special Semiotic Characters: What is an Obstacle-Sign?," *Media Tropes eJournal*, (4, 2013), 102.

Mason, "Rhetoric After the Fall," 109.

performed through/on their body; making this strategy “a type of corporal semiotics in which the bodies of sinners are made readable.”<sup>18</sup>

For LGBTQ individuals, the reading of their body is not an uncommon event, specifically as a sinful expression. In fact, the seventh circle of Dante’s Hell contains those who committed the sin of defying nature. Given the time period in which Dante composed the work, sodomites, or anyone participating in ‘unnatural’ sex, were thought to reside here. Whether or not Dante was referencing homosexuality specifically is a contested topic; yet, if we look to the visual imagery while thinking about contrapasso, the punishments seem to match that particular ‘sin.’<sup>19</sup> For example, the land in the seventh circle is barren, thought to represent the fact that sodomites could not procreate. Fire constantly rains upon the sinners, perhaps as a literary allusion to the fate of the city of Sodom, a reference often used as ‘proof’ of God’s contempt for homosexuality. Certainly, the visual symbolism suggests that those who commit the ‘sin’ of homosexuality would suffer a similar destiny to the sinners featured in the contrapasso.

Because messages of “unnatural,” “fire,” and “sin” are commonly associated with “homosexuality” within the dominant rhetoric of The Church, the contrapasso existing within The Church promotes negativity and pain toward LGBTQ bodies. To combat the contrapasso, the SPI’s queer holy fool style must establish a positive rhetorical relationship between LGBTQ individuals and spirituality. What queer holy fool stylistic

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<sup>18</sup> Mason, “Rhetoric After the Fall,” 105-109. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 134.

<sup>19</sup> I use the word ‘homosexuality’ because that is the term that would have been used by those who consider LGBTQ individuals sinful simply because of their sexual orientation.

strategies are used in texts to (re)build a rapport between the LGBTQ community and the Divine?

### 4.3 The SPI as Text/Hypertext

Like the older, more bizarre visual Christian texts, the SPI refuses to hide behind the veil of nature. While religious texts do so in order to draw attention to the message in the apocalyptic disciplining, the Sisters want to challenge the idea that *any* religious symbolism is ‘natural.’ Attempting to detach themselves from oppressive teachings of The Church, each new Sister must take their vows upon becoming a fully professed member: “Promulgate universal joy and expiate stigmatic guilt.”<sup>20</sup> Specifically, they believe that “all people have a right to express their unique joy and beauty and [they] use humor and irreverent wit to expose the forces of bigotry, complacency and guilt that chain the human spirit.”<sup>21</sup> If they wish to expiate the stigmatic guilt and fear pressed upon spiritual queers by The Church, then they must necessarily address the contrapasso in images and tropes that set up queers as ‘sinful’ and correct the rhetoric surrounding such tropes. The Sisters’ stylistic choices show other LGBTQ people that it is possible to be both queer and spiritual/religious.

In Chapter 3, I used the tropes dramatically: I referred to the ‘nun’ as a media constructed genre that is employed by the SPI to enact their embodied style. For textual/hypertextual style, returning to the structure of text and the messages embedded within discourse becomes necessary. As such, I turn to the more historic use of ‘tropes’

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<sup>20</sup> Sister Vish, “From the Origins to Founding,” *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, accessed March 13, 2016, <http://thesisters.org/sistory-by-sister-vish/212-from-origins-to-founding>. Though I cite specifically from the website here, this sentiment was echoed in several YouTube videos, as well as the oral history narratives I collected.

<sup>21</sup> Sister Vish, “From the Origins.”

as rhetorical figures of speech in this chapter to explore the construction of the stylization of queer holy fool communication. Since the Sisters must combat the guilt and fear embedded in LGBTQ's relationship to traditional religious texts, addressing them textually (whether it is visual or linguistic) is important in determining what the structure of their style looks like. To do so, I look to Burke's master tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) to analyze their style via linguistic and visual texts.

The style of the SPI is not innate; styles are learned through communication and enculturation. Reflecting on how they came to be a queer nun, Sister Zsa Zsa Glamour describes the first time they went out in full habit:

Well, there was like a weeknight fundraiser at a piano bar in Pacific Heights put on by Sister Blanche. And I didn't know the whole process. There wasn't any website, no printed material. I didn't know where to find out information. So, I just cobbled together what I thought was a nun habit and put on a black veil and painted my face and showed up. Everybody looked and said who the hell is this... They said, "Girl you gotta go through a process. You can't just show up like that." Well, I didn't know.<sup>22</sup>

As technology (and their organization) has grown, thesisters.org was created to act as an access point for information about the SPI. The website not only informs those who are interested in becoming Sisters about the process, but it also provides LGBTQ individuals with news about a variety of topics that are pertinent to their community, such as safe sex practices and fundraising opportunities. Websites, as public texts, activate rhetorical processes of interpretation due to the active role readers play in providing context and knowledge to what they are reading.<sup>23</sup> Barbara Warnick argues "contemporary users of

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<sup>22</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa, interviewed by Christina L. Ivey, Oral history interview, May 29, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Warnick, "Intertextuality and Web-Based Discourse," *Rhetoric Online: Persuasion and Politics on the World Wide Web* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 102.

Web-based discourse have at their fingertips resources that enable them to seek out information in the moment in order to more fully understand and appreciate an intertextual reference.”<sup>24</sup> In seeking out what is ‘missing,’ LGBTQ individuals looking for spiritual guidance and utilize intertextual markers to push their message further. Because of the important role of hypertext within the Sister’s communication, I retrieve my texts using the website as the primary hub for such discursive tendrils.

#### **4.4 Burke’s Four Master Tropes**

Tropes, as I have previously explained, have the power to change how particular symbols are perceived through various contexts. Traditionally, trope has been labeled as a stylistic device used to describe the “use of a word in a sense other than the literal.”<sup>25</sup> This, of course, is not just limited to linguistic rhetorical strategies: images and other forms of visual representations can also be used to incite something else. As such, tropes (whether verbal or visual) act as a mechanism for providing various perspectives to a particular phenomenon. Consider the conventional defense of poetry: the use of rich tropes provides new ways of thinking about things, actions, relations, people, and so on. Kenneth Burke recognized the rhetorical power of tropes, and identified four (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony) which he considered to be the ‘Master Tropes.’<sup>26</sup> In this chapter, I will identify examples of each Master trope within the textual, hypertextual, and visual discourse created by the Sisters.

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<sup>24</sup> Warnick, “Intertextuality,” 119.

<sup>25</sup> Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egley Waggoner, *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 49. Holman & Harmon, 485

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 503-517.

#### 4.4.1 Metaphor

Metaphor, as Burke's foundational trope, is simply "a device for seeing something in terms of something else."<sup>27</sup> Language cultivates through metaphor – a process in which we first connect the known/familiar to the unknown/unfamiliar in order to better understand the symbolic.<sup>28</sup> For instance, the expression "love is a battlefield" is a metaphor meant to symbolize the more difficult, possibly combative nature of the intangible feeling of 'love.' Likewise, one could describe YouTube as 'the motion pictures of the current generation' to provide a parallel between the way that we think of the booming entertainment industry in Hollywood and the dramatic changes that are occurring in the online social platform. Both of these examples draw a distinct, symbolic connection between the object and a perspective that it is not often associated with.

The SPI employ many sexual metaphors, especially when discussing who they are as an organization or the safety of the LGBTQ community. The term 'blow,' a term meant to suggest oral sex, is utilized often. Recall the title of their historical timeline is "Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Inc. – A *blow-by-blow* account."<sup>29</sup> The interactive timeline not only features historical accounts of the Sisters, but it also points out key moments in LGBTQ history, such as Harvey Milk's assassination, and the first time the queer flag was flown in the Castro. Given the tumultuous, sometimes violent, history of LGBTQ individuals, *blow* can also come to mean a powerful strike. In this way, the name

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<sup>27</sup> Burke, *Grammar*, page number; Tell, 37

<sup>28</sup> Burke, *Grammar*, 506. David Tell, "Burke's Encounter with Ransom: Rhetoric and Epistemology in 'Four Master Tropes.'" *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* (2009), 41.

<sup>29</sup> The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, "Sistory of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence," *Tiki Toki*, accessed March 17, 2016, <http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/52067/Sistory-of-the-Sisters-of-Perpetual-Indulgence-Inc/>, original emphasis.

of the sistory could imply that despite facing struggle, the LGBTQ community has fought back. The Sistory also allows for those who know about LGBTQ history to see the Sisters as part of the struggle. If they did not know, then this timeline provides “extratextual events” that creates more information for those on the site.<sup>30</sup> Again, this process connects text, author, and those seeking the information within a “plural, intertextual network of significations and potential significations.”<sup>31</sup> As such, the reader can become enveloped in the Sistory, a more feminine, relational term that is in itself a metaphor for an alternative narrativization of history.

Blow connects with attacks in other areas of the website. The page dedicated to their Stop the Violence campaign describes the purpose of the campaign and what they do to promote an end to hate crime behavior. The Sisters give out whistles during events (such as Pride) that LGBTQ individuals can use if they are being attacked. The page also features personal accounts of those who have successfully used the whistle to prevent such an attack. One account by Sister Dana Van Iquity specifically applies the *blow* metaphor:

My first reaction was to be a victim, but then I suddenly went into autopilot (thanks to The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence’s recent campaign to Stop the Violence) and fished my whistle out of my right pocket and blew like crazy - not really knowing what that might do, but still blowing it away - I mean BLOWING for LIFE – racing towards Diamond Street, only to find several police squad cars arriving on the spot. I thought this was amazing timing! At the whistle’s shrill and continual sound, the attacker had dashed away in the opposite direction.

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<sup>30</sup> Warnick, “Intertextuality,” 92.

<sup>31</sup> Warnick, “Intertextuality,” 119.



Here, the metaphor adds humor to a situation that in reality is very frightening, connecting the sexual to a sense of safety for the community in an entertaining, light-hearted way.

Sexually playful metaphors carry over into the naming of the SPI events, too. “Up Your Alley Fair,” “Score” (a basketball fundraiser), and “Hot Cross Buns” (where “buns” refers to a persons’ derriere) all metaphorically imply body parts or sexual acts.<sup>32</sup> Other events create metaphors of religious ideas. “Resurrection Bingo” obviously implies the Resurrection of Christ, or the moment in Christianity when Jesus rose from the dead after the Crucifixion. The description of the event helps develop the connection between the event and resurrection:

The Sisters find themselves in the middle of an AIDS denialist mythology drama when members are targeted around barebacking issues. The Sisters *rise to the occasion* by granting money to AIDS Activist Against Violence and Lies (AAAVL) who battle the denialists on many fronts. AAAVL helps to prevent violence against PWA's [people with AIDS] from occurring and works to protect public meetings from being threatened by the denialists.<sup>33</sup>

Here, rhetoric used in the description of the event suggests that like Jesus, the Sisters rise to save their people. Instead of saving them from ‘sin,’ the SPI saves their community from those who would deny the real threat of AIDS.

To receive help in their fight against those who deny their problems exist, the SPI employ a war metaphor. A flier from 1994 featured the Sisters dressed in normative nun attire, standing in front of Uncle Sam with the text “Sister Sam Wants You! Join the All-

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<sup>32</sup> “Sistory,” *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, accessed April 2, 2016, <http://thesisters.org/index.php/sistory>.

<sup>33</sup> “Sistory,” my emphasis.

Action Queer Army” at the top.<sup>34</sup> This image’s tone undergirds the tone of the Sisters’ work at the time: they were fighting a war “against homophobia in the church and the government.”<sup>35</sup> The Sisters sought to “enlist the energy of angry people for the Holy Wars,” and even distributed draft cards.<sup>36</sup> By taking up war rhetoric, as well as the “Sister Sam” visual image, the Sisters present their struggles with oppression as a literal battle – one in need of ‘soldiers’ to rise against the enemy.

Overall, the queer holy fool style relies on metaphor in a playful way to connect sexuality, religious terms, and safety. Serving a community that is often taught that the combination of sexuality and religion mean ‘danger’ or ‘judgment,’ the addition of safety tries to repair that idea: identifying strongly as queer and spiritual should not pose a risk.

#### **4.4.2 Metonymy**

Metonymy, or communicating “some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible,” is arguably the most poetic of Burke’s master tropes.<sup>37</sup> Here, the immaterial, more abstract symbols are described in such a way as to make them more concrete. Burke explains that metonymy is how we come to know that shame (an intangible feeling) is associated with flush, red cheeks (a physical symbol). For example, the material object ‘crown’ can often stand in place of royalty as a way to deduce the intangible (royalty) down to a tangible signifier (crown). Moreover, the rhetoric of

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<sup>34</sup> The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, “Sistory of the Sisters.” Please visit the website to view the image described.

<sup>35</sup> The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, “Sistory of the Sisters.”

<sup>36</sup> The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, “Sistory of the Sisters.”

<sup>37</sup> Burke, *Grammar*, 506.

connectivity (such as: if you want to be ‘connected,’ you make a YouTube site) has come to provide a way to understand the nature of relationships within Web 2.0.

The example I gave in Chapter Two reveals that the Sister’s names often make abstract, spiritual concepts more concrete through performance.<sup>38</sup> For instance, Sisters’ Celeste L. Powers, Dharma Gettin’ and Penny Coastal names reflect the spiritual/religious elements of the SPI’s mission. Other Sisters chose names that challenge more normative religious ideas. Sister Lilith of the Valley of the Shadow of Death chose to invoke Lilith, first wife of Adam, who was supposedly cast out of Eden for refusing to be subservient to Adam.<sup>39</sup> Lilith’s name is often associated with the empowerment of women in religion.

Some Sisters have names that satirically bring forth individuals that are found in religious pop culture. Sister Tammy Fae Bakkersfield obviously invokes Tammy Fae Bakker, infamous evangelical who, with her husband Jim Bakker, conned individuals out of millions through their fake ministry. The Branch Davidian compound in Texas is memorialized through Dallas Sister Blanche Davidian. Though both Tammy Fae Baker and the Branch Davidians actually existed, their infamy has turned them into a more abstract symbol of the trickery of institutionalized religion. The Bakkers notoriously took advantage of their vulnerable followers to become incredibly wealthy, and led the way for other ‘Super Churches’ to make money off of their congregation. In the wake of the

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<sup>38</sup> Previously, scholars have used the Sisters’ names to demonstrate their dedication to raising awareness of AIDS with the LGBTQ community (such as Sister Latex of the Immaculate Protection). Paul Cambridge, “How Far to Gay?: The Politics of HIV in Learning Disability,” *Disability and Society* 12 (1997), 430.

<sup>39</sup> Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing, Valarie H. Ziegler, *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 220–221.

revelations about the Bakkers, the conflation of capitalist greed and obligatory tithing caused many to doubt the role of institutional religion. The Branch Davidians, on the other hand, were devoted to their congregation—in fact, so devoted that they represent (to many who only know of them through media scandal) the potential of The Church to brainwash followers and create a cult culture. Because of these practices, the allusion to Tammy Fae Baker and the Branch Davidians diminishes The Church down to the distrustful and even scary.

Other Sisters avoid drawing on religious symbolism, and choose more sexual names, such as: Sister Betty Tastewell, Self Rising; Sister “Floozy!” Flora Goodthyme; and Sister Anni Coque l’Doo.<sup>40</sup> Then there are those Sisters who choose to combine the spiritual, the humorous, and the sexual: Sister Constance Lee Craving of the Holey Desire, sister Jezabelle of the Enraptured Sling, and Sister Risque of the Sissytime Chapel. For some, it is difficult to tell if the Sister is invoking the sexual or the religious. Sister T’aint a Virgin could refer to someone who has abstained from sex, or *the* Virgin Mary. The colloquial addition of “T” in front of “aint” creates the word “taint” – a term used to describe the area between the testicles and anus – another bodily reference. Sister Tilly Comes Again also falls into this category, either implying the Second Coming of the Messiah, or the completion of an orgasm. For many of their ‘congregation,’ the essence of the Sisters can be summed up by the combination of sexual orientation and spirituality.

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<sup>40</sup> Many of these names are understood by hearing them out loud. If you are having difficulty understanding *why* they are sexual, say them out loud. Just do not do so in a public place.

Visually, metonymy manifests as taking a complex idea and boiling it down to a simplistic image.<sup>41</sup> For the SPI, the origin of their wimples is a good example. Various religions require different head coverings for multiple reasons. The exact rationale for women's head coverings is contested; though, many theologians point to Apostle Paul's discussion of them in 1 Corinthians 11. First, Paul taught that men were given, by God's creation, the authority over women; and therefore, held the position as head of the home.<sup>42</sup> As a symbol of this hierarchy, women should wear head coverings in places deemed the house of God. Paul also claimed head coverings help delineate 'natural' gender distinctions: "Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering."<sup>43</sup> Demanding head coverings for women and not men was thought to aid in separating those two genders, symbolizing the two roles they played within 'God's plan.'

In Catholicism, the head covering worn by traditional nuns is called a wimple. Though they may look similar, the subtle differences help identify which Order the nun belongs to. The SPI are no different: each Order has its own wimple shape, though the shapes are a bit more *fabulous* than traditional. According to their website, the original SPI wimple worn by the San Francisco Sisters is inspired by head coverings worn by 14<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Deanna D. Sellnow, "A Visual Perspective: Visual Pleasure Theory," *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2010), 143.

<sup>42</sup> Taken from 1 Corinthians 11: 7-10. "*For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head...*"

<sup>43</sup> 1 Corinthians 11: 14-15

century ladies in waiting.<sup>44</sup> Due to its shape (large, round, half-spheres on each side of the head above the ears), they are lovingly referred to as “ear boobs.”<sup>45</sup> As other Orders began, some found inspiration in the city in which they live. For instance, the Grand Canyon Sisters’ wimple bends in the middle, much like the shape of the Grand Canyon.<sup>46</sup> Other Orders draw from geographically linked pop culture references. The Orlando Sisters’ covering resembles “the ears of a certain rodent which shall remain unnamed,” while Orders in Texas feature Sisters that look like they are wearing cowboy hats.<sup>47</sup>

The strength of the wimple as metonymic anchor is demonstrated through the advertisements notifying website visitors of grant opportunities provided by the Sisters. One particular ad poses two nude Sisters next to each other, one eating a banana while the other points at her and smiles mischievously into the camera.<sup>48</sup> Cleverly blocking elements that might classify the picture as ‘pornographic,’ large text stating “GIVING it AWAY! \$15000” with the Sisters’ grant link can be seen in the center of the photo. The only way one would know that the models are Sisters is the wimple and the website.

Because the original motivation for head coverings included dogmatic ideas that the SPI tries to combat, it makes sense that their wimples boil down the complexity of their unity into simplified symbols. Instead of acting as oppressive symbols of an outdated Biblical interpretation, the wimples pose as a tangible expression of each

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<sup>44</sup> “Wimples of the World,” *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, accessed March 11, 2016, <http://thesisters.org/wimples-of-the-world>.

<sup>45</sup> “Wimples of the World.”

<sup>46</sup> “Wimples of the World.”

<sup>47</sup> “Wimples of the World.”

<sup>48</sup> “Sister Grants,” *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, accessed April 2, 2016, <http://http://thesisters.org/grants>. Please visit the website to view the picture.

Sister's origin. The original "boob head" wimple spoke more to the parodic nature of the Sisters' mission: the concept of 'ladies in waiting' grew around the time a standard nun attire was established. Newer forms of other Sisters' habits focus more on humor than parody.

#### ***4.4.3 Synecdoche***

Metonymy and synecdoche are often confused. They each function as a way to discuss a smaller part of a greater picture, but as opposed to metonymy's reduction of the immaterial to the material (unity/community into a wimple), synecdoche's induction is a "conversion upwards" that allows us to understand the intangible through the tangible representation.<sup>49</sup> In this way, synecdoche is a trope where a part stands in for the greater whole.<sup>50</sup> David Tell argues that this synecdochic conversion allows the audience to "overcome the limitations of language."<sup>51</sup> Metonymy, Tell clarifies, limits language by "restricting it to a metaphorical extension," whereas synecdoche induces the symbolism in such a way that transcends language.<sup>52</sup> Here, Burke continues his analogy of the feeling of shame and flushed, red cheeks to explain the difference between metonymy and synecdoche: If metonymy deduces the immaterial expression of shame through the material flushing of cheeks; synecdoche is the process through which the audience understands that red cheeks represent shame. The use of body parts to represent whole person are figures of speech that occur often. *If* that body part helps to explain the function of the whole person ("all hands on deck" implies the physical, albeit intangible

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<sup>49</sup> Burke, *Grammar*, 509.

<sup>50</sup> Burke, *Grammar*, 507.

<sup>51</sup> Tell, "Burke's Encounter," 43.

<sup>52</sup> Tell, "Burke's Encounter," 43.

work sailors do), then such a phrase is a synecdoche. On a larger level, individuals can be used as representatives of a larger organization (thinking of Pewdiepie as representative of ‘YouTube success’ due to his channel touting the most subscribers on YouTube). As I argued in Chapter Two, the Sisters acts as a synecdochal representation of the queer holy fool style: while the category of the queer holy fool style is rich and complicated, the SPI are representative of this broader category.

Self-descriptions of the SPI states contain the terms “ministry of presence,” “family,” and “educators.” All of these concepts seem simple enough, but when trying to define them explicitly, the task proves quite a bit more difficult than assumed. Under the heading “What It Takes to be a Sister of Perpetual Indulgence,” the website states,

Most often the Sisters are seen out having a good time, looking fabulous and enjoying ourselves. However, what is not often seen is the great deal of work that each Sister does. Similarly, we are often associated with fundraising. Although we do a lot of fundraising, that is not our mission and our work spans a lot of other areas.<sup>53</sup>

Though the public witnesses the fundraising and easily assume that is all they do, the Sisters are much more. A “ministry of presence” means the Sisters meet the people where they are doing what they do. While out, the website claims that members of the SPI hold “very intense one-on-one sessions with people” who seek their spiritual guidance and need the universal joy each Sister vowed to promulgate.<sup>54</sup> Part of this ‘joy’ also includes teaching individuals about safe sex practices, a practice that combats the stigmatic guilt surrounding AIDS.

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<sup>53</sup> “Becoming a Sister,” *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, accessed March 11, 2016, <http://thesisters.org/becoming-a-sister>.

<sup>54</sup> “Becoming a Sister.”



Growing their “family,” means evaluating potential new Sisters. A short list of ‘must-haves’ for any new member includes: “passion,” “commitment,” “desire to perform community service,” and “good people skills.”<sup>55</sup> As the website warns, however, these attributes are not the only things that make up a good candidate.

The Order is made up of over 30 people who all must be able to work together smoothly and efficiently. We are far from perfect and, like any family, often have our misunderstandings. Despite that, we all work towards our common goals and often can make miracles happen. A new member must be able to mesh with the Order and should add to the group dynamic, not detract from it.<sup>56</sup>

Here, “family” represents much more than a familial unit (as dysfunctional as that may be), but also cohesion, adaptability, the ability to “mesh.” Though that might be the make-up of most families, that certainly is not the requirement for all; therefore, the screening for new Sisters has progressively gotten stricter. In the early days of the SPI, many individuals came from 12 step programs hoping to find a Divine intervention by becoming a Sister.<sup>57</sup> As the popularity of the Sisters grew, some wanted to join hoping for a jumpstart to their drag career.<sup>58</sup> Since neither of these fit into their definition of family, there are now rules in place to prevent such individuals from joining.

The use of family, at first, may appear to be a metaphor rather than synecdoche; but the concept of family helps some Sisters grasp what the Divine is. Queer holy fools “remind us that God is found in fragments, not just wholeness;” and a large fragment of

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<sup>55</sup> “Becoming a Sister.”

<sup>56</sup> “Becoming a Sister.”

<sup>57</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa.

<sup>58</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa.

the Divine (especially for the LGBTQ community) is familial support.<sup>59</sup> For some Sisters, the promise of family is what makes the SPI so attractive – making ‘family’ the fragment of the Divine they have been searching for. As such, the consistent use of familial rhetoric creates an understanding of the intangible Divine through the representation of a tangible familial relationship.

Visually, the positive connection between sexuality and spirituality becomes clear through the Sisters choices for flier images and complementary anchoring. More contemporary fliers collected within the Sisters’ archives include positive, playful images of sexuality and religion. For example, the Eureka Sisters hold a ‘Garden of Reading’ bingo event benefitting a local literacy project. The flier for the event features what appears to be a child’s rendering of the tree of knowledge that has “I [heart] 2 read” etched into the bark surrounded by two digitally inserted Sisters and a woman painted green with a snake-like tongue hanging upside down from the branches.<sup>60</sup> The sexuality is subtle here: the sign for the Humboldt Literacy Project (which resembles an artistic apple) is dangling from what appears to be a fishing line as one Sister suggestively tries to take a bite. Using religious symbolism from the well-known story of Adam and Eve, the Sisters create visual representations of religiosity combined with sexual innuendos. The story of Adam and Eve is one of the first stories told to children in Sunday School; and arguably, one of the first moments that heterosexuality is reified through Church discourse (God made ‘woman’ as the *natural* match for ‘man’). The childlike rendering

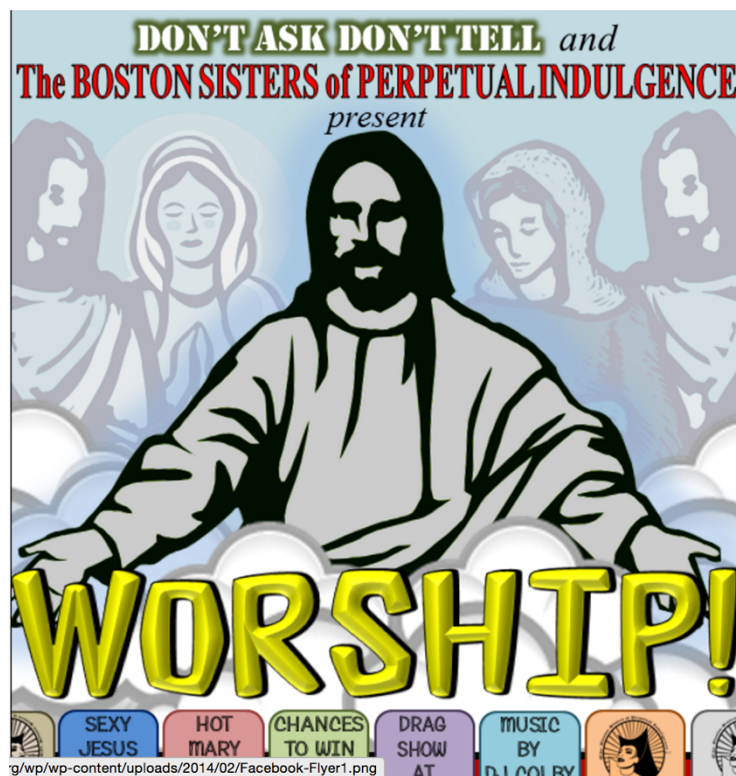
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<sup>59</sup> Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 168.

<sup>60</sup> “Archive,” *Queer Humboldt*, accessed January 31, 2016, <http://hosted-p0.vresp.com/837159/e98d533272/ARCHIVE>. Please visit the link to view the flier.

of the flier represents this initial trope, and the addition of new characters troubles the old meaning. Yes, there is a ‘female’ and ‘male’ present here, but the female is depicted as the serpent. Earlier, I mentioned that in some religious discourse, Lilith is considered to be the first wife of Adam until he casts her out of Eden. Some renditions of the story state that instead of banishment, Lilith was made into the serpent that tempted Eve. Knowing this allusion, the female in the picture is cast out and made over into the serpent in favor of the more ‘suitable’ partner – another (presumably masculine) Sister. The fact that the ‘apple’ is dangling from what appears to be a fishing line suggests that the female-esque serpent is luring the Sister, as the other Sister (Adam) watches in horror. A phrase which stems from the heterosexual reification of The Church (“It’s Adam and *Eve*, not Adam and *Steve!*”) represents the broader negative discourse surrounding LGBTQ bodies and The Church. This flier, in turning certain parts of that story, corrects the larger discourse by proposing that in some cases, Steve is a better fit for Adam after all. Through select visual symbols, the Sisters capture the holistic picture of Adam and Eve, and then trouble it with new parts of their own. The combination of both generate for the viewer a positive, synecdochical relationship between religion and sexuality.

The trend of drawing upon sexual and religious representations continues throughout several fliers created by the SPI. A poster advertising for “Worship!” features a caricature sketch of Jesus with arms open.

Figure 1<sup>61</sup>

The flier could be for a church youth get together, were it not for phrases like “Sexy Jesus,” “Hot Mary,” and “Drag Show” at the bottom of the advertisement.<sup>62</sup> Note how in the depiction, Jesus, typically a representation of The Church’s love and acceptance, is more in focus and placed in the foreground while the other caricatures are blurry and back. The fact that His arms are open only further suggests His welcoming nature. Here, the Sisters are using a common symbol of The Church for what it commonly represents; yet, they are juxtaposing it with terms and phrases of the queer community. Accounts of Jesus have Him dining with whores and visiting lepers – populations that the Pharisees

<sup>61</sup> The Boston Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, “Worship @ Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” accessed January 31, 2016, <http://www.thebostonisters.org/worship-dont-ask-dont-tell/>. I obtained the necessary permission to include this image in my dissertation. Photo courtesy of Sister Gloria LeLuia of the Boston Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

<sup>62</sup> The Boston Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, “Worship.”

would never entertain. With a simple representation, the SPI is calling on that *whole* story, not just the one side given by The Church. As such, the Sisters paint a holistic depiction of acceptance of individuals who are not normatively associated with the Divine.

#### **4.4.4 Irony**

If tropes indeed allow for a space where multiple perspectives are heard, irony as a trope allows two or more of those perspectives to be heard at once. Burke positions irony in opposition to relativism, where everything is seen “in but one set of terms” as opposed to multiple ways of seeing.<sup>63</sup> David Tell describes irony as Burke’s “perspective of perspectives” in which “conflicting perspectives” are held in “productive tension.”<sup>64</sup> Essentially, by viewing two seemingly opposing ideas together, we begin to get a sense of their relationship. More specifically, Burke outlines a “formula” for irony: “what goes forth as A returns as non-A.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, irony, as I am operationalizing it, is when a rhetor utilizes specific terms that normally have one established meaning in such a way as to reverse this conventional meaning. For instance, if a traffic cop is placed in jail for unpaid parking tickets, such a situation is described as ironic. An individual whose entire livelihood deals with punishing those who disobey the law is ultimately charged with not obeying said law. In continuing with my ‘YouTube’ themed explanations, irony is present if I post a video about how useless YouTube is on YouTube. To utilize Burke’s formula: What goes forth as a critique of the ability of a medium to contain useful information is only fodder contributing to the growth of that medium.

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<sup>63</sup> Burke, *Grammar*, 512. Tell, “Burke’s Encounter,” 47.

<sup>64</sup> Tell, “Burke’s Encounter,” 47. Tell is citing Burke, *Grammar*, 513.

<sup>65</sup> Burke, *Grammar*, 517.

The Sisters, by combining spirituality and sexuality together positively confront major taboos within the normative thinking of The Church. By combining the two together, their rhetoric reflects an ironic situation similar to, yet in negation of, the *contrapasso*. An easy example to explain irony is to look at how the SPI have changed the way the term “condom” is perceived as it relates to their community. To commemorate the investiture of the SPI order in Paris in 1990, the San Francisco Sisters flew to Paris to welcome them to the Sisterhood. They performed the first ever “The Condom Saviour Consecration Vow,” which has since been performed regularly.<sup>66</sup> This event, like the name suggests, praises the invention of the condom and its use to fight the spread of AIDS. Consecration, when used in Catholicism, changes the common or profane into something sacred. In the Catholic Church and many strains of Christianity, consecration is the act of making a person, place, or thing sacred. Priests consecrate bread and wine in order to make it sacred for acts of communion. That one could consecrate a condom—that most profane of things—involves a reversal of what we tend to think is appropriate to consecrate. And yet, the rhetorically novel move of the Sisters is to say precisely that something historically profanized like a condom ought to be seen as sacred; indeed, the act of consecration *makes* it sacred for a queer public with historically ambivalent feelings toward condoms.

The ironic, tropic twisting of the condom by the Sisters is better understood by viewing The Church’s opinions on prudence and indulgence. In Saint Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine*, he claims that a true teacher of the Divine would aid those instructed

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<sup>66</sup> “Sistory.”

in the ways of loving themselves in a way that was profitable to living a good life.<sup>67</sup> For Augustine, however, the teacher should instruct individuals how “he [sic] should love his [sic] body so that he [sic] may care for it in an ordinate and *prudent* way.”<sup>68</sup> In the *History of Sexuality II*, Michel Foucault explains that as the Catholic Church attempted to put a stop to the sexual ‘sins’ of its congregation, it established desire and prudence in direct opposition to each other. Just by thinking of their name, one would think that The Sisters of Perpetual *Indulgence* wholeheartedly positions itself in the ‘desire’ camp, but that is not necessarily the case. Though the Sisters promulgate universal joy, they do so while encouraging *safety*. For instance, a section of their website called “A Nun on Your Side” gives advice and attempts to raise awareness for safe sex practices. The description solidifies this idea to the reader:

Though Sisters always want you to indulge when it comes to life (heck, it's part of our name, you know), nevertheless you want to do it (whatever it is) safely. Below are some of our on-going campaigns that aim to keep you safe and, remember, you always have a nun on your side.<sup>69</sup>

The descriptions below the heading vary from the humorous (“Blow Jobs R Us: When giving beejays, spit or swallow, but don’t gargle. And don’t forget the courtesy gag”) to the more serious, such as this entry for “Barebacking”:

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<sup>67</sup> Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 22.

<sup>68</sup> Saint Augustine, *On Christian*, 22, my emphasis. Augustine’s sexist language (and attitudes toward women) were of his times, so the masculine language within that citation reflects that.

<sup>69</sup> “Play Fair!,” *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, accessed March 11, 2016, <http://thesisters.org/index.php/play-fair>.

Throughout the years, “barebacking” has become a very charged term, loaded with guilt. We believe that guilt and shame are never helpful. When having unprotected sex, assume everyone is possibly positive (mindful that barebacking can expose you to other things besides HIV, too). If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck ... it might really be the Easter Bunny. Assuming that your play partner is coming from the same space as you is one of the few risks Mother Superior discourages. Better to assume your partner has no idea what’s inside his or her body. We suggest that folks assume everyone is possibly positive and Play Fair from there.<sup>70</sup>

Yes, this entry still displays the information in a humorous way, and is even accompanied by a clip art of a giant penis riding a pair of testicles like a horse.<sup>71</sup> One cannot deny, however, the differences between the entries for ‘Blow Jobs’ and ‘Barebacking.’ Barebacking, or the phenomenon of same-sex men having sex with individuals they know are HIV positive in order to contract the disorder, is a taboo practice within the gay community. Prior to better testing and treatments, it was a main cause of the spread of HIV/AIDS. A movement within the community came forth to try and stop barebacking practices, and, through this entry, it is obvious where the Sisters stand on the issue. Ironically, what initially goes forth as humor towards a taboo practice, comes back as a serious reminder of the dangers of not using protection during sex. As such, the Sisters’ trope encourages the community to indulge in a safe, prudent manner.

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<sup>70</sup> “Play Fair!”

<sup>71</sup> “Play Fair!” Please visit the website to see this image.



Even the illustration accompanying the barebacking information implies situational irony. The depiction, with the cowboy hat and reigns, parallels ‘barebacking’ in the queer community with riding a horse bareback. Riding a horse bareback is often thought of as the more fashionable, ‘natural’ way to ride a horse, and is even thought to improve communication with the horse because of the direct contact with the animal. Of course, riding without a saddle means a higher risk of injury due to falling off. Though barebacking advocates would argue having sex without a condom feels more natural, and fits into an elitist, perceptually ‘fashionable’ group, their actions make them outcasts within the community and can lead to death.

AIDS, and the awareness surrounding the disease, proves to be an area where the Sisters often employ the ironic trope. Sister Florence Nightmare, RN and Sister Roz Erection teamed up with doctors in their community to create the AIDS: Play Fair campaign in 1982. It was during this time when the then unnamed AIDS epidemic was first linked to the LGBTQ community. The goal of the campaign was to develop the “first queer-positive, safer sex pamphlet.”<sup>72</sup> It remains one of the more effective campaigns in the San Francisco area for safer sex awareness, but its motto is one that highlights the queer holy fool irony: “Play Safe, Play *Sane*, Play Fair!”<sup>73</sup> Due to the high stakes surrounding the AIDS virus in their community, the SPI promotes indulgence as long as it is accompanied with ways to preserve the health and well being of the community. If this situational irony were performed in the key of a contrapasso, the Sisters’ Play Fair pamphlet would contain brash visual images of queers suffering in the Hell of AIDS, a

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<sup>72</sup> “Play Fair!”

<sup>73</sup> “Play Fair!,” my emphasis

clear sign that sexual indulgence is sinful. The Sisters, however, prefer to combat the notion that combining sexuality and spirituality is an inherently sinful act, though they do negotiate a minute amount of their indulgence to protect the community. In doing so, their approach resembles less of a “physical side effect of terror,” and more like a “festival” or “ceremony.”<sup>74</sup>

Overall, the use of tropes in the SPI’s textual and hypertextual rhetoric attempts to build a positive relationship between religion/spirituality and sexuality/gender. In doing so, they demonstrate how the queer holy fool style combats a dogmatic contrapasso that seeks to damn those who would defy normative teachings of The Church. The Sisters’ approach to this process is to take tropes and symbols already used by The Church (resurrection, the wimple, Adam and Eve, Jesus, prudence, etc.) and re-appropriate them in a way that builds a more affirmative relationship. The SPI’s tropes promote family, love, and acceptance, as well as spiritual and sexual freedom. Fully aware of the dangers associated with AIDS, the Sisters also employ an ironic melancholy to stress the importance of safety when engaging in sexual acts. As such, the SPI not only defends LGBTQ faith, but also extirpates the evil – making them a true teacher of queer spirituality. In the Chapter 5, I will extend upon the relationship suggested here, and discuss the sociological consequences of style as it relates to audience interaction and adaption.

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<sup>74</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 111.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Rhetoric of Folly and the Politics of Queerness: The SPI's Sociological Style

In her description of sociological style, Anna Young argues that “in group life as a whole, there is a kind of education...that can only be obtained through social contact and practice.”<sup>1</sup> Style, then, is influenced by social factors, specifically, the audience that witnesses the style. In short, style is a “way of being with others,” because style relies on co-construction *with* others.<sup>2</sup> The the context of a queer holy fool style, the co-construction requires a reframing of societal expectations that undergird understandings of religion/spirituality. As such, their social position appears confusing, vulgar, and possibly offensive to those who do not understand. This, in turn, impacts the social positioning between the SPI and their audience. Sociological style includes the audience interaction with the ‘fitting’ response, as well as the subsequent reply to the interaction from the rhetor. Keep in mind, when I refer to “sociological” style, I am meaning the consequences (both positive and negative) of communication with an audience.

The co-construction of style is echoed in Christopher Campbell and Johan Cilliars’ rhetoric of folly, as they underline the need for interaction and dialogue between the fool and their audience.<sup>3</sup> What makes communication difficult is the ambiguity and indirection that often describes the rhetoric of fools. Similarly, Helene Shugart and

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<sup>1</sup> Anna M. Young, *Prophets, Gurus and Pundits: Rhetorical Styles and Public Engagement* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2014), 10. Jake Harwood furthers this idea, stating “operating in terms of groups is an inherent part of *being human*.” Jake Harwood, “Communication as social identity,” In *Communication as...: Stances on Theory*, ed. Shepherd, et. al (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2006), 85, my emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Young, *Prophets*, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliars, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012).

Catherine Waggoner warn that campy styles risk confusion if the audience is not privy to the contextual information needed to interpret the humor.<sup>4</sup> Both the rhetoric of folly and camp obey the logic of the inside joke, which sometimes hinders an audience's ability to ascertain whether or not a style is a 'fitting' response. As Young observes, determinations of "fitting" fall along social axes of power: "some kinds of styles are rewarded (those leaning towards hegemony), and others are punished (those on the fringes)."<sup>5</sup> If an audience does not 'get the joke,' do they discipline the fool? What happens when a philosophy of style (which is dependent upon others) creates "often uncomfortable and unwanted figures?"<sup>6</sup> Is disciplining seen as a result of queer holy fool style? If so, does the style adapt?

Examining controversial, potentially offensive styles aids in determining how they are interpreted by individuals that are the intended audience of the rhetoric, as well as individuals who are not the intended audience. Though I previously argued that Campbell and Cilliaris do not go far enough to account for the sociology of marginalized populations, they do provide a place to start the investigation. A queer holy fool style is one that combines the rhetoric of folly with queer theory; playfully disrupting stagnant, normative ideas of The Church, while politically focused on helping those in marginalized populations. To fully employ the queer holy fool sociological style, the SPI must queerly enact a rhetoric of folly while playfully promoting political action within their communities. In this chapter, I first combine concepts of a rhetoric of folly and

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<sup>4</sup> Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egle Waggoner, *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 59.

<sup>5</sup> Young, *Prophets*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell and Cilliaris, *Preaching Fools*, 155.

queer theory before providing examples of audience interactions with the Sisters' rhetoric of folly and queer political performances. Because the rhetor's retort to the audience is important to sociological style, I then explore the SPI's subsequent responses to these variant audience interactions.

## **5.2 Interruption, Disciplining, and Subversion**

Fools functionally act as “agents of interruption,” contesting boundaries and utilizing disruptive behaviors in order to confront taboos.<sup>7</sup> Using Jesus as an example, Campbell and Cilliar describe how He was thought to disrupt the “oppressive ways of the empire,” “unmask the powers of death,” and utilize irony, parody, and lampooning to express His message.<sup>8</sup> Similar to irony and parody (both of which have been discussed in previous chapters), lampooning mocks conventions and powerful figures in the status quo, but does so much more publicly. The parables of Jesus, which were presented before audiences, often employed lampooning to direct attention to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who, at that time, functioned similar to how The Church does now. Irony, parody, and lampoons “become agents of agitation in societal and cultural debates, unmasking the powers at work behind those debates.”<sup>9</sup> As a more public irony/parody, lampoon allows the ‘agitation’ to be seen by the audience.

Disrupting powerful structures leads to a transgressive breaking of taboos and cultural barriers. Specifically, a transgressive rhetoric of folly is “open towards

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<sup>7</sup> Campbell and Cilliar, *Preaching Fools*, 154.

<sup>8</sup> Campbell and Cilliar, *Preaching Fools*, 194.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell and Cilliar, *Preaching Fools*, 200.

others...creating a space for new relationships.”<sup>10</sup> No area of The Church is safe from their comical critique - not even the pulpit:

The pulpit is surrounded by all kinds of taboos and exclusions and boundaries. Certain topics are off limits, and many preachers are pressured into a kind of internal censorship...Moreover, certain *bodies* are not permitted to preach because they are the wrong shape or gender or color or sexual orientation. Preaching fools will challenge these taboos and transgress these boundaries.<sup>11</sup>

The reason for such outlandish strategies and the breaking of bodily taboos align with previous discussions surrounding the need for camp. When a particular ideology becomes oppressive, that mentality must be disrupted and dismissed as the ‘natural’ way of thinking/being. This is why discernment, a concept Campbell and Cilliars describe as “seeing the faces of others and the Other,” requires fools to only accept playful *openness* from individuals.<sup>12</sup> Typically, discernment is analogous to judgment, forcing the discerning to decide whether or not those judged are acting in error. The fool, however, is certainly not one to force a particular way of doing things; but rather, takes a more comic, playful approach - allowing individuals to find their own path. The queer holy fool style reframes societal expectations surrounding religion/spirituality and queerness, but requires discernment from the audience in order to fully decode the reframing.

To continue to learn and transform with others, one must be open to multiple possibilities and ways of being. Openness includes a willingness to see the world differently; not about cloning one’s own stand point, but *kenosis*: “The giving and losing

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<sup>10</sup> Campbell and Cilliars, *Preaching Fools*, 203.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell and Cilliars, *Preaching Fools*, 156, original emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell and Cilliars, *Preaching Fools*, 172.

[of] oneself for the sake of others and, in the process, finding and discovering oneself.”<sup>13</sup>

The emphasis on kenosis suggests that a sociological style which includes a rhetoric of folly contains the elements of providing a ‘fitting’ response that is co-constructed with an audience, but providing the audience the freedom to discover their own way.

What about those who do not perceive life as openly and playfully as the fool? When the world becomes eternal, foreign, and *other*, difference is easily criticized (such as the fool). Gender, too, is easily criticized for not following normative expectations. The “*economy of repetition*” created by the recurrence of specific gender performances hinders any new performances that emerge from being accepted and complicates how society holistically handles differences in identity.<sup>14</sup> Queer theorists answer with *alterity*, or critiquing the normative perception of gender and providing alternative ways of seeing.<sup>15</sup> Butler furthers the notion of the economy of repetition, claiming that such movement is the way that heterosexuality normalizes and naturalizes itself.<sup>16</sup> Using the phrase ‘fictive foundations,’ she not only considers the problems with language, she challenges the assumption that normative language usage constitutes what is Truth. The only way to change these fictive assumptions is to trouble gender in such a way as to rethink what gender actually is.

Despite the variety of ways to express gender and/or sexuality, only one expression becomes normatively accepted and mirrored by a larger discourse

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<sup>13</sup> Campbell and Cilliers, *Preaching Fools*, 177.

<sup>14</sup> Riki Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory* (Bronx: Magnus Books, 2004), 49.

<sup>15</sup> Wilchins, *Queer Theory*, 49.

<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 40.

(heterosexual, cisgender, male). As such, individuals who attempt to perform the gender that they identify with (trans\*, butches, femme boi's) are seen "not as *doing a gender* but rather as *imitating a gender*."<sup>17</sup> For those who have not second guessed their language game (socially assigned gender/how their body is labeled), individuals attempting a different gender performance do not make sense. Compensating for the internal dissonance associated with the alternative performances, social institutions then begin to discipline those who do not fit into the neat boxes created by language. Conformity to the normative definition of gender is key, and those who do not choose to conform are potentially met with stigmatization and societal backlash. Since "multiplicity equals error" in the minds of those who do not understand the vast array of gender expressions, they try to discipline them to the point of bringing them back to a more normative way of being.<sup>18</sup> The concept, known as ideological clawback, refers to how, "in a culture's yearning to preserve certain norms, society will encourage those who fall outside the realm of expected behavior to adhere to those norms by 'clawing them back' (or disciplining them) based upon normative rules."<sup>19</sup> Found within public discourses surrounding gender and The Church is an underlying ideological assumption regarding the issue, echoing normative understandings of "binary roles and behaviors which

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<sup>17</sup> Wilchins, *Queer Theory*, 44.

<sup>18</sup> Wilchins, *Queer Theory*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Christina L. Ivey, "Que(er/ry)ing Christianity: Questions, Answers, and More Questions," *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research* 13 (2014), <http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/kaleidoscope/vol13/iss1/5>, 64. Also, see: Bonnie J. Dow and Julia. T. Wood, *The SAGE Handbook of Gender and Communication* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006).; John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978).; John M. Sloop, *Disciplining Gender: Rhetorics of Sex Identity in Contemporary U.S. Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).



ultimately constitute the very notions of male and female, masculinity and femininity, hetero- and homosexual.”<sup>20</sup> If these particular norms are not followed, the possibility for disciplining increases. Hate crimes, bullying, and other forms of societal punishment are extensions of rhetorical disciplining. Disciplining is meant to protect the way things are, and demonstrates society’s reluctance for change.

In many cases societal disciplining works, perhaps not in changing an individual’s gender, but in pushing their emotional tolerance to a place where they ostracize themselves or maybe even commit suicide. On January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, trans\* teen Leelah Alcorn committed suicide; and, while searching for answers, her parents found a note posted to her Tumblr account detailing why and how she came to the decision to end her own life. According to the letter, the main reason she chose to commit suicide had to do with the conversion therapy her parents were forcing her to attend. Also referred to as reparative therapy, conversion therapy involves primarily Christian fundamentalist ‘therapists’ subjecting their LGBTQ patients to seclusion, as well as mental and physical abuse in order to ‘fix’ their gender ‘confusion.’ Bernadette Barton explains that therapy as a sort of answer to what is seen as a gender problem occurs often in the Bible Belt, where such notions as ‘Marriage = One Man + One Woman’ is not uncommon.<sup>21</sup> Though once thought to be based on scientific evidence that someone could be ‘converted back’ to heterosexuality, the original scientists and major organizations that have promoted conversion therapy have since admitted that the studies were incorrect and even

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<sup>20</sup> Sloop, *Disciplining Gender*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Bernadette C. Barton, *Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

apologized.<sup>22</sup> Such therapeutic practices continue, however, and Leelah’s parents (who still refer to her as ‘Joshua’) forced Tumblr to take down Leelah’s suicide letter, stating, “We don’t support that, religiously...but we told him [sic] that we loved him [sic] unconditionally...People need to know that I loved him [sic].”<sup>23</sup> Regardless of the intentions motivating ideological clawback and social disciplining, the effects are dramatic and irreversible. Leelah’s story provides us with an example how ideological clawback functions when traditional gender understandings collide with practices of The Church. But what happens when not only normative notions of gender are challenged, but also traditional depictions of The Church? This chapter specifically focuses on how public reactions of the SPI (both positive and disciplining) impact the queer holy fool style. Examining public responses allows for the analysis of discourses that reveal how individuals receive the Sisters.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Several news outlets covered this controversial set of apologies, including: William Saletan, “Fifty Shades of Gay,” *Slate*, May 22, 2012, accessed March 2015, [http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/human\\_nature/2012/05/robert\\_spitzer\\_s\\_apology\\_for\\_his\\_reparative\\_therapy\\_study\\_can\\_gays\\_become\\_straight.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/human_nature/2012/05/robert_spitzer_s_apology_for_his_reparative_therapy_study_can_gays_become_straight.html). Ed Payne, “Group Apologizes to Gay Community, Shuts Down ‘Cure’ Ministry,” *CNN*, July 8, 2013, accessed March 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/20/us/exodus-international-shutdown/>. Maya Rhodan, “Ex-Leaders of the Gay Conversion Therapy Movement Apologize,” *Time*, July 13, 2014, accessed March 15, 2015, <http://time.com/3065495/9-ex-leaders-of-the-gay-conversion-therapy-movement-apologize/>

<sup>23</sup> Since (and perhaps because of) Leelah’s death, President Barack Obama signed an executive order banning the practice of conversion therapy. Many religious institutions still believe in its ‘healing’ power, and have fought against this order. Kieran Corcoran and Chris Spargo, “Suicide Note of 17-Year-Old Transgender Girl is Deleted from Her Tumblr Page after Her Christian Parents Demand Message Blaming Them for Her Death be Removed,” *Daily Mail*, January 3, 2015, accessed March 15, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2895534/Heartbreaking-suicide-note-17-year-old-transgender-girl-DELETED-Tumblr-page-candlelit-vigils-held-honor.html>. There is also a large number of conversion therapy narratives captured on the website I’m From Driftwood: “Conversion Therapy,” accessed March 13, 2015, <http://imfromdriftwood.com/?s=conversion+therapy>

<sup>24</sup> Sloop, *Disciplining Gender*, 2

Queer stylizations, like Campbell and Cilliar's interruption of the fool, encourage LGBTQ individuals to attempt to subvert the logic and conclusions that undergird disciplining. Butler's reliance on the drag example to demonstrate the ways in which gender performativity can be understood is one way in which queer theorists foster subversion. Simply relying on drag performances, however, does not guarantee a subversive message. When the audience reads the hyperbolic performance as an overly elaborate queer performance as opposed to questioning the fictive foundation of gender, drag does not subvert the normative assumptions; but rather, places more social distance between the queer rhetor and the audience. Establishing subversion (which is key to troubling gender) is tricky, as Butler claims:

[Subversion] is not simply a matter of situating performances in contexts (as if the demarcation of context is not already a prefiguring result), of gauging audience response, or of establishing the epistemological ground from which one is entitled to 'know' such effects. Rather, subversiveness is the kind of effect that *resists calculation*. If one thinks of the effects of discursive productions, they do not conclude at the terminus of a given statement or utterance, the passing of legislation, the announcement of a birth. The reach of their signifiability cannot be controlled by the one who utters or writes, since such productions are not owned by the one who utters them. They continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors' most precious intentions.<sup>25</sup>

Though a performer's job is to prevent the calcification of their performance, audience participation contributes to the *subversive read* of the performance. Although messages and texts hold the potentiality to be read transgressively, they are often co-opted to fit the "governing interests" of oppressive forces.<sup>26</sup> How do SPI rhetorical performances play

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<sup>25</sup> Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Queer Studies* 1 (1993), 29, original emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> Sloop, *Disciplining Gender*, 22.

out on the field of the social? How do different audiences, from different social locations, interpret SPI performances?

### 5.3 The SPI as Rhetoric of Folly

All of the elements of rhetoric of folly discussed above reflect the necessity of an audience. Publicity helps the fool draw attention to the more dramatic, outrageous elements of their message. The Sisters, too, attempt to reach audiences through public means, and doing so has been a long part of their sistory.<sup>27</sup> In 1982, Diane Feinstein, who took over as mayor after the late Harvey Milk was assassinated, wanted to call a meeting of all the gay leaders in San Francisco to discuss what community outreach was being done. At that time, traditional drag was taboo, but the Sisters were the exception as they were thought of as the “funny ‘gay club’ mascots” doing wonderful things for the community.<sup>28</sup> Because of their works, other gay leaders thought the new mayor would love the Sisters – despite her strong Catholic upbringing. As Sister Vish recalls, “When they were finished [introducing us], the mayor looked down at her desk, shook her head, and said, ‘I don't know, whenever I see the Sisters I just SEE RED!’”

The mayor was referring to the phrase ‘seeing red’ to symbolize anger, but in true queer holy fool fashion, the Sisters decided to throw a large party in her honor. Because May Day is an international day to celebrate worker and often connected to communism, the

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<sup>27</sup> Cathy Glen discusses how the Sisters often combine their foolery with cultural political stances. Cathy B. Glen, “Queering the (Sacred) Body Politic: Considering the Performative Cultural Politics of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence,” *Theory & Event* 7 (2003).

<sup>28</sup> This entire story is told through Sister Vish’s perspective. Sister Vish, “The Red Party,” *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://thesisters.org/sistory-by-sister-vish/214-1984-sisters-at-republican-national-convention-in-dallas>.

SPI took advantage of the mayor's reaction to call their party the "Red Party."<sup>29</sup> They rented the Russian Center located in San Francisco, and proceeded to decorate according to a 'Communist Party' theme: large missile parked outside, performance of a cheer routine (complete with pom-poms) to *The Internationale*, and national flags (including the Soviet Flag).<sup>30</sup> Sister Vish explained that problems arose when the owners of the center learned what the Sisters were doing:

About two hours before the party started, the doors flew open and in marched a woman in her 80's with three of her friends. She was the manager of the Center. She said, "You must remove the Soviet flag." We said, "we have paid for the rental of this center and it is within our *rights of free speech* to hang whatever flag we wish." She stormed out and the next morning in the *San Francisco Examiner*...were these words, "GAYS OFFEND RUSSIANS" with the photo of an angry-fisted SPI nun. It turns out, the woman manager was the daughter of the head general to the Czar in the 1917 revolution. She was a White Russian. We did not know that at the time.<sup>31</sup>

This story exemplifies rhetoric of folly (lampooning a public figure, transgressing to gay leaders in the community), but the ending demonstrates that those not privy to the joke can be greatly offended by stylistic elements of a rhetorical performance. Focusing on particular elements may mean that those offended may miss the overall message.

Contemporarily, several abbeys and some individual Sisters have their own YouTube channels to relay messages in a way that is easily accessible. Abbey channels focus on events sponsored by their organization. For instance, the San Francisco Order's channel features recordings of past Project Nunways hosted in San Francisco, Hunky

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<sup>29</sup> Sister Vish, "The Red Party."

<sup>30</sup> *Internationale* is considered to be the "national anthem" of communism. Sister Vish, "The Red Party."

<sup>31</sup> Sister Vish, "The Red Party."

Jesus contests, and the convent's contribution to the It Gets Better Campaign.<sup>32</sup>

Individual channels host more poignant, potentially controversial video blogs or vlogs. Sister Unity's channel contains many videos that discuss LGBTQ+ issues (such as marriage equality), spiritual stories from her religion (she identifies as Hindu), as well as videos that speak to the assumed general constituency of her channel (she has videos called "Hooray for Weirdos!" and "For Gay Boys and Girls Who Have Considered Suicide"). Though her channel only has 2686 subscribers, she has over 460,000 views – some individual videos boasting over 30,000 by themselves.<sup>33</sup> In analyzing the comments on these videos, I realized that several of them contained instances of internet slang and grammatical errors. I did not want to edit the comments as they were written, nor did I want to overrun the examples with [sic] citations. For the more difficult ones, I provide an interpretation in the footnotes, but otherwise there will be a few examples with errors in the following sections.

Many of the responses to the videos (both abbey and Sister operated) contain positive comments from viewers. Such comments include: "wonderful! my mother always wanted me to be a nun, maybe now I will!," "I want to join!," "I wish we had an organization like this," and "There are tears streaming down my cheeks...all expressions of love are SACRED."<sup>34</sup> A few of the positive comments reflect the recognition of the

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<sup>32</sup> "The Epistle – Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence," last modified October 29, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/user/SistersEpistle/videos?nohtml5=False>.

<sup>33</sup> "Sister Unity," last modified April 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/user/SisterUnity>.

<sup>34</sup> mrsbrown333, comment on "THE SISTERS OF PERPETUAL INDULGENCE," *In The Life Media*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kv2PoetiQw&lc=o42cx9CboBS4naoFTDCjbqcRTRMe4ia823DBKNgOIHc>. Joseph Polsonetti, comment on "THE SISTERS OF PERPETUAL INDULGENCE," *In The Life Media*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kv2PoetiQw&lc=z13kddoz3qmee1djr04chhoium2rt>

transgressive nature of the rhetoric of folly, such as: “I love everything *that upsets the binary thinkers*. Therefore I love you, and everyone who cannot be explained in terms of ‘either this or that’. The world is getting closer and closer *to embracing the third answer!* HALLELUJAH.”<sup>35</sup> By recognizing the disruption that is occurring to “binary” (or normative) individuals, the commenter reflects an understanding of the transgressive openness of the message.

Some commenters choose to pose questions or engage in conversations about gender or spirituality/religion. Clarification about the use of terms (such as “cross gender”) is often the subject of debate.<sup>36</sup> Sister Unity responds to these questions by first asking where the commenter received their information. In one exchange, Sister Unity discussed the proper pronunciation of the Hindu ‘Jai’ with someone identifying as both Hindu and a linguist.<sup>37</sup> Though the conversation was long in the video thread (and there was no resolution as to the true pronunciation), the debate ended with the discovery of a

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ncqhco. londondreamz89, comment on “Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence,” *Mrs. Carter*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmxxF5aESlc&lc=ELpsWsUGs6g9pTeWZiv5doRWmxi4zQoiBeGiUNr0ll0>. Richard Escarcega, comment on “A Gay Marriage – Listen to the Words,” *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQan8CsdzEOX1dlfL51KMdWtbNzIvYemcOE\\_](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQan8CsdzEOX1dlfL51KMdWtbNzIvYemcOE_)

<sup>35</sup> guzsaj, comment on “Why Gay Pride – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-GcaTOx98U&lc=ZE0jkQ32fkUE90Wer\\_LYdl4-sr\\_Y8qrQQV9zpWVUWYs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-GcaTOx98U&lc=ZE0jkQ32fkUE90Wer_LYdl4-sr_Y8qrQQV9zpWVUWYs), my emphasis.

<sup>36</sup> The specific comment referenced here argued that what was being described as “cross gender” by Sister Unity was not gay, but rather, transgender. Sister Unity thanked the person for the comment, and explained how that information as contradictory to what they had learned and experienced. Dominique, comment on “Berdache, The Holy Gay – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8zlpmfthfPvvo675mS7xG9kBC7xwyMwfck>.

<sup>37</sup> Liz, comment on “the Story of Ganesh – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg28ZNhd0Bw&lc=z125erfpuoi3vljx104cgdnzutesevurxgw>.

common love for a Gayatri Mantra. Sister Unity then stated “Thank you very truly for this, because I am now elated and grateful... Thank you for facilitating this experience for me.”<sup>38</sup> These discussions demonstrate the open nature of queer holy fool style: though neither side ‘wins’ the debate, both walk away having transcended that difference and with a new understanding of the similarities.

Other comments like, “I...can’t stop staring at his eyelashes...” focus primarily on the aesthetic presented by Sister Unity.<sup>39</sup> Some even state that though they agree with the sentiments being expressed in the videos, they would have “preferred to see the *normal* human being who thinks like this.”<sup>40</sup> One commenter, when asked why the clothing bothers them, explains, “Perhaps if normal people breached the subject we would be more inclined to listen.”<sup>41</sup> A fan of Sister Unity tries to help by countering, “The importance of the video is in the content, not the images. Words are important.”<sup>42</sup> This attempt to help Sister Unity, though thoughtful, defies the queer holy fool style

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<sup>38</sup> Sister Unity, comment on “the Story of Ganesh – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg28ZNhd0Bw&lc=z125erfpuoi3vljx104cgdnzutesevurxgw>.

<sup>39</sup> Akemi Tsukino, comment on “The Unity of God and You,” *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mt4pd2rjnfA&lc=LDadbGGB086B6pcAHw5quFpBkyf\\_w-m5rXYZD\\_\\_Qh7Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mt4pd2rjnfA&lc=LDadbGGB086B6pcAHw5quFpBkyf_w-m5rXYZD__Qh7Q). Right after commenting this, the user posted “Um...I mean her!” – a move to correct the use of “his” in the aforementioned quotation.

<sup>40</sup> tony4sure, comment on “Berdache, the Holy Gay – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8x3kN01c93F4WP5eB5qP9zeE6VY3w\\_YHGE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8x3kN01c93F4WP5eB5qP9zeE6VY3w_YHGE), my emphasis.

<sup>41</sup> Sister Unity, “Berdache.” tony4sure, comment on “Berdache, the Holy Gay – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8xd3m7Ooux0BF19S-tNJk\\_IY8rpMy59w8w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8xd3m7Ooux0BF19S-tNJk_IY8rpMy59w8w).

<sup>42</sup> Henhouse, comment on “Berdache, the Holy Gay – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8wMIq\\_Okwy09Fs\\_H4VSI1oxVHvtgyKdTLQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8wMIq_Okwy09Fs_H4VSI1oxVHvtgyKdTLQ).



because it explicitly states what is happening as opposed to playing with the audience. Sister Unity's response to a statement like, "Nice eyelashes, girlfriend," is simply "Thank you. They're natural..."<sup>43</sup> Retorting with a phrase about the absurd 'naturalness' of the unnatural element of their aesthetic is reminiscent of camp's goal of having individuals question what is 'natural' vs. 'human-made.' These comments stay true to *playfully* challenging (at the expense of the spectacle) what is really natural. Why is it more preferable for a "normal" person to deliver these messages? Why is the attire 'distracting' from the message (if, it is indeed so important)?

Sister Unity continues her playful remarks with other challenges to her identity, both gender and spiritual/religious. Those that question the 'naturalness' of Sister Unity's gender are met with responses that question the naturalness of gender performance in general:

Commenter 1: "ur a girl????"<sup>44</sup>

Sister Unity: "on occasion."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Sister Unity, "Gay Marriage." Mike Bee, comment on "Gay Marriage – Listen to the Words," *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQYrXfB70qyMd5IykWODOQ0PpkQ3hyod9-4>. Sister Unity, comment on "Gay Marriage – Listen to the Words," *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQas22t6SSgw5VjNm4twHgvXBtlBFZ05gVk>.

<sup>44</sup> Tyler Craig, comment on "the Story of Ganesh – Sister Unity," *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg28ZNhd0Bw&lc=HvVXsl-VYQg64FTPU\\_cqq4dLkDTw8cff4a35Ofcx5oU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg28ZNhd0Bw&lc=HvVXsl-VYQg64FTPU_cqq4dLkDTw8cff4a35Ofcx5oU).

<sup>45</sup> Sister Unity, comment on "the Story of Ganesh – Sister Unity," *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg28ZNhd0Bw&lc=HvVXsl-VYQgLv\\_TGUaDYY\\_9832hpMiczwZA0T4XR1lw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg28ZNhd0Bw&lc=HvVXsl-VYQgLv_TGUaDYY_9832hpMiczwZA0T4XR1lw).

Commenter 1: “well what ur *real* gender??”<sup>46</sup>

“On occasion” implies that gender is a *fluid* identity – one that can, in the case of Sister Unity, resist congealing and adhering to social norms. The fluid nature of Sister Unity’s gender combats the assumption that a particular gender must be performed in a particular way. Such an assumption is revealed through the follow up comment from Commenter 1, suggesting that there is a “real” gender that does not blend masculine, feminine, and other attributes. Sister Unity continues pushing the boundaries of gender with the following comment, which attempts to challenge their gender *and* their role as a Sister:

Commenter 2: “you’re not a sister you’re a brother”<sup>47</sup>

Sister Unity: “Sometimes, it’s the same thing.”<sup>48</sup>

Commenter 2 uses roles (“sister” and “brother”) to imply female and male. Sister Unity’s response blurs the line between these strict, differentiated categories, suggesting that they can exist at the same time as one identity. Sister Unity’s comebacks can be a bit confusing, as they embrace paradox and playfulness, such as the subsequent comment:

Commenter 3: “What of person is Sister Unity? It looks like a mix of priestess, a looser clown and an evil nun... get real man!!!”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Tyler Craig, comment on “the Story of Ganesh – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg28ZNhd0Bw&lc=HvVXsl-VYQhoQU7mszt\\_A78Cs6MagD\\_EiSwLTfwJodk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg28ZNhd0Bw&lc=HvVXsl-VYQhoQU7mszt_A78Cs6MagD_EiSwLTfwJodk), my emphasis.

<sup>47</sup> uchihunk, comment on “the Story of Ganesh – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg28ZNhd0Bw&lc=HvVXsl-VYQjhg6BI-fnEd9G5r4vKahLNd-mSUouUjWY>.

<sup>48</sup> Sister Unity, comment on “the Story of Ganesh – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg28ZNhd0Bw&lc=HvVXsl-VYQgn3v1a2PYttwrM27p7eXhh\\_9Q3ft\\_ZXZ4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg28ZNhd0Bw&lc=HvVXsl-VYQgn3v1a2PYttwrM27p7eXhh_9Q3ft_ZXZ4).

<sup>49</sup> pbrojose 12, comment on “A Gay Marriage – Listen to the Words,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQbqbvs1bedl915bcBLUa9HjiqPnhUHogV8>.

Sister Unity: “You are correct. I am all 3.”<sup>50</sup>

Here, Sister Unity again proposes that multiple attributes socially assumed to be separate can exist in one identity. Instead of employing this logic for gender, they extend the example to refer to their identity as a Sister – an identity that does indeed contain elements of priestess, clown, and nun.

Spiritual/religious comments often reveal a supposition of the dominant Judeo-Christian narrative that flows through American discourse. Even commenters that appear to be atheists/nihilists rely on this narrative, such as Commenter 4:

Commenter 4: “god is dead”<sup>51</sup>

Sister Unity: “Which God, please? I’m Hindu.”<sup>52</sup>

Instead of challenging the steadfast limits of a particular identity, Sister Unity responds in such a way that points out to commenters (and, readers of the comments) the ‘naturalness’ of the Judeo-Christian narrative. In doing so, they challenge the internal structure gender categories as well as the idea that there is only one way to be religious/spiritual. These responses to comments are ambiguous, humorous, and, most likely, agitating to the original commenters who are publicly ridiculed by the non-answers. Sister Unity uses their YouTube channel (specifically the comments section) to lampoon those who wish to bully through comments. Like the answers to questions

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<sup>50</sup> Sister Unity, comment on “A Gay Marriage – Listen to the Words,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQZzY0TZe8DXwTEHNz0P9IQ0HXgLhuvv0Xg>.

<sup>51</sup> whadupbratha, comment on “A Gay Marriage – Listen to the Words,” *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQZgJ8IGcySOfr24W\\_yIsZmR-wDqHwrJbIQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQZgJ8IGcySOfr24W_yIsZmR-wDqHwrJbIQ).

<sup>52</sup> Sister Unity, comment on “A Gay Marriage – Listen to the Words,” *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQZgJ8IGcySOfr24W\\_yIsZmR-wDqHwrJbIQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQZgJ8IGcySOfr24W_yIsZmR-wDqHwrJbIQ).

regarding aesthetics, the playful retorts here serve to challenge what is ‘natural’ about elements of gender and religious/spiritual identity.

Of course, there are comments that seek to confront Sister Unity about ‘homosexuality.’ “Being gay isnt a natural thing, it isnt a natural way of thinking, I dont even know how I found this video and I didnt even know you were a guy,” is representative of several comments left on the walls of videos.<sup>53</sup> Instead of fully disrupting the naturalness of gender, Sister Unity tells the person to check out “homosexuality in nature” videos on YouTube and “talk with gay people about their experience.”<sup>54</sup> They then link sexuality and religious assumptions by further stating, “Maybe you mean to say it is against what you believe? Or is not supported by a large number of Christian and Muslim adherents?”<sup>55</sup> In true queer holy fool style, responses such as these from the Sisters link the two issues of religion/spirituality and gender/sexuality together and troubles the ‘naturalness’ of both.

There are examples of Sister Unity breaking with the ambiguous nature of rhetoric of folly to explicitly address particular commenters. One such comment attempts to ignore Sister Unity’s request for more information by telling them to do it themselves:

The facts are already out there. Just use google. But does that really matter?? Because a guy like you doesn’t care for proof or the truth! You would rather believe a lie just to continue with your disgusting lifestyle. Perverts pervert the truth into a lie to continue in their debauchery and

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<sup>53</sup> uhayel35, comment on “Berdache, the Holy Gay – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8yhySmmIsgzs5IgJEi0NqU2jqzPiyyT9Rg>, grammatical errors in original.

<sup>54</sup> Sister Unity, comment on “Berdache, the Holy Gay – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8yqvDO3scySJseEDiG6Lz5PIzi5dwtXCTw>.

<sup>55</sup> Sister Unity, comment on “Berdache, the Holy Gay – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8yqvDO3scySJseEDiG6Lz5PIzi5dwtXCTw>.

they are proud of it. So a pervert won't care about the facts about AIDS. The facts are too real for those that refuse to deal with reality like you.<sup>56</sup>

Note how this particular example presents a widely accepted (and incredibly false) accusation about the link between homosexuality and AIDS. Like in the “Play Safe, Play Sane, Play Fair” section of the Sisters’ website, Sister Unity’s rhetorical strategy to respond reflects the serious manner in which the SPI approaches AIDS:

Nothing. Not a word of the claim has been proven. No citations, no quotations, no proofs, no facts have been presented. There is boasting and strutting, but no argument supporting the claim of BS. There is merely name calling and insults and pride; ad hominem attacks have nothing to do with truth or with the claim of BS. Bullies and idiots fling this kind of adolescent verbiage with nothing to back it up. If you accuse someone of not knowing truth, you bettah have some yourself.<sup>57</sup>

Though they try at the end to incorporate sassy playfulness (“you bettah have some yourself”), the commenter broached a subject that is no laughing matter. Despite the lack of humor, Sister Unity still took this opportunity on a public medium to challenge normative assumptions about a deadly disease.

Another example of the more serious, explicit responses came after a series of derogatory statements by one commenter.

Sister Unity: you are a man. Why don't you look and act like one. You look completely ridiculous in your get-up. I'm pretty sure you weren't raised like that; and I'm pretty sure your parents and siblings are disgusted by the way you turned out. I just wonder what goes on in a child's life to make him or her go in a direction that is so completely against what is

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<sup>56</sup> Semper Fidelis, comment on “Berdache, the Holy Gay – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=z13wsbloflbeerdlb23kw5ugrx2ljbd1g.1450018992531193>.

<sup>57</sup> Sister Unity, comment on “Berdache, the Holy Gay – Sister Unity,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=z13wsbloflbeerdlb23kw5ugrx2ljbd1g.1450416709040679>.

considered normal. You are not normal. Your homosexual friends are not normal. The lifestyle that you choose to live is abnormal.<sup>58</sup>

This comment not only attacked Sister Unity's "lifestyle," but also those of their fans and community. As such, the Sister was driven to respond in an attempt to open the perspective of the commenter:

Life is bigger and more varied than what I see you depicting. It is plain to see that I am one of those, not-so-normal variations. There is room in the world for the normal and the not normal. Each has its gift to give for those who are wise enough to accept it. For information on how and why cross gendered men exist in the world, may I recommend my videos, 'Berdache – the Holy Gay' and 'Hooray for Weirdoes' may help you make sense of why God created the abnormal and how it is beneficial to you.<sup>59</sup>

Once again, the humor is missing, but the transgressive, open encouragement is present. Perhaps these occasional moments of solemnity stem from the melancholia of the fool. Recall that melancholy presents itself due to reminiscing on the oppressive forces that terrorize the fool. This break in humor is not contrary to queer holy fool style; but rather, necessary when confronted with the more delicate issues of their cause. A 'fitting' response to atrocities is not always laughter.

The sociological facet of queer holy fool style manifests in a playful, inquisitive manner that simultaneously lampoons those who wish to push back against the rhetor and provides various ways of being. Alternative modes of existence presented in the responses not only include a variety of forms, but also the inclusion of multiple, potentially 'incompatible' attributes within one identity. Through these examples, we also

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<sup>58</sup> Wendell Williams, comment on "A Gay Marriage – Listen to the Words," *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQbVpC93fIKHo95Q\\_evMnEUImU7suTpr8ys](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQbVpC93fIKHo95Q_evMnEUImU7suTpr8ys).

<sup>59</sup> Sister Unity, comment on "A Gay Marriage – Listen to the Words," *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQZohAiAd\\_YiGxPJ25i1Wsb12KgHHEfkysQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQZohAiAd_YiGxPJ25i1Wsb12KgHHEfkysQ).

see how a commenter's response alters the queer holy fool style by summoning the fool's melancholia – a co-constructed shift that would have gone unrecognized were it not for examining the sociological aspect of style.

#### 5.4 The SPI as Political Queerness

Situations that invite a queer holy fool style often spawn from highly political controversies; in these cases, spectacle can help draw attention to the cause. The excessive, performative nature and outrageous spectacle make camp's aesthetics salient to the audience. For audience members that are not attuned to the specific critique being made by the rhetor, however, the aesthetic is simply viewed as a deviation from the norm. In order for camp to be effective, there must be those that don't get it: "there is always someone for whom the performance is taken seriously and someone who is in on the 'joke.'"<sup>60</sup> In this way, those individuals who are privy to the "historical and social underpinning of camp's cultural codes" (or, are 'in' on the joke) will realize the rationale for the camp, and can take away the intended message.<sup>61</sup> Others will read the deviation as mocking the norm. When speaking of subversion, Butler mentioned that it "*resists calculation*" – because calculation cannot ensure the message reaches its intended audience.<sup>62</sup> So, the SPI must also engage in the political queer action of their 'nun' work: they are making an attempt to connect with the audience that is also in need of The Church critique.

For example, in 2014, Sister Roma was forcibly logged out of their Facebook account and asked to login using their 'legal name.' Confused, they entered "Michael

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<sup>60</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 35.

<sup>61</sup> Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 37.

<sup>62</sup> Butler, "Critically Queer," 29, original emphasis.

Williams,” and was upset to find that their entire account had been changed to read “Michael Williams.”<sup>63</sup> Sister Roma told *Vogue*, “But nobody knows who Michael Williams is. I don’t identify as that.” They quickly turned to Twitter to complain about the situation, and within a few days received hundreds of emails from others who had felt victim to Facebook’s “Real Name” policy. The Real Name policy requires individuals to authenticate their ‘real’ identity if their page is reported to Facebook as fraudulent. Creators of Facebook envisioned the site functioning as an extension of their campus social network; so, the use of ‘real names’ is a logical component to the profiles.<sup>64</sup> As danah boyd explains, the assumption that names play an important role in social media is common: “Implicit in is the notion that in ‘real life,’ people have to use their ‘real names’ so why shouldn’t they be required to do so online?”<sup>65</sup> Presumably, if someone does not use their ‘real name,’ then, they are attempting to “hide” something and, perhaps, cannot be trusted.<sup>66</sup>

The connection between trust, ‘real life,’ and ‘virtual life’ can be seen by simply looking at the way issues concerning the policy are reported. Though the official name of this policy is the “Real Name” policy, several media outlets reporting on the controversy called it the “*Fake Name*” policy. The rhetorical change is small, yes, but for those who identify as trans\* and are using their chosen name, drag queens who use the social media

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<sup>63</sup> Alex Frank, “#MyNameIs: How a Group of LGBT Activists Confronted Facebook,” *Vogue*, October 3, 2014, accessed April 3, 2016, <http://www.vogue.com/2280729/activists-facebook-real-name-policy-ello/>.

<sup>64</sup> danah boyd, “The Politics of ‘Real Names’: Power, Context, and Control in Networked Publics,” *Communications of the ACM* 55 (2012), 29.

<sup>65</sup> boyd, “The Politics of ‘Real Names,” 30.

<sup>66</sup> boyd, “The Politics of ‘Real Names,” 30.



site as a way to communicate with fans, or anyone using another name to hide from former abusers and/or stalkers, such a change hints at how devastating the implications of this policy are. Specifically, many in the trans\* community felt as though they were being “maliciously targeted” for using a ‘fake’ name.<sup>67</sup> Outraged by the lack of support from Facebook for individuals who *needed* to use something other than their ‘legal’ name, Sister Roma decided to act:

That’s when I realized it wasn’t just drag queens bitching about using their stage names. I got emails from bullied youth who had found new identities on Facebook, a political activist from China who said she can’t use her legal name, and a woman who was a victim of domestic violence and didn’t want her husband to find her online.<sup>68</sup>

While news articles are quick to report that Facebook is only attempting to *preserve* privacy with this policy, such a wide-ranging policy puts many groups of people at risk of losing their privacy and safety.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Lisa Fernandez and Bob Redell, “#MyNameIs: Protesters Rally Against Facebook’s ‘Fake Name’ Policy,” *NBC Bay Area*, June 1, 2015, accessed April 3, 2016, <http://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/MyNameIs-Protesters-Rally-Around-Facebooks-Fake-Name-Policy-305672511.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Frank, “#MyNameIs.”

<sup>69</sup> Most, if not all, of the news articles were quick to justify the actions of Facebook by claiming the policies are in place to protect those who would hide their identity to harm others. The argument was reminiscent of the stories describing men posing as trans\* women in order to sneak into women’s bathrooms that were used to pass policies requiring proof of biological sex to enter certain bathrooms. Fernandez and Redell, “#MyNameIs.” Jessica Guyunn, “Facebook Targeted by ‘Real Name’ Policy Protest,” *USAToday*, June 1, 2015, accessed April 3, 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2015/06/01/facebook-real-name-protest/28325031/>. JP Mangalindan, “Protesters Rally Outside Facebook HQ Over ‘Real Name’ Policy,” *Mashable*, June 1, 2015, accessed April 3, 2016, <http://mashable.com/2015/06/01/drag-facebook-real-name/#RQN4day1vZqK>. Kim Bellware, “Facebook Protesters Say Naming Policy Harms Identity – And Can Put Safety at Risk,” *Huffington Post*, June 1, 2015, accessed April 3, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/01/mynameis-facebook-protest\\_n\\_7487644.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/01/mynameis-facebook-protest_n_7487644.html). Julia Carrie Wong, “#MyNameIs Coalition Takes ‘Fake Name’ Protest to Facebook HQ,” *SFWeekly*, June 1, 2015, accessed April 3, 2016,

Originally, Facebook seemed more protected compared to other, earlier social media sites (MySpace, for example).<sup>70</sup> However, the #MyNameIs website contains accounts that beg to differ: several stories from trans\* people, domestic/sexual assault survivors, as well as members of the LGBTQ community who are threatened due to their sexual orientation – all of whom write about fearing for their lives because their chosen identities have been compromised.<sup>71</sup> Despite the real threat that the policy poses, individuals commenting on online news articles reflect the disciplining suggested by non-normative practices. Some individuals address the rules specifically, saying things like “Seems to me that Facebook has the right to implement any rules they want to those that don’t like it can find another site or start their own site,” and “Why is it the rules never seem to apply to these people, yet they expect special rights that nobody else gets?”<sup>72</sup> These comments explicitly discipline trans\* bodies based on the ‘rules’ put into place. Other commenters complained that focus to this particular issue prevents other issues from being addressed (“They are not discriminating, my god. Things like this make it hard for REAL complaints to be heard.”).<sup>73</sup> These comments discipline more covertly by shifting attention to ‘more important’ matters and ignoring the voices of the marginalized. Still others completely dismissed the stories, telling those who threaten to

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<http://www.sfweekly.com/thesnitch/2015/06/01/mynameis-coalition-takes-fake-name-protest-to-facebook-hq>.

<sup>70</sup> boyd, “The Politics of ‘Real Names,’” 29.

<sup>71</sup> “Featured User Stories,” #MyNameIs, last accessed April 5, 2016, <http://www.mynameiscampaign.org/category/user-stories/featured/>. On the website for the campaign and every news article, #MyNameIs contains the hashtag before it. To remain consistent, I also place the hashtag before the title every time I mention it by name.

<sup>72</sup> Fernandez and Redell, “#MyNameIs.” Wong, “#MyNameIs Coalition.”

<sup>73</sup> Bellware, “Facebook Protesters.”

leave Facebook things like, “I’m certain Zuck doesn’t care you left Facebook. Nice to see the religious hatred and intolerance.”<sup>74</sup> Comments like these discipline in the most direct way; not only dismissing their experiences, but also implying they do not belong at all. Finally, a few individuals who commented both critiqued the actions of those protesting *and* understood the gravity of the protesters’ situation. For example, suggestions were offered to help those who receive stalking or threatening messages: “Time to think more wisely as to who you become FB friends with. Don't just add anyone because they send you a request.”<sup>75</sup> The advice here (“Don’t just add anyone”) recognizes the threat posed by friended Facebook contacts; yet, it tries to fit the concern within the framework of Facebook’s rules – a true ideological clawback.

The comments above parallel public discourses that attempt to discipline people who identify as LGBTQ. Comments about following specific rules are reminiscent of fundamentalist evangelicals who insist on discriminating against LGBTQ individuals based on particular Biblical verses. As a result of this ‘rule following’ disciplinary rhetoric, some lawmakers have been recently swayed into creating policies which are homophobic and transphobic.<sup>76</sup> Comments that attempt to sway focus away from marginalized groups demonstrate a mindset that contributes to the discourse of ‘love the sinner, hate the sin’ – a common phrase used in religious circles to reconcile their

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<sup>74</sup> “Zuck” is short for “Zuckerberg,” the last name of the creator of Facebook. The last sentence mentioning “religious intolerance” is in reference to the Sisters who were present at the protest covered by the news article. Wong, “#MyNameIs Coalition.”

<sup>75</sup> “FB” is short for Facebook. Fernandez and Redell, “#MyNameIs.”

<sup>76</sup> Emily Wagster Pettus, “Mississippi Senate Passes Nation’s Most Anti-Gay Bill Yet,” *Associated Press*, March 31, 2016, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://www.lgbtqnation.com/2016/03/mississippi-senate-passes-nations-most-anti-gay-bill-yet/>.

feelings towards LGBTQ individuals.<sup>77</sup> Separating *who* a person is from what they *do* functionally removes that person's voice from the situation, ignoring what the individual believes is in their own best interest. Interestingly enough, this discourse also surrounds problematic governmental policies, but often under the guise of advocacy. For instance, Mississippi HB 1523 – a bill that allows churches, businesses and clergy to deny services to individuals based upon religious beliefs – was hotly contested by protesters and clergy. One such minister, Reverend Tony Montgomery Sr., stated that though he believed “homosexuality is wrong,” he felt he must work in negation of the bill because “teachings tell him to love thy neighbor, and ‘love the sinner, hate the sin.’”<sup>78</sup> What makes this so problematic is that for some LGBTQ individuals, their sexual orientation is a large part of their identity; they cannot divorce themselves from their ‘sin.’ To ignore the *reasoning* for the disciplinary action makes light of the atrocities suffered by the ‘sinner’ even if the disciplinarian inevitably fights for their rights.

More aggressive discourses, like the direct dismissal comments, seek to tell LGBTQ people that they ‘do not belong.’ The most obvious example of this is Westboro Baptist Church’s ‘God Hates Fags’ posters, but other, potentially more incendiary

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<sup>77</sup> Though often cited as a Biblical teaching, this exact phrasing is no where in the Christian Bible. St. Augustine is thought to originate the saying, with his Letter 211 containing the words: “With love for mankind and hatred of sins.” Vincent Serpa, “Quick Questions: Who Said ‘Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin?’” *Catholic Answers*, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://www.catholic.com/quickquestions/who-said-love-the-sinner-hate-the-sin>. The verse which is often employed to justify the phrase’s use in Christian teachings is Jude 1:22-23: “Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.”

<sup>78</sup> Quentin Smith, “The Religious Freedom Bill Causes Controversy,” *WCBI*, April 6, 2016, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://www.wcbi.com/local-news/the-religious-freedom-bill-causes-controversy/>.

discourses exist as well. In November 2015, Kevin Swanson, known home schooling advocate and religious fundamentalist speaker, called for the killing of gay individuals at the National Religious Liberties Conference.<sup>79</sup> Possibly more troubling than this is the fact three Republican Presidential candidates were in attendance at the conference and said nothing to discourage the outrageous suggestion.<sup>80</sup> Finally, for commenters who make an effort to give advice, their rhetorical posturing mirrors those who would suggest conversion therapy to LGBTQ individuals. Essentially, this type of disciplining empathically connects, while simultaneously attempts to claw the individual back to a more normatively accepted way of being. As I described earlier, conversion therapy is performed by programs concerned with the individual's soul (empathy), so it relies on psychologically damaging techniques to 'pray the gay away' (changing the individual).

These disciplining discourses, represented by the comments regarding the #MyNameIs campaign and religious figures/policies, are a major reason why advocates using a queer holy fool style necessarily engage in queer political activism. Though not all are immediately identifiable as 'religious,' the political and religious discourses both parallel each other and are intertwined within public discussions. By enacting the political activism of their style through campaigns like #MyNameIs, the Sisters interrupt the conversations and allow more community affirming messages to be visible. In turn,

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<sup>79</sup> Katherine Stewart, "Ted Cruz and the Anti-Gay Pastor," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2015, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/16/opinion/campaign-stops/ted-cruz-and-the-anti-gay-pastor.html>. Michelangelo Signorile, "Why Is the Media Ignoring Ted Cruz's Embrace of 'Kill the Gays' Pastor?," *Huffington Post*, November 12, 2015, accessed April 6, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michelangelo-signorile/post\\_10496\\_b\\_8544540.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michelangelo-signorile/post_10496_b_8544540.html).

<sup>80</sup> The three Republican Presidential candidates were Mike Huckabee, Bobby Jindal, and Ted Cruz. Stewart, "Ted Cruz." Signorile, "Why Is the Media."

members who see positive spiritual figures supporting rights of the marginalized can begin to build a more helpful, less dogmatic relationship with their own spirituality.

Concentrating on queer political issues does not mean that only LGBT individuals view and understand the critique, as the transgressive focus of rhetoric of folly would imply. Novice Sister Leigh Viticus, after seeing the SPI's work in Portland, became enamored with the group. After coincidentally meeting and speaking with Sister Ohna Fucking Tirade (a cisgender female member) at a Pride event, she realized she could also join.<sup>81</sup> Of course, she admittedly meets with situations that require flexibility, such as having to respond to comments like "You're really a girl!" from individuals at events.<sup>82</sup> She believes, however, that situations like that are "a part of [her] ministry," and constantly reminds herself "there are so many people who are starved for acceptance," which includes those who have been hurt by The Church.<sup>83</sup> As this example demonstrates, anyone who wants to *disrupt* stagnation (a feature of both rhetoric of folly and queer theory) of The Church can join the SPI. Specifically, Novice Sister Leigh Viticus witnessed the Sisters' "joyous natures, charity work, and their positive use of religious symbolism," and felt the calling to become a Sister.<sup>84</sup> As such, the SPI provides

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<sup>81</sup> Leigh Viticus, "Op-ed: I Am a Straight, Female Sister of Perpetual Indulgence (And You Can Be, Too!)," *Advocate*, October 24, 2014, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.advocate.com/commentary/2014/10/24/op-ed-i-am-straight-female-sister-perpetual-indulgence-and-you-can-be-too>.

<sup>82</sup> She finds moments such as this funny, and likens them to "Look! A two-headed calf!" Leigh Viticus, "Op-ed: I Am a Straight."

<sup>83</sup> Leigh Viticus, "Op-ed: I Am a Straight."

<sup>84</sup> She is not the only cisgender female to have this calling. There are several comments of support and identification on her article. Leigh Viticus, "Op-ed: I Am a Straight."

a space for allies of the LGBTQ community who are also interested in critiquing The Church to help.

Alternatively, even within one's own community disciplining can occur. For instance, Craig Jungwirth, primary organizer of the 2016 Beach Bear Weekend, openly stated that no members of the SPI were allowed at the event.<sup>85</sup> When asked by a Sister via Twitter about his proclamation, he tweeted, "wtf [sic] are you wearing makeup and a dress for? Man up fuck [sic]."<sup>86</sup> In regards to ideological clawback and discipline, the explanation for this response is simple, even if discouraging: Often, individuals within marginalized groups can discipline each other in the hopes that such oppressive acts will make them viewed as more favorable to those in power.<sup>87</sup> Telling the Sisters to "Man up" can be viewed as an act of internal disciplining and forcing queer individuals, specifically queer cis male individuals, within the SPI to proscribe to normative ideas of masculinity. Though these interactions are not as common as disciplining from outside the group, they still pose a threat to political advocacy.

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<sup>85</sup> 'Bear' is a term used in the LGBTQ community to describe a more masculine, often hairy, gay man. Big Bear Weekend is a yearly gathering of gay men (mostly bears) in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. "Unhinged Head of National Bear Event Bans All Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Tells Them to 'Man Up,'" *Queerty*, March 10, 2016, accessed April 1, 2016, <https://www.queerty.com/unhinged-head-of-national-bear-event-bans-all-sisters-of-perpetual-indulgence-tells-them-to-man-up-20160310>.

<sup>86</sup> The tweet was referenced in the above article. "Unhinged Head of National Bear."

<sup>87</sup> Another example of this is the 'crab mentality' scenario used in discussing race issues. Crabs, when placed in a small holding vessel (like a bucket), will crawl on top of each other to get out of the bucket and often pull down other crabs down in the process. Because of this, it is rumored that those who catch crabs for a living do not have to worry about covering the vessel the crabs are kept in. Applying this to how traditionally marginalized groups discipline each other, ideological clawback refers to how those who are oppressed 'pull down' others in the hopes of being viewed more favorably by the dominant forces and climb their way out of the oppressive system.

In terms of sociological style, this example provides a glimpse of what happens when the audience is supposedly ‘ingroup’ as opposed to ‘outgroup’: Though the engagement with queer political issues is meant to signify a connection with LGBTQ individuals, some do not agree with/understand queer holy fool style. Such audience responses reveal that even within the LGBTQ community there are various social positions, and some positions are not privy to the joke that flows through this specific style.

### **5.5 Sisters and Snark**

So, how do potential threats from both sides (both ingroup and out) alter the responses of queer holy fool style? How do members of the SPI respond to the variant interpretations of their style? For those who protest for change (like the Sisters), adaptability and flexibility is essential to responding to particular rhetorical situations. The potentiality of disciplining leaves the Sisters vulnerable in their situation. Vulnerability is a common, “unavoidable condition, one with which rhetoricians must continually grapple.”<sup>88</sup> For the Sisters, their situation becomes more complicated as many people hear about them through media released on the internet (my Hunky Jesus video story, for example). Networked rhetorical situations attract audiences from a multitude of places, experiences, and standpoints.<sup>89</sup> In order for their message to reach a vast audience, those who release videos, blogs, and other forms of rhetoric on the web must be prepared to be heard by those who were not necessarily intended to receive the message.

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<sup>88</sup> James J. Brown Jr., “Louis C.K.’s ‘Weird Ethic’: *Kairos* and Rhetoric in the Network.” *Present Tense: A Journal of Rhetoric in Society* 3, (2013): <http://www.presenttensejournal.org/volume-3/louie-c-k-s-weird-ethic-kairos-and-rhetoric-in-the-network/>.

<sup>89</sup> Brown, “Louis C.K.’s,” 1.



“These arrivals invite us to consider how the rhetor is called to respond,” or, in other words, how is the queer holy fool style adapted to account for/in reaction to unintended audiences?<sup>90</sup>

Being attuned to *kairos*, or the timely, often “unpredictable moments of persuasion,” helps rhetors respond to their situations.<sup>91</sup> For instance, comediennes and comedians are often placed in vulnerable positions while opening themselves to ridicule on stage. Many have developed the style of response “snark”: “a portmanteau of ‘snide’ and ‘remark.’”<sup>92</sup> Snark is characterized by jabbing attacks in a “knowing tone” that aid in protecting against “attacks and trolling.”<sup>93</sup> According to James Brown, when comedic professionals are thrown into kairotic situations, snark not only defends them by showing the perpetrators that their attacks did no harm, but it also helps “protect against shame and vulnerability.”<sup>94</sup>

The Sisters, who, like many drag queens, possess quick wit, use a type of campy snark to address hostile audiences. Given their timely antics in a post-secular society, they easily understand the nuances of kairotic attunement enough to use it to their advantage against rhetorical attacks. Some Sisters choose not to engage in more potentially sensitive events. For instance, while some Sisters choose to dress in habit and publically minister on any given day, others prefer to only manifest as Sisters when there are specific events to attend.<sup>95</sup> Regardless of whether or not a Sister places themselves in

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<sup>90</sup> Brown, “Louis C.K.’s,” 1.

<sup>91</sup> Brown, “Louis C.K.’s,” 2.

<sup>92</sup> Brown, “Louis C.K.’s,” 3.

<sup>93</sup> Brown, “Louis C.K.’s,” 3.

<sup>94</sup> Brown, “Louis C.K.’s,” 6.

<sup>95</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa

more hostile environments, the SPI holistically creates predicaments simply by holding their events in public places *and* releasing the videos online.

Knowing that a specific oppressive force exists in particular areas, the SPI often creates events meant to directly confront them and place themselves into unpredictable situations. One example has already been discussed: the “Red Party.” The Sisters created a predicament where they were vulnerable, and saw a repercussion of such vulnerability: the unintended offense of their host. The Salvation Sisters event is another example of the SPI creating potentially vulnerable predicaments. Every holiday season, Sisters ring bells and spread cheer in public places to earn money for charity. If this sounds familiar, they are “giving a poke at the Salvation Army” due to their policies against LGBTQ individuals.<sup>96</sup> While the Salvation Army has been known to deny aid to trans\* individuals and ban gay individuals from serving unless they make an oath to remain celibate, the organization has recently tried to change their dialogue with LGBTQ individuals.<sup>97</sup> In an article detailing this supposed change, Sister Blanche Davidian makes the first comment. They do not criticize the Salvation Army or accuse the organization of falsely attempting to connect with LGBTQ individuals; but rather, they simply state: “The DFW Sisters will be at the corner of Cedar Springs and Throckmorton Saturday night between 8-11pm ringing their bells collecting money for HIV.”<sup>98</sup> By merely providing the time and

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<sup>96</sup> Salvation Sisters *Facebook* event page, accessed April 2, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/events/765467316890889/>.

<sup>97</sup> “Salvation Sisters 2014,” *Wordpress*, March 15, 2013, accessed April 2, 2016, <http://www.sdsisters.org/ministry/salvation-sisters-2014/>. Anna Waugh, “Dallas Salvation Army Is ‘Changing the Dialogue on Gays,’” *Dallas Voice*, December 20, 2013, accessed April 2, 2016, <http://www.dallasvoice.com/dallas-salvation-army-changing-dialogue-gays-10164035.html>.

<sup>98</sup> Waugh, “Dallas Salvation Army.”

location of their counter event, Sister Blanche opens up a potential kairotic situation.

Anyone who reads the response and supports the Salvation Army could easily show up to the event in protest. The Sister knows this, and yet posts the information anyway.

The events certainly place the Sisters in kairotic predicaments, but responses to online comments reflect the snide temperament of snark. Small, playful jabs are inserted throughout the comments section of Sister Unity's videos; such as "Gay people don't troll, we Fairy." and:<sup>99</sup>

Commenter: WHAT IS THIS SHIT?<sup>100</sup>

Sister Unity: exactly.<sup>101</sup>

Some commenters even push back (like audiences during stand-up routines). During one video, an application on Sister Unity's phone, Adam4Adam, is heard sounding its notification noise. Adam4Adam is a gay dating and hookup social networking app (similar to Grindr) and has a very specific notification alarm. Several individuals noticed it and wrote statements like: "I think your a4a notification went off at 5:53."<sup>102</sup> Playing off the humor in a potentially embarrassing moment, Sister Unity responded: "shhhh. I

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<sup>99</sup> Sister Unity, comment on "Berdache, the Holy Gay – Sister Unity, *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=z132wbwxxvzctl4t04cfdhocozw eztfbdk.1454047864550481>.

<sup>100</sup> FUUAAAAAAAAARRRRRKKKKK, comment on "Berdache, the Holy Gay – Sister Unity, *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8xxs6VbBzVQoZS-0 me8l0TukiEe8R6TL4>.

<sup>101</sup> Sister Unity, comment on "Berdache, the Holy Gay – Sister Unity, *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8y5FJu44wwjFMim R2dtAZi-km3msvcJGqM>.

<sup>102</sup> "a4a" is short for Adam4Adam. Roger Luedecke, comment on "The Unity of God and You," *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mt4pd2rjnfA&lc=z13wtjxfq3lftfusw23nshch4uafxr mq504>.

can has needs.”<sup>103</sup> Utilizing the humor known to characterize the fool, Sister Unity takes the moment of ‘failure’ to demonstrate that even people ‘of the cloth’ have certain bodily desires.

Towards individuals who are attempting to discipline the Sister’s performance, the snarky quick wit commonly associated with drag queens is utilized. One commenter attempted to argue that the reason women and men “become homosexual” is because they have been “rejected so many times,” to which Sister Unity responded:<sup>104</sup>

Hey, could you cite your research and sources for us? I’m asking cause your theory contradicts a lot of science from the last 100 years. Just a note: I was never actually rejected by girls...I never asked them for anything...I was gay. My trouble was how to let them down easy with the ones who were interested in me.<sup>105</sup>

Again, they ask for research, but quickly follow it up with snide remark. For commenters that persist in their efforts to discipline, snark such as “you seem extra interested in me. I think something more is at play here” is seen.<sup>106</sup>

Snark works well for instances where vulnerability resides, but as we have seen with melancholy, queer holy fools do not rely solely on it as a response. The combination of rhetoric of folly and queer political actions give insight to *how* the Sisters interact with

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<sup>103</sup> Sister Unity, comment on “The Unity of God and You,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mt4pd2rjnfA&lc=z13wtjkxfq3ltfusw23nshch4uafxrmq504.1392525273849837>.

<sup>104</sup> uhayel35, comment on “A Gay Marriage – Listen to the Words,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8wElr0yw0uFkzx-geW59X8vOdZQll2nNc0>.

<sup>105</sup> Sister Unity, comment on “A Gay Marriage – Listen to the Words,” *Sister Unity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDklj0QpQ7s&lc=K4x1VE90a8w0EVB97AVsa48NU5mha7uTiS81PJSAsmg>.

<sup>106</sup> Sister Unity, comment on “A Gay Marriage – Listen to the Words,” *Sister Unity*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQYUa\\_H6GqF6DIZTaPq-iso8Pxxkuc6WcPwM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRbMTuwXBc&lc=4YDcXKBZPQYUa_H6GqF6DIZTaPq-iso8Pxxkuc6WcPwM).

their audience(s), both intended and unintended. Disciplining certainly has an impact on the queer holy fool style, but the context of the disciplining (what is being discussed) seems to steer the response towards humor or melancholy. In the final chapter, I reflect on the embodied, textual/hypertextual, and sociological aspects of queer holy fool style. I also provide discussion to further answer questions about the Sisters and the style.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Answering the Questions, Questioning the Answers: Some Concluding Thoughts on the Style of the Queer Holy Fool**

In this study, I posed several questions about the style of the queer holy fool, using the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence as a representative incarnation. The SPI perform a unique style that attempts to balance a distancing from the religious institution of The Church with the maintenance of spirituality. During a cultural moment when individuals have grown distrustful of institutions, yet, are acutely aware of a lack of spiritual fulfillment, such a style offers guidance in exploring spirituality beyond the institution of religion. We might see the SPI's rhetorical interventions as attempts to *queer* religion; thus, I have turned to rhetorical theory and queer theory to analyze their performances. In previous chapters, I discussed style—part of the response a rhetor deems 'fitting' to a particular rhetorical situation—using Young's three categories: physiological, psychological, and sociological. Changing two of Young's initial terms (physiological and psychological) to embodied and textual/hypertextual makes her rhetorical approach to style more compatible with queer theory by making more explicit how rhetorical interventions (whether bodily, visual, or linguistic) are inherently performances. Audiences play a part in the co-construction of style, making an investigation of reactions to the style and subsequent responses/adjustments by the rhetor an important aspect of stylistic inquiry.

The embodied, visual, and linguistic elements of a queer holy fool style suggest that the style is a reaction to LGBTQ individuals' negative experiences with The Church. A 'fitting' response, then, is to playfully engage the oppressive discourse while

encouraging a positive connection between spirituality and sexual freedom. The concept of playing with cultural expectations is nothing new to social movement literature or queer theory. Benjamin Shepard argues, “play can be understood as both an affective tool and instructive device. It is an emotional tool that supports group cohesion as well as a tactical device used to convey campaign messages through political performance and acts of street theater.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps a reason why queer holy fool style attempts to play with the audience and expose the innocence of actions normatively dismissed as vulgarity stems from the power of play as a child: play is how children *learn* about the world around them. Drama therapy research notes that a primary benefit of play is its ability to allow children to revisit trauma safely and understand how to deal with their troubling emotional connections to it.<sup>2</sup> As renowned drama therapist Renee Emunah explains, “Under the guise of play and pretend, we can – for once – act in *new* ways...and experiment actively with alternatives.”<sup>3</sup> Queer critiques perform a similar function: they take individuals back to a time when ideas about gender/race/sex/spirituality were still congealing, encouraging individuals to (re)learn how to interact with those identity politics in a different way (or, at least, begin to question the ‘naturalness’ or strict performance of the dominant way of being). In terms of this particular style, playing with religious symbolism and tropes allows individuals to confront past trauma, discover a new way to engage spirituality, and forge a new relationship with the Divine.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Shepard, *Queer Political Performance and Protest* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Sue Jennings, ed., *Dramatherapy with Children and Adolescents* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> “What is Drama Therapy?,” *North American Drama Therapy Association*, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.nadta.org/what-is-drama-therapy.html>, my emphasis.

Taking up a playful approach to this conclusion, I pose questions as a way to engage readers with the finale of the study. As a work of queer theory, this dissertation is riddled with research questions – possibly so many that you are not quite sure which is *the* research question. I make no apologies for that: Querying a subject is itself an act of disruption, a moment that everything pauses in order to reflect upon its existence. As such, I have deemed posing questions a ‘fitting’ ending to this work on queer holy fool style. The following sections are generated by questions that emerge from analyzing the embodied, textual/hypertextual, and sociological aspects of the style.

## **6.2 Does religious drag in queer holy fool style reify traditional gender/religious roles?**

Embodied style investigation uncovered a reliance of camp and drag within queer holy fool style. Critics of drag posit that it mocks a particular form of femininity, and in doing so, perpetuates that particular form as being the *only* type of femininity. It is rare to see drag queens (especially those who are more ‘mainstream,’ i.e. RuPaul’s *Drag Race*) embrace a more androgynous look that steers away from any gender norms.<sup>4</sup> The Sisters rely on the nun trope, which, in many ways, separates the figure of nun from any sort of gender or sexuality. As a result, the SPI does not represent gender in the typical way that critiques of drag expect. In fact, they present gender in such a way that those who would not normally dress in drag willingly don the habit to become a Sister – perhaps extending what it means to represent gender in drag. Masculine-identifying LGBTQ individuals typically start as Guards, or those that protect the Sisters during events. Guards paint their faces, too, but they do not wear the habit or wimple. This option attracts those who want

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, drag performers are often punished for doing so on *Drag Race*.



to be involved, but do not want to dress in what appears to be a ‘feminine’ look. After some time as a Guard, many realize they want to participate more (actually performing in the events as opposed to standing guard), so they take the next step and become a Novice Sister.<sup>5</sup> Though employing spectacle is a part of queer holy fool style, the emphasis on *religious* spectacle (versus defying gender norms in traditional drag) opens up drag to those who are more masculine identifying, like leathermen. Similar to traditional drag, which comes under scrutiny for simply mocking feminine gender, the Sisters’ religious drag is constantly accused of simply mocking religious practices. Their retort is that they are only mocking “organized religion,” and that their works should speak to their performative nunhood.<sup>6</sup> Again, the emphasis on *performance* as opposed to *performativity* prevents individuals from seeing the good works implemented by the Sisters, which they believe is worthy of the label ‘nun.’

The question, then, is not necessarily “Does the SPI reify normative *gender* roles?” The better question is “Does the SPI, in relying on the dramatic trope of ‘nun,’ reify normative *religious* roles?” Rachel Sullivan argues that as ‘real’ sisters became more “radical” in their social work and activism, their public, mass produced images became more conservative.<sup>7</sup> Despite advocating more enlightened stances on social issues and pushing The Church forward after World War II, portrayals during the 50’s and 60’s focused on their “poverty, chastity, and obedience.”<sup>8</sup> In this way, the trope of

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<sup>5</sup> This is how Sister Jezebelle became a Sister.

<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Carter, “Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence,” last modified June 25, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmxxF5aESic&index=3&list=PLB6133FA639EF2285>, my emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Sullivan, “Celluloid Sister: Femininity, Religiosity, and the Postwar American Nun Film,” *The Velvet Light Trap* (2000), 71.

<sup>8</sup> Sullivan, “Celluloid Sister,” 71.

the nun carries with it a perception of how strict religious doctrine prevents women from progressing in Church systems, and reinforces a perspective of religion that is, above all else, moral and orderly.<sup>9</sup> Though there are limited exceptions (1995's *Dead Man Walking*, for example), this trend continues into more contemporary films, such as *Sister Act* (1992) and *Doubt* (2008). Does the Sisters' style further perpetuate outdated nun stereotypes?

The tropes that the Sisters play with encourage a combination of spirituality and sexual freedom, a clearly progressive stance in regards to religion. This is not surprising, given their emergence during the height of the AIDS epidemic. The SPI, then, never fully exude the chaste version of the nun trope, giving no reason to believe they perpetuate that particular stereotype. Externally, the Sisters parody the habit and wimple, pieces of an aesthetic that are no longer a norm. While this may seem to be propagating an outdated stereotype, Sister Julie, author of a blog on the website [anunslife.org](http://anunslife.org), claims there are times when she does not "need to let everyone know that [she is] a nun," and moments when "it is important for folks to know when [she is] a nun."<sup>10</sup> As such, she spends most of her time in "simple, modest" clothing that fits the context of her ministry, and wears a habit when she is "at work."<sup>11</sup> By her account, the habit is imbued with a certain power that gives her authority when she needs to represent her congregation and be recognized as a member of her religion. The Sisters choose to wear the habit for the same reason: when it is appropriate for them to represent their message in public. Their choice to wear

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<sup>9</sup> Sullivan, "Celluloid Sister," 71.

<sup>10</sup> Sister Julie, "Habits: Standard Issue Nun Gear??" *A Nun's Life*, last modified August 10, 2006, <http://anunslife.org/blog/nun-talk/habits-standard-issue-nun-gear>.

<sup>11</sup> Sister Julie, "Habits."

the habit does not reinforce a stereotype of the hard work and spiritual inspiration of nuns, but the power that is given to a particular wardrobe. The Sisters also take advantage of the nurturing and compassionate nature of the nun trope, and do so as a way to care for their communities – something traditional nuns *still* do. An overlap exists here between the trope and reality: can you perpetuate aspects of a ‘stereotype’ that remains true of the original community?

The SPI’s self-given title (“*21<sup>st</sup> century nuns*”) could be perceived as an attempt to divorce what they do from what outdated, pre-21<sup>st</sup> century nuns accomplish; however, such a claim would ignore the strong parallels the Sisters forge between themselves and traditional nuns.<sup>12</sup> They recognize their performance juxtaposes stereotypical nun attire with the hard work, compassion, activism, and spiritual inspiration of ‘real’ sisters as a means of critiquing the institution of The Church. Keeping this in mind, the “21<sup>st</sup> century” preface seems more like an attack on the outdated ways of The Church, not the nuns themselves. This makes the answer to the question about reifying an outdated religious role complicated: The Sisters attempt to honor traditional nuns through likening their community outreach to works of traditional nuns, but they perpetuate the stereotype that all nuns are inherently tied to The Church. Such a complex position is not uncommon in studies regarding the nun trope. Sullivan claims that in depictions of nuns in mainstream media, “the role of the nun was often placed into conflict...with the vestiges

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<sup>12</sup> Dee Ireland Lewis, “ANGELS IN WHITEFACE,” last modified September 4, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6WLYwsKVnY>. The Epistle – Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, “Sister Selma Soul’s Surprise/Project Nunway,” last modified June 7, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z11bkrBUjvk&list=PL84049B09A95ECC85&index=9>.

of a grandiose religiosity.”<sup>13</sup> The result allowed audiences to become sympathetic to nuns, while still critiquing the forces of The Church.<sup>14</sup> The Sisters strive to create a similar effect: an homage to nun spirituality and a simultaneous critique of The Church. Traditional nuns may not agree or completely follow all of the ideas of The Church, but their role places them as a representative of the institution; so, the fact that they are both stereotyped and adored by the SPI only reflects their position.

Excavation of traditional tropes within textual/hypertextual style uncovered even more evidence for this question as to whether or not the Sisters reify normative roles of religion: further complications emerge from their acknowledgment of the power of religious attire and the *fear* it can produce. “Fear” and “terror” can be seen in the rhetoric of the SPI in regards to their vestments. For instance, Sister Vish explains how the first manifestation of the Sisters came from wanting to “throw [the habits] on and go *terrorize* the streets.”<sup>15</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa, confused by some Sisters’ choice of attire, does not know why they want to “wear mini skirts and funny hats where they could be wearing the habit, *frightening* people.”<sup>16</sup> It would appear that, along with the trope of the nun, the Sisters also potentially perpetuate the fear that The Church instills in those identifying as LGBTQ. LGBTQ individuals certainly have reasons to fear The Church: The Church attempts to discipline queer bodies, propagates anti-LGBTQ contrapasso, and contributes

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<sup>13</sup> Sullivan, “Celluloid Sister,” 71-72.

<sup>14</sup> Sullivan, “Celluloid Sister,” 72.

<sup>15</sup> Sister Vish, “From Origins to Founding,” <http://thesisters.org/sistory-by-sister-vish/212-from-origins-to-founding>, my emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa, interviewed by Christina L. Ivey, Oral history interview, May 29, 2015, my emphasis.

to hateful discourse towards LGBTQ individuals through traditional tropes. Is queer holy fool style religious drag perpetuating the stereotypical, terrorizing role of The Church?

As stated previously, the rhetorical figures utilized by the Sisters reflect a harmonious combination of spirituality and sexual freedom, as well as emphasizing *safety*. As such, the SPI do suggest that there is something to cause a need for safety, primarily, The Church and its ability to influence those that would discipline, deny the existence of AIDS, and/or describe AIDS as God's way of eradicating LGBTQ individuals. These are valid concerns, so yes, the SPI could be accused of perpetuating the idea that The Church is dangerous. Even their vows demonstrate this: "expiate stigmatic guilt." The Sisters, however, never waver from their goal to inspire and create a spiritual outlet for their community. The queer holy fool style's religious drag, while criticizing The Church, does not do so at the expense of *spirituality*. The 'turning' that occurs within the SPI's tropes is not one that requires a more positive image of The Church, but rather, an acceptance of LGBTQ individuals by the Divine. There is still room within their performance to hold a relationship with the Divine, in fact, to do so is encouraged. So, while they may be reifying stereotypes about The Church, they do so to protect their communities and provide a space for them to grow spiritually.

Through a discussion of potential reification of roles within religious drag, one thing is clear: performances of identity are complex and resist simple explanations. In answering bell hooks' scathing review of the movie *Paris is Burning* as misogynistic and offensive to women, Judith Butler argues such a claim does not take into account the

ambivalence of identification.<sup>17</sup> In other words, categorizations such as ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are “internally unstable affairs” due to shifting norms.<sup>18</sup> As a result, some performances can both ‘offensively’ appropriate attributes of an identity while subverting expectations of that identity. The tension between appropriation and subversion carries the potential to cause “a fatally unsubversive appropriate” to occur.<sup>19</sup> The Sisters’ religious drag is no exception, as they simultaneously provide a space to (re)define the Divine and offend individuals who read their performance as mocking The Church (a symbol that, for many, acts as a connection to the Divine). This dissertation contributes to scholarly conversations about these appropriative/subversive complex identity performances by adding non-normative religious/spiritual examples. As an aspect of identity that can be just as personal as gender, sexuality, or race, religious/spiritual identity should be included in discussions of identity politics.

### **6.3 Does the changing perception of drag impact queer holy fool style?**

Sociological style analysis revealed that media portrayals and audience play a large role in how the Sisters are perceived. This was true, too, of how the Lesbian Avengers were viewed. Their lesbian chic was considered hip by audiences, and they tried to use it to their advantage in furthering their message – a move that caused many critics to question their actions. Particular images of LGBTQ individuals, such as lesbian chic, both help and hinder the propagation of queer political issues. Since audience

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, “Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Butler, “Gender is Burning,” 385.

<sup>19</sup> Butler, “Gender is Burning,” 386.

interpretation plays such a crucial role in queer holy fool style, is the Sisters' image one that both helps and hinders their message?

Media outside of The Church's influence (Hollywood being the primary example), aided in the changing perception of gays and lesbians starting around the 1990's. As images of lesbians and gays became more prominent, a "new representation" was fashioned for them in society - one in which "the normal gay" became the "counterpart to the normal heterosexual."<sup>20</sup> Joyce Hammond explores an exemplar of this counterpart by analyzing the role of drag queens in the 1995 movie *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*. The three drag queens featured, Hammond argues, transform the heterosexual individuals in the film by performing various "miracles":

A stuttering young man receives the confidence to overcome his disability; a white woman finds the courage to pursue a relationship with an African American man; an elderly woman regarded as deaf, mute, and crazy has her self-esteem and voice restored; and a housewife suffering verbal and physical abuse by her husband is supported in regaining her autonomy and dignity. Along the way the drag queens teach lessons about sexual harassment, the conscious use of gender constructions, and the importance of self-expression.<sup>21</sup>

Due to their miraculous influence on the other characters in the film, Hammond equates them with the astounding acts of angels – gay'ngels, if you will. Gay'ngels continue to rush to the aid of their heterosexual counterparts: from Will's level-headed approach to Grace's messes to *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* saving socially inept straight men from themselves. Though this image parallels queerness and spirituality, it does so only as a benefit to the heterosexual counterparts.

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<sup>20</sup> Steven Seidman, *The Social Construction of Sexuality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 133.

<sup>21</sup> Joyce Hammond, "Drag Queen as Angel," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* (1996), 8-9.

RuPaul, pushing against the image of the heterosexual counterpart, created *Drag Race*, a reality competition show that pits drag queens against each other, to provide a glimpse into the inner-workings of drag. The show became immensely popular with both queer and non-queer viewers. As a result, individuals who had never seen drag were tuning in weekly to watch the addictive antics of the boisterous personalities featured on the show. *Drag Race* was heralded for ushering in a new image of queer possibilities, as well as bringing drag into mainstream conversations.

Even though visibility acts as a positive, it comes with the potential threat to the community. Steven Seidman clarifies this, stating that the assumption of ‘normality’ that comes with visibility “makes possible an open, integrated life” for LGBTQ individuals, “but it also restricts tolerance to individuals who display the traits or behavior that are associated with normality.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, those who deviate from the *visible* images (which are often not representative of the whole community) are still disciplined. Recall the concept of ideological clawback – if a performance cannot be identified even as a *variation* of the norm, it becomes a target of those that seek to claw it back to normal. Resistance to such co-option is clear in the logic of queer individuals who are opposed to the legalization of same sex marriage: “to the extent that heterosexual marriage is the model or ideal of intimacy, it devalues, sometimes stigmatizes, a wide range of intimate choices: for example, all nonheterosexual intimacies and all heterosexual intimacies that are not about love or marriage.”<sup>23</sup> By advocating for a particular view of ‘marriage’ to be inclusive, other manners of partnerships (such as polyamorous relationships) continue to

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<sup>22</sup> Seidman, *The Social Construction*, 137.

<sup>23</sup> Seidman, *The Social Construction*, 145.



be stigmatized. If queer ruptures are co-opted and become normalized, they no longer serve their disrupting function. In turn, individuals within the community who do not abide by variations of the norm are *still* impacted by the negative discourse and actions, even though the new changes in society perceptually benefit them.

Queer holy fool style, which features a variation of drag (religious drag), inevitably changes with the perception of drag in mass produced images. When I asked Sister Zsa Zsa about what they hoped people would take away from their events, the answer began with a reference to *Drag Race*: “We like to use the term, canary in a gold mine,... It used to be that we would go out in habit and shock people. Well now, RuPaul is putting that on television, so it’s not as shocking.”<sup>24</sup> “Canary in a gold mine” is a reference to the historic use of canaries to warn mine workers of potential dangers within the mines. The Sisters’ performance represents a warning about The Church’s hateful discourse, a message that is conveyed through their outrageous spectacle. Due to prominent images of a particular kind of drag queen, Sister Zsa Zsa suggests they are losing their ‘shock’ factor with audiences. The SPI has always represented a unique form of drag; Sister Vish claims they were considered “funny mascot-clowns” when drag was still stigmatized.<sup>25</sup> Now that a particular image of drag is distributed in media, what will happen to the queer holy fool style of drag? This question that cannot be answered now as ‘mainstream’ drag is still fairly new. Future research investigating the impact of a mainstream media image will elucidate this inquiry.

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<sup>24</sup> Sister Zsa Zsa.

<sup>25</sup> Sister Vish, “The Red Party,” *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://thesisters.org/sistory-by-sister-vish/214-1984-sisters-at-republican-national-convention-in-dallas>.

#### 6.4 What now?

Questions drove this research, to be sure, but some questions I posed were not answered throughout the course of the dissertation. As opposed to simply deleting them, erasing all evidence of that particular disruption, I intentionally left them scattered throughout. Doing so does two important things: 1) Keeping the questions open allows a reader to ponder them, challenge them, possibly answer them on their own. Either way, they act as a constant disruption to what I have established as queer holy fool style – reminding readers that categories are ambivalent and constantly shifting. 2) The questions act as a performative nod to the fact that ‘studies’ are never done. We may finish the paper, receive feedback, even publish – but that does not mean that we have learned all there is to know about a particular subject. In this section, I outline questions that were not answered (or, not answered *fully*). I also offer ways in which these questions can be approached in future work.

As I mentioned in the first chapter, the SPI functions as *a* representative (not *the* representative) of queer holy fool style.<sup>26</sup> The Sisters certainly begin the conversation of the potential of this style, but where else could queer holy fools be found? What questions are the SPI unable to answer that could be obtained other places? While the SPI encourages a sense of spirituality, much of their spectacle is based upon mocking The Church, specifically Catholicism. There are a wide array of religious/spiritual perspectives that are not fully addressed by the SPI; and therefore, are not available in

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Hariman also warns against essentializing a style based upon his case studies: “The style need not be limited to these exemplars, however. By turning to other records of court life, one discerns not only the continued presence of the tropes I have identified but others as well.” Robert Hariman, *Political Style: The Artistry of Power* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 70.

this perspective of queer holy fool style. The Radical Faeries, one of the first organizations created to focus on queer spirituality and divine consciousness, are a group that could be studied to extend insight into a queer holy fool style. Founded in 1979, the Radical Faeries consider themselves to be “gay centered,” “politically progressive,” and “community building.”<sup>27</sup> The group’s initial goal was to unite gay men, as there was a loss of hope during the early gay liberation, leading to the beginning of apathetic rumblings at a crucial moment in the movement. Radical Faeries base much of their practices off of a neo-Pagan religion; specifically, they attune their spiritual inclinations toward a worship of a Goddess/God androgyne figure where Earth is both Mother and Father. They are known to hold their ‘Faerie Gatherings’ in spaces that allow for a connection with nature. While not immediately perceived as ‘foolish,’ their genesis occurred during a radical age for queer life (hence their name), at the time they were subjectively perceived as foolish to begin queer spiritual fixated events.<sup>28</sup> Their neo-Pagan roots also demonstrate a foolery in the creation of a Queer God, one that is solely for queers and worshipped in a Dionysian fashion.<sup>29</sup> An analysis of the first known gay/spiritual organization could suggest degrees of foolishness, as well as concentrating on a spectacle based off of different spiritual guidance. Given they do not seem to be combating The Church directly through the explicit mockery of the ‘nun’ trope, how does a queer holy fool style that indirectly approaches The Church manifest? In what ways, if at all, do they employ parody/camp?

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<sup>27</sup> Don Kilhefner, “The Radical Faeries at Thirty (+ One),” *The Gay and Lesbian Review* (2010), 21.

<sup>28</sup> Bill Rodgers, “The Radical Faerie Movement: A Queer Spirit Pathway,” *Social Alternatives* 14 (1995).

<sup>29</sup> Rodger, “The Radical Faerie,” 36.

Investigating the Radical Faeries does not answer an important question left after this study: where is the feminist and lesbian influence? Admittedly, this is a question I posed early on that was never truly answered: The Sisters, though they have cis female participants, are predominately driven by a gay-male camp style of performance. What would it mean to redefine and/or reclaim a more female perspective of spirituality via the queer holy fool style? One such performative presence that could help answer this question is Love Art Laboratory. After reading Linda M. Montano's *14 Years of Living Art* during a turbulent time in the history of the struggle for queer rights, Elizabeth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle decided to create an artistic project they named Love Art Laboratory. Inspired by Montano's use of the Hindu chakras and determined to spread the message of love and acceptance, the couple held a wedding ceremony each year from 2003-2011 representing a different chakra.<sup>30</sup> Their goal? To create "symbolic gestures intended to help make the world a more tolerant, sustainable, and peaceful place... to love, honor, and cherish the Earth, Sky and Sea until death brings us closer together forever."<sup>31</sup> In the first year of the project (2005) they chose to begin with the root chakra; a perfect place to start, given that it is symbolic of the basis of an individual's being. It also correlates with deep connections to the physical body and surrounding environment. Since the duo began the project during a trying time in LGBTQ rights, performances that highlight the tumultuous political environment represent a way to disrupt the dominant narrative while simultaneously associating with queer individuals. Red, the color often

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<sup>30</sup> Raised as a Roman Catholic, Montano fell in love with the ritual of Catholicism, but did not fall in love with the patriarchal oppression. Her book, though based on Hindu principles, still maintains the ritual aspects of her religious past.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, "Love Art Laboratory," last modified 2007, [www.loveartlab.org](http://www.loveartlab.org).

associated with the root chakra due to its symbolic connection with security, was a primary feature throughout the events. The performances leading up to their wedding consisted of passionately kissing in public to convey a sense of protection in each other's presence, and they even constructed a large heart shaped bed where they "cuddled" in public for an extended amount of time.<sup>32</sup> Given the queer holy fool style's insistence on marrying sexuality, religion, and *safety*, this project fits within the realm of the style. The couple keeps full records of the various experiences on their website, including wedding pictures and summaries of each year lived focusing on a specific chakra. Studying Love Art Laboratory could be an important addition to any analysis of queer holy fools, as feminine perspectives of holy fools are rarely identified. Exploration of Stephens and Sprinkles' project would shed some light on why that may be the case. Studying this particular pair could also extend the queer holy fool style beyond the contexts of institutions: Stephens and Sprinkles are the only members of Love Art Laboratory. What does the queer holy fool style look like when there are no charters, guidelines, or a long history?

Of course, this current study does not mark an end to excavating the queer holy fool style within the SPI. The next step is collecting oral histories of the Sisters on a larger scale. Campbell and Cilliers stressed in their description of a rhetoric of folly that each preaching fool would manifest their disruption differently depending upon the personality of the fool. While obtaining a few oral histories to prepare for this project, I certainly saw evidence of the individual differences of each Sister.<sup>33</sup> As I mentioned in

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<sup>32</sup> Stephens and Sprinkle, "Love Art Laboratory."

<sup>33</sup> When I explained to one Sister what I was attempting to do, they remarked, "That will be quite a task, honey," hinting that each Sister would give me a markedly different story.

the beginning chapters, the SPI functions as a synecdoche, *a* representative not *the* representative, so the various manifestations can still fall under the umbrella of queer holy fool style. Oral histories could provide a sense of the depth and variance within the style, and each evocative story will only help preserve the history of this group. Outside of Sister Vish's accounts on the website, there is no other place to access individual Sister reports of events. Demonstrating how the style varies opens the potential for more work to be done with variations of the queer holy fool style, thus expanding the definition and possibilities of the label. Relying on texts that are immediately available to the public is certainly an appropriate way to start the study of such a unique style, but *should* the investigation stop there? After acquainting myself with the overarching tropes and performatives of queer holy fool style, I argue there is a bigger, more evocative story to be told through oral histories and/or an autoethnographic account of a Sister.

Collecting oral histories also offers the opportunity to ascertain the queer holy fool style of individual Abbeys. For this dissertation, I primarily relied on the San Francisco Order's website, as all other Order websites are intertextually linked. Some of the other Order's websites are not maintained as well, making it difficult to capture a glimpse of the differences between each Abbey. YouTube channels and videos from the other Orders helped, as did press about them, but oral histories could shed more insight into the inner workings of each individual Abbey. Each Abbey fulfills a different need depending on what the location needs, and each Order is composed of different demographics. For example, Novice Sister Leigh Viticus explains how in Portland, there is a "higher percentage of bisexual, queer, and transgender women," but in Los Angeles,

she and a trans\* Sister represent the “only ladies.”<sup>34</sup> Not only are the demographics different, but the needs of the city are also different. San Francisco, a notoriously flamboyant city, is more open than others to the LGBTQ community. In Los Angeles, however, many LGBTQ individuals do not wish to be as open, so the missions and events performed by the Sisters look different.<sup>35</sup> The San Francisco website even acknowledges this, stating, “although the San Francisco House is often referred to as the “Mother House,”... Each House is an autonomous, unique group *with its own Habits, culture and rules*. Just as the San Francisco House is a reflection of the culture that surrounds it, so too is each House *a reflection of its own environment*.”<sup>36</sup> If the queer holy fool style is intrinsically linked to audience, meaning the population and needs of each location plays an important role in the co-creation of the style, then the community dictates, to some extent, what the style looks like.

Some environments are in need of queer holy fool intervention, but are presently outside the reach of an Order. While visiting the San Francisco Sisters, I off-handedly mentioned that I wish there was an Abbey in my area. “You know,” one Sister told me, “we have Missions all over the country. There’s no need to live right next to us to do what we do.”<sup>37</sup> Upon investigation, I found that indeed, official Missions could be

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<sup>34</sup> Leigh Viticus, “Op-ed: I Am a Straight, Female Sister of Perpetual Indulgence (And You Can Be, Too!),” *Advocate*, October 24, 2014, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.advocate.com/commentary/2014/10/24/op-ed-i-am-straight-female-sister-perpetual-indulgence-and-you-can-be-too>.

<sup>35</sup> Sister Jezebelle. They were asked to move to Los Angeles to help when the Order began, and noted the difference in approach to tasks that were common tasks in San Francisco.

<sup>36</sup> “World Orders,” *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, accessed April 12, 2016, <http://thesisters.org/world-orders>, my emphasis.

<sup>37</sup> The use of Mission here is different from earlier utilizations. Previously, I have used ‘mission’ (lower-cased) to refer to the various issues within the community that each

initiated where full Abbeys do not exist. In fact, many current Abbeys began as a Mission, and became full Orders after a vote from the United Nuns Privy Council.<sup>38</sup> The Toronto Sisters, for example, began as Sister Merry Peter's Mission in 1987.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, the Toronto Mission was not meant to be at that time, and Sister Merry Peter "packed up her glitter and migrated to the mother house in San Francisco where she still serves the order in dazzling fashion."<sup>40</sup> Luckily, since that time, Toronto saw a resurgence in the interest the Sisterhood, and the Mission was officially accepted as a Fully Professed House of the SPI in 2012.<sup>41</sup> What might the individual stories of Sisters from an Order that was created under such circumstances add to queer holy fool style? Could their oral histories stress the importance of *kairos* within the style?

As someone that was initially equally appalled and fascinated by the Sisters, this project has been a veritable roller coaster. After reading, contemplating, and reconnecting with my own spirituality through this long journey, I am thinking of becoming a Sister myself.<sup>42</sup> Becoming a Sister will provide insight on a level that I do not have in this

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Sister undertakes as their focus for outreach/fundraising. 'Mission' (capitalized) indicates the newer orders that do not have their voting privileges within the SPI.

<sup>38</sup> The definition of "Mission" as "a *newly-forming house* that has not yet received its exequatur, or voting privilege" even suggests that the process of creating new Orders begins with starting a Mission. "World Orders," my emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> "A Canadian Sistory Lesson," *The Toronto Sisters*, accessed April 24, 2016, [http://www.torontosisters.com/pb/wp\\_20a4f49c/wp\\_20a4f49c.html](http://www.torontosisters.com/pb/wp_20a4f49c/wp_20a4f49c.html).

<sup>40</sup> "A Canadian Sistory."

<sup>41</sup> "A Canadian Sistory."

<sup>42</sup> I even have a name picked out: Sister Benedetta Cunni-Lingee. The inspiration comes from Sister Benedetta Carlini: during the Italian Renaissance, she was the first nun to be accused of 'lesbian' actions. She claimed she and Sister Bartolomea (who lived in the same convent) would make love when she became possessed by an angel named Splenditello, during which they would experience 'mystical epiphanies' – including seeing and conversing with an image of God. Sister Bartolomea later turned on her lover (a betrayal and a disciplining), and Sister Benedetta was subsequently imprisoned for heretical spirituality. Obviously, such a figure represents an important significance to women's spirituality *and* sexuality – a fitting person to which I can pay homage through



project, nor will I achieve thoroughly from oral histories: a real-time, personal account of the creation of queer holy fool style. Such a perspective could dramatically change the findings here, precipitating potential changes for the style.

While my awe of the SPI is probably evident in the way I describe them and their cause, I did not come to the decision to consider Sisterhood lightly. My own coming out process was a bit traumatic, but not because I received horrific backlash from family or friends (though, there were certainly individuals that took a long time to speak to me again). I came out later in life, and was lucky to find support early; I avoided much of the disciplining and bullying that impacts a vast amount of LGBTQ youth. What made (and still makes) my process so troubling is the reconciliation between my gender/sexual identity and my religious/spiritual identity. My inquiry into the Sisters began as an attempt to ‘get it;’ to understand how they were able to ‘expiate the stigmatic guilt’ while ‘promulgating universal joy.’ Luckily, what I found so attractive about the SPI was *how* they were responding to their rhetorical situation, leading to a topic fit for a dissertation. All my concerns about the seemingly blasphemous nature of their actions are addressed in these pages; my personal thoughts on the matter to come in a later work. My hope for this current project is that I can reach other queer individuals battling with their religious/spiritual identity. The dogmatic, oppressive actions and rhetoric of The Church, as prevalent as it is, does not represent every relationship with the Divine.

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my name. The second part of my name is meant to rhyme with “Carlini,” making reference to a sexual act performed on females - possibly what led to many a ‘mystical epiphany.’ If you do not know which act I am referring to, please type ‘cunnilingus’ into Google. Also, contact me if you do this. I could use a laugh after writing a dissertation. Judith Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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