

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

by

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

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IF WE'RE MOCKING ANYTHING, IT'S ORGANIZED RELIGION:
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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 “21st 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.

PREVIEW

DEDICATION

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

You are loved.

PREVIEW

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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.

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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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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

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.¹

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.”

¹ 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.²

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.”³

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.’⁴ 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.⁵ In cities that have a more diverse population, there are more sisters of color. For instance, abbeys in Texas (Fort Worth,

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

³ 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.

⁴ “Welcome to the Sisters.”

⁵ “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,"⁶ to "card carrying atheist,"⁷ 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."⁸

"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."⁹ 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.¹⁰ Summing up my initial concerns about their actions, one Sister stated:

⁶ Sister Agnes Dei'after Tamara

⁷ Sister Zsa Zsa Glamour

⁸ Sister Roma!

⁹ "Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence," directed by Alison Knox and Maxe Schimberg, last modified June 25, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmxxF5aESlc>.

¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.”¹²

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

¹¹ Knox and Schimberg, “Sisters,” my emphasis.

¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

¹³ 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-religionis-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.

¹⁴ Robinson, “Bishop Gene Robinson.”

¹⁵ 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>.

¹⁶ “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!”.¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ 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

¹⁷ 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/>.

¹⁸ Shore-Goss “The Holy Spirit,” 111.

donations for the neighborhood. In 2008, the Sisters brought in roughly \$20,000 in donations. On June 28th, 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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’?²¹ 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

¹⁹ 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>.

²⁰ 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>.

²¹ 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.”²² 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

²² 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.²³ Diogenes (referred to as “Socrates gone mad”) was the most well known Cynic.²⁴ 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.”²⁵ Through acts like this, Cynics sought to “dramatize their criticism of society,” especially through the rhetorical form of the diatribe.²⁶ A diatribe is an “extemporaneous sermon” attempting “to criticize, to entertain, to shock and to convey impression of public figures.”²⁷ 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.”²⁸ Though the ‘truth’ expressed through the diatribe may seem at first to be unreasonable (and perhaps

²³ 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.

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

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

²⁶ Windt, “The Diatribe,” 7.

²⁷ Windt, “The Diatribe,” 7.

²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.”³⁰ When he passed away, Athenians erected a marble statue of a dog on his grave.³¹

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.³² 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.”³³ On the other hand, the knowledge associated with foolishness represents a “difficult, hermetic, esoteric learning.”³⁴ It is a forbidden form of wisdom – one in which the fool can enjoy all of the desires of paradise with no

²⁹ 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 6th Century A.D.* (London: Methuen and Company Limited, 1937), 2.

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

³¹ Windt, “The Diatribe,” 5.

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

³³ Foucault, *Madness*, 21.

³⁴ Foucault, *Madness*, 21.