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## Feeling of / Feeling for Queer Community: The Social Activism of the San Francisco Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

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## Feeling of / Feeling for Queer Community

### The Social Activism of the San Francisco Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

**Jason B. Crawford**

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#### Resumen

Este artículo interdisciplinario explora el activismo social queer de las Hermanas de la Perpetua Indulgencia de San Francisco, California. Sobre la base de más de diez años de observación participante e investigación de archivos, examino sus rituales y actuaciones públicas para iluminar las complejas formas en que la comunidad queer es identificada, sentida, pensada y vivida en respuesta a las injusticias sociales arraigadas en la religión. Usando un lente teóricamente informado, alterno entre estilos académicos y litúrgicos de escritura para transmitir los sentimientos y sentimientos de la comunidad que motivan e inspiran la única estética sagrada de las hermanas, inspirada en un deseo de queerificar y desafiar tradiciones religiosas y dogmas.

**Palabras claves:** Hermanas de la Perpetua Indulgencia, Comunidad Queer, Activismo social, Sentimientos.

#### Resumo

Este artigo interdisciplinar explora o ativismo social queer das Irmãs da Perpétua Indulgência de São Francisco, California. Com base em mais de dez anos de observação participante e pesquisa arquivística, eu examino seus rituais e performances públicas, a fim de iluminar as complexas maneiras pelas quais a comunidade queer é identificada, sentida, pensada e vivida em resposta a injustiças sociais enraizadas na religião. Usando uma lente teoricamente informada, alterno estilos de escrita acadêmicos e litúrgicos para transmitir os sentimentos e sentimentos da comunidade que motivam e inspiram a estética particular de palhaço sagrado das Irmãs inspirada por um desejo de queerificar e desafiar tradições religiosas e dogmas.

**Palavras-chave:** Irmãs da Perpétua Indulgência, Comunidade queer, Ativismo social, Sentimentos.

### Abstract

This interdisciplinary article explores the queer social activism of the San Francisco Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Based on over ten years of participant observation and archival research, I examine their rituals and public performances in order to illuminate the complex ways in which queer community is identified, felt, thought and lived out in response to social injustices rooted in religion. Using a theoretically informed lens, I alternate between academic and liturgical styles of writing to convey the feelings for, and feelings of, community that motivate and inspire the Sisters' unique sacred clown aesthetic inspired by a desire to queer and challenged religious traditions and dogmas.

**Keywords:** Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Queer community, Social activism, Feelings.

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## Introduction

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are an order of nuns «for the twenty-first century» made up of men, women and transgendered people who are often queer-identified (The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, 1978-2016). Founded in 1979 in San Francisco, they have been at the forefront of HIV/AIDS activism and safer-sex education. Widely-known in the San Francisco Bay Area, the Sisters court controversy for their Roman Catholic-inspired public rituals and for their public appearances dressed in wimples, habits and clown-like makeup. This article focuses on the Sisters from an interdisciplinary perspective that weaves together analytical and theoretical tools from performance studies, cultural geography and queer cultural studies and will focus on the Sisters' social activism in three vignettes. While the Sisters offer the opportunity for a rich discussion on the changes in the «post-secular» landscape in the US, the analysis instead seeks to illuminate the ways in which their performances of social activism are motivated by feelings of and for queer community that offers a chance for thinking about the ethics of queer community in relation to, but outside of traditional religious institutions (Beaumont and Baker, 2011; Gorsky et al, 2012; Wilcox, 2012a, 2012b).

Debates about queerness as both a theory and a political practice are an important part of the experiences of queerness —both personal and social— and this paper makes a contribution to these discussion by focusing on ways in which «community» takes a central role in the performances of queerness by a historically important and culturally significant organization. Therefore, this article will not focus on the spiritual/religious leanings and motivations of individual members of the order. Rather, the focus is on the performance roles of the Sisters as queer social activists, examining their rituals and public performances in order to think about the complex ways in which queer community is felt, thought and lived out in response to social injustices rooted in religion.

## Some «Sistory»

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence first emerged in 1979 as a performance troupe on a beach in San Francisco. Men wearing nun's habits was not a new idea —there being a long tradition in theatre and farce of men dressing as nuns— but it was one that challenged the then-current image of gay men in San Francisco, i.e. the image of the «Castro Clone,» a masculine looking man in tight t-shirt and jeans, often with a mustache. Sensing the need to disrupt these dominant images of gay male bodies, three men donned «borrowed» nun habits and paraded along the beach with a toy gun. They eventually became a popular feature of local gay and lesbian softball games, working the sidelines as cheerleaders.

These first Sisters were not only interested in adding hilarity to social events —though this work is important to highlight— they were also, from the beginning, deeply political, motivated by experiences within Radical Faerie communities.<sup>1</sup> Some of the earliest public rituals that the Sisters performed were in response to the nuclear disaster at Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania and benefit fundraiser bingo games for gay Cuban refugees (The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, 1978-2016). The emergence of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s were extremely challenging for the Sisters and caused a major shift in focus: public rituals that challenged the status quo, educated the public, and comforted and supported the People with AIDS (hereinafter cited as «PWAs»).

## *Characteristics of the Order*

As an order of nuns, people interested in joining the Order must first express their interest through volunteering and eventually in the more formal process of becoming a nun. Similar to traditional Christian holy orders, individuals first become aspirants, then postulants, and then fully professed «black veils.» They take life-

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<sup>1</sup> Radical Faeries are an intentional community of gay men that is inspired by alternative ways of living together, bringing together individuals from all walks of life interested in communal living, radical spiritual and political consciousness and exploring creative ways to connect bodies, minds, sexualities and Pagan spiritualities. For more on the Faeries see Mark Thompson, Richard Neely, and Bo Young (2011).

long vows to «expiate stigmatic guilt, spread universal joy, and to serve the community» («Become a Nun»). Fully-professed black veil nuns take up a new name, most of which demonstrate the unique campy humour of the order: Sister Constance Craving of the Holey Deisre, Sister Gina Tonic the Sparkling, Sister Mare Mae Himm, Sister Saki Tumi, Sister Mary Juanita High, to name just a few. The nuns of the San Francisco house, like many of the other houses, wear clown-white makeup and decorate these «blank spaces» with a variety of designs, jewels and the ubiquitous glitter. It is interesting to note that these white faces are part of a long theatrical lineage, highlighting the Sisters' awareness of and queering of the tradition of both sacred and secular clowning (Bouissac, 1990; Ballinger, 1991; Ganymede, 1991; Baker, 1994; Sennelick, 2000; Purzycki, 2006).

The Sisters are organized into autocephalous chapters, or «houses,» around the world, each with a Mother Superior or Abbess and various other office holders elected from among the fully-professed black veil Sisters. Most of the houses operate by consensus models and are democratically inclined. In the US, each house is expected to receive official non-profit status from the Internal Revenue Service for tax purposes in order to legally carry out fundraising for charitable donations. While the houses are autonomous, they are represented on the United Nun's Privy Council which meets every few years in a selected city around the world so that the Sisters can meet each other, nurture their mutual commitments, and learn from each other.

Each house is expected to choose a veil and habit that is in keeping with some unique cultural aspect of the communities in which they live and to whom they serve. The San Francisco house, known as the Mother House of the Order of Indulgence, early on chose to emulate the fourteenth-century Flemish maid servant's wimple. However, these wimples were originally made from women's brassieres. The global variety of wimples and veils is aesthetically diverse and, when many Sisters are gathered together from around the world, the result is quite festive.

## *Activist Nuns*

In the media, the Sisters are often described as «activist nuns,» placing them in a long line of nuns who have actively engaged in political movements (For examples see Koehlinger, 2007). As I have shown elsewhere, the Sisters' role as nuns queers the doctrinal and institutional power relations that constitute a particular understanding of nun (Crawford, 2011). Their claim that they are in fact nuns, evidenced by living out their vows, honours the work done by women religious while extending the possibility of meaning and practice of «nun» to a queer context. In addition, their clown-like performances allow for social critique as well as creating places for «parties with politics» (Browne, 2007). Again, these roles are identities that are performed in different settings and times by individuals —within a collective— who express those roles in different ways. Taken as a whole, then, the Sisters operate as both a social and a cultural force.

Cathy B. Glenn (2006) writes «[t]he Sisters use identity in their politics precisely by *unfixing*, from the norms established in various socio-political contexts, both the subjectivities they embody and the political ground they occupy» (258, emphasis in the original). This unfixing of the political ground requires us to consider that the Sisters' performance of their activism is directed at a variety of social issues and the strategies of their political interventions are also multiple, responding to the flow of emotions emanating from social injustices. However, rather than separate their activism from their roles as nuns and clowns, we should understand that their activism is done as, and is seen as, an integral part of these roles. Again, I have identified these roles as characteristics of their performances. These roles overlap both in performance and in the Sisters' own discourse about themselves.

What distinguishes the Sisters as activists from their roles as nuns and clowns consists of three factors: 1) *Agitation*: The Sisters have been at the forefront of actions that brought awareness of HIV/AIDS and helped make health a political issue; 2) *Affirmation*: Many of their performances emerge from political framing of the need to advocate for queer people and their needs; and 3) *Affection*: The Sisters help us think about queer relationships and friendships and communities as an ethics of care.

Political actions that respond to marginalisation and discrimination are also motivated by and generate strongly felt emotions. Queer politics, especially in the early days of HIV/AIDS, catalyzed anger in political protest performances. Early memorials to those who had died from AIDS, like the Names Project Quilt, Candlelight Vigils and Memorial Services, personalised and politicised an overwhelming experience of government inaction, putting queer grief onto the newspaper headlines and television coverage. Marking where queer politics takes place and the emotions generated in those spaces of performance yields an emotional cartography of the sites of contestation within and on the borders of the queer community.

In the following sections, I demonstrate that the Sisters' activism was not only at the forefront of queer politics around HIV/AIDS, but that their continued activism has developed into an ethics of care within the space of performance that is, in itself, a unique contribution of the Sisters to queer politics. Thus, I offer my analyses of the Sisters' performances of their unique kind of activism as the activism of *agitation*, *affirmation* and *affection*. I then proceed with illustrations of the performances of these activist spaces, drawn primarily from archival materials and observations. I have used an experimental and creative form of presenting these examples, relying on Christian liturgical forms in order to demonstrate in academic writing the kind of campy/clownish, yet «seriously parodic,» spirituality in which the activism of the Sisters so often takes form (Wilcox, 2012a, 2012b).<sup>2</sup>

## Interpreting Ritual(ized) Activism

### *Three Modes of Performance*

The Sisters' activism is contextually and historically specific, issue-driven, and is difficult to define in absolute terms. Generally, their activism takes place through three broad modes: *agitation* (AIDS work and political protests), *affirmation* (supporting queer groups

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of my previous experimental academic writing and arguments in favour of disrupting the power of established authoritative writing styles, see (Crawford, 2009, 2014, 2016).



and non-profit organisations), and *affection* (advocating for safer sex). I use these terms in particular ways, which I will explain below. However, it should be noted that these are terms that have vastly different interpretations, complex histories, and dissimilar literatures.

There have been a variety of theories of queer politics –its meanings, practices and efficacy– yet none of the most influential US- and UK-based writers has mentioned the queer activist work of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (Warner, 1993, 1999; Vaid, 1996; Jeffreys, 2003; Duggan, 2004; Ruffolo, 2009). This could be because the Sisters’ brand of campy nun interventions are, like many political performances, taken less seriously by theorists «it’s just art» or that their performances are seen as a too specifically linked to the unique queer culture of San Francisco –ignoring their presence in over forty communities around the world– and thus, not about politics «it’s not activism». Cathy B. Glenn’s article, «Queering the (Sacred) Body Politic,» demonstrates how the Sisters challenge the temptation to think of queer cultural performances as either art or activism. She notes through their campy habits and names as well as their charity fundraising and volunteer work, «artistry and activism merge, for SPI, to ironize, critique, and transform oppressive conditions» (Glenn, 2007: 253). The Sisters were present before the AIDS crisis, helped form some of the earlier campaigns against AIDS, and have continued to maintain their local struggles for and by PWAs and for research – and much of this was done through rituals, die-ins, bingo, and other cultural performances.<sup>3</sup>

If we think of the Sisters as activists we can think of these performances as interventions in *social dramas* that seek to redress injustices, injustices that are felt not always immediately analysed objectively, and felt so deeply that they serve as sources of political engagement (Turner, 1982). The Sisters as activists, as will become evident later in this paper, respond to immediate needs

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in 1982, the Sisters cohosted a fundraiser with Shirley MacLaine for the Kaposi’s Sarcoma (KS) Clinic at UCSF Medical Centre. David Román describes the event as «the second annual outdoor Dog Show and Parade with performances by the Gay Freedom Day Marching Band, Twirling Corps, and Honor Guard» (Román, 1998: 14).

and situations, but these needs are understood within the larger framework of US society that focuses on the ways that people are marginalised and oppressed or put in vulnerable situations: the poor, homeless people, PWAs, transsexuals, queers, and women.

I also consider the Sisters' fundraising efforts as evidence of their activism as *affirmation*. Affirmation, as material and emotional advocacy and support, continues to be a necessary function, especially for non-profit charities. When I say that the Sisters embody an activist role, I mean this to refer to their *advocacy* for particular communities and a public *affirmation* of the issues that these groups raise.<sup>4</sup> This means that the specific political actions discussed in this article are analysed and interpreted within their sociocultural and geographic contexts with an eye towards the various modes of expressing their activism. In addition to fundraising, the Sisters' affirmation of queer lives and the suffering of marginalised peoples extends to the affirmation of those people, in the sense of giving voice to those in need, voicing one's own needs and sense of injustice. The Sisters' affirmation also encompasses hospitality and merrymaking. This exemplifies their feeling *for* community, their dedication to their calling of service to the community, and their desire to create a space of safety and welcome, what Sonjah Stanley-Niaah (2010: 48) calls «geography of refuge.»

Hosting fundraising parties and holding street festivals and parties lends a merrymaking quality to life which, in the scope of continuing marginalisation of queer people, is a radical way of responding to oppression. As Stanley-Niaah (2010) writes in reference to Dancehall culture in Jamaica, the participants negotiate «contested and unreconciled issues of space while they create spaces of celebration and valorized identities as key survival strategies» (37). This kind of affirmation calls for life to be lived joyfully and creates spaces of celebration in the face of oppression. The Sisters' activism also affirms the way San Francisco is perceived in the popular imagination as a refuge from the rest of

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<sup>4</sup> In keeping with US tax law, the Sisters distribute funds to registered non-profit organizations and they give details as to what funds are ineligible for donations. The Sisters specifically work to help small and underfunded groups.

the US and as a place where people can be free to live their lives in whatever way they choose.

### *Emotional Politics and Communities of Feeling*

Since the Sisters' activism is motivated by personal and communal experiences of marginalisation and oppression, we can also think about the ways that emotions instigate, and are produced by, the Sisters' activism. As I have said earlier, social injustice is an emotion, as well as an objective social situation. It is necessary to clearly analyse those structures that make injustice not only possible, but also a real-lived experience. Yet, we must not forget that the emotional experiences of social injustice, the deep hurt, anger, fear, and shame that come with injustice are also important factors that must be included in our understanding of any social movement.<sup>5</sup>

Theories about affect and emotion in philosophy help us think about the politics of emotions and how those emotions are put into use for political purposes. Recent conceptions of affect draw heavily on the writings of Gilles Deleuze whose concept of affect was influenced by Spinoza's understanding of affect as a separate entity from emotion (Deleuze, 1990). For Deleuze, affect is the potential for «bodies to affect other bodies and be affected by other bodies. 'Bodies,' here, are not to be understood only as human bodies. Rather 'bodies' can be defined as a site where forces are 'actualised'» (Lim, 2009: 54). Emotions, in a Deleuzian sense, are the actualisation of those potentials in the world. Queer geographer Jason Lim (2009) describes Deleuzian affect as «allow[ing] one to think about what might take place beyond the limits of normative modes of regulating life and relationships» (55). This conceptual division between affect and emotion splits the concept of affect from the bodily experience of emotion. However, removing affect from corpo-really situated practices of everyday life tends to describe—and theorise—emotions in a way that bears little resemblance to the level of experience. Lim translates Deleuze's

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<sup>5</sup> There are many examples of analysis of social injustice that pay close attention to the emotions of how it feels to suffer injustice. A selected few include: Frantz Fanon (1965 [1963]), James Baldwin (1965 [1953]), Audre Lorde (1982, 1984), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), and bell hooks (1984, 1995, 2000).

concept of affect into queer political criticism of geography and sexuality. However, his citation of Judith Halberstam's concept of «queer time» —thinking about «life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance and child rearing»— denotes an approach to queer politics that ignores different social, economic and geographic experiences of time-space (Lim, 2009: 59). If queer is a radical political stance that is open-ended and anti-normative (Warner, 1999), then our theorising of queer must be rooted in corpo-really situated practices of every-single-day life. Rather than being too ready to dismiss the multiple ways that different non-radical, non-queer-identified homosexual people live and feel their every-single-day lives in relation to structures of power, we need to, as Didier Éribon (2011) has noted, not be too quick to make a fetish out of the meaning and practice of what is deemed to be «the radical.»<sup>6</sup>

I argue that, while an important theoretical concept, this approach to affect does not directly apply to the Sisters' form of activism. Thinking about affect as a *potential force* can, as both Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987) have shown, open up the possibilities for political action and may offer new ways of thinking about social organising. Yet, these theories are rather far removed from the really lived feelings of injustice.<sup>7</sup>

I interpret the Sisters' activism in a framework that acknowledges that the source of their activism emerges from emotional experiences of *feeling* social injustice. I understand that the Sisters' respond to various social dramas in a way that never

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<sup>6</sup> For a poignant portrayal of the dangers of the fetish of the «radical» within queer politics see Eribon (2011).

<sup>7</sup> Following in the industrial language of Deleuze, geographer Nigel Thrift's non-representational theory, while deeply concerned with affect, paints a portrait of human experience as rather machinic. In his 2004 article, «Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect,» he describes his approach to affect and emotions is not «based on a notion of human individuals coming together in community.» His approach, rather, is concerned with an «inhuman' or 'transhuman' framework in which individuals are generally understood as effects of the events to which their body parts —broadly understood— respond and in which they participate» (Thrift, 2004: 60). While theoretically stimulating, I am arguing, that Thrift and other cutting-edge ideas on the politics of affect, are incongruous to the Sisters' form of activism as rooted in emotions — feeling injustice.

strays too far from the emotional needs of people in those dramas and the Sisters' performances produce emotions that serve to bolster people's ability to counter and reverse violent discourses and practices. These are essential tactical reversals, particularly when people are facing on-going dilemmas such as the lack of access to adequate healthcare. The Sisters' affirmation activism is deeply rooted in experiences of the grief of too many lost lives. The Sisters focus their affirmation of queer lives in a context of the Roman Catholic Church's teachings on homosexuality, AIDS and condoms. These teachings dismiss entire groups of people as «intrinsically disordered» who may need «pastoral care» but do not require the affirmation of their own human dignity and value (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1976; Ratzinger, 1986).

Research within in sociology on the role of emotions within social movements is useful for further developing analytical frameworks for the Sisters' activism. These studies focus on emotions as key sources of recruitment of new members, interpretation and analysis of social issues, as well as forming a central part of political protests. This work is also useful for building an interpretive framework for the Sisters' activism. Focusing on the use of emotions in public rituals, Mabel Berezin (2001) describes how a 1923 public Mass was celebrated in Rome to commemorate the rise to power of the fascists. At the moment in the Eucharist when the celebrant raised the Host, the soldiers raised their arms in fascist salute (Berezin, 2001: 89-90). Berezin (2001) notes that:

As the priest consecrated the Eucharist, the fascists consecrated themselves and blurred the distinction between what was sacred and what was secular—what was Church and what was State. This fascist imposition upon Catholic ritual suggested that one could be both fascist and Catholic. (90).

The emotionally-charged moment of the elevation of the Host, was, according to Berezin (2001: 89), such a well-known act in Roman Catholic Italy, that regardless of one's faith, it was a «mental frame» that was popularly recognised by the masses and could easily be «transposed» for other purposes. Berezin's example

of political ritual raises the point that emotions are not always used for progressive political causes. «Emotion,» she writes, «is the pivot upon which political ritual turns» (Berezin, 2001: 93). Emotion in political ritual seeks to construct political identities through what she calls «communities of feeling.» Berezin reworks Raymond Williams' notion of «structures of feeling» the interest in «meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt» (2001: 94). For Berezin, then, communities of feeling minimise social differences between people and create the opportunity to construct a new collective political identity, a feeling of «we are all here together» (2001: 93). However, Berezin points out that public political rituals are relatively open to various interpretations by the participants in these rituals. She writes that «[e]motion may obliterate the old self, but there is no guarantee as to what form the new self or identity might assume. 'We *are* all here together' may easily become, 'Here we go again'» (Berezin, 2001: 94, emphasis in the original). What if «communities of feeling,» even with all their indeterminacy, were not only limited to the ritual process of forming political identities connected to the nation-state? What if, extending Berezin's analysis to queer communities, we think about how emotions and ritual are used to construct «communities of feeling» that are indifferent to or in direct opposition to the nation-state?

### *Ethics of Care within the Space of Performance*

In the case of the Sisters' activism, I suggest we think of emotion as a catalyst, as an indeterminate yet powerfully suggestive base from which communities of feeling may be formed around specific political issues as well as a way of offering a «mental frame» for which to live out our queer lives. I propose, therefore, that we think of *affection* as a way of interpreting the activism of the Sisters. Affection, rather than affect, describes the ways the Sisters constitute communities of feeling. These communities of feeling are formed around the emotional issues in social dramas and can consist of those directly affected and their allies as well as concerned citizens. The Sisters are also dedicated to feeling *for* community, as a «mental frame,» (see Berezin, 2001) that motivates and shapes their interpretations of social dramas and informs their agitations and affirmations in those social dramas.

Communities of feeling require a feeling for community, a dedication to the idea(l) of community as well as dedication to naming, expressing and channelling the emotions that emerge as part of social dramas.

The Sisters have responded, and continue to respond to social dramas, with interventions and agitations against institutions and structures of power as well as with life-affirming declarations and performances on multiple scales —saying hello to people in bars is just as necessary, one could argue, as street demonstrations—. As I mentioned above, using theories of affect that disassociate those feelings —and potential feelings— from their corpo-really situated practices will miss much of the point of the Sisters style of activism. Once we acknowledge that the Sisters' activism is rooted in communities of feeling and affection —a feeling *for* community—we can focus on the ethics that are part of the negotiations of everyday relations within these communities of feeling.

In addition to framing the Sisters' activism as agitation for AIDS and other social justice issues, I have suggested we think of their activism as an affirmation of queer people's lives that supports a life of joy and self-expression. Furthermore, I suggest we look at how the Sisters also express an ethics that is reminiscent of feminist care ethics (Gilligan, 1982). The Sisters' vows express the values of expiating guilt (one is not born guilty), spreading universal joy (barriers to joy should be critiqued and challenged) and serving the community (participation in communities). This latter vow links the Sisters' ethics to feminist care ethics. The theorization of feminist ethics of care first emerged from psychologist Carol Gilligan's research on gendered differences in moral development (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan concluded that women's moral development is rooted in care and attention to relationships which differs from male moral development, rooted in justice and abstract duties (Gilligan, 1982: 23). Her work has inspired feminist ethicists to research how women have lived out an ethics of care which led to political critiques of the devaluing of the care done by women —especially child-rearing, childcare and hospital work— in the workforce and, specifically, in domestic settings (Noddings, 1984; Hoagland, 1988; Held, 1995, 2006; Tong 1993, 2009).

The Sisters also hold to an ethics of care of both the self and the community. For example, their safer sex guide, *Play Fair!*, was meant to educate gay men in the early 1980s about STIs and safer sex practices. This approach to public health education used popular language, cartoon drawings and up-to-date health information delivered with campy humour. The logic inherent in *Play Fair!* and in many of the Sisters' interventions is grounded in the care of queer people's selves (mental and physical health) and is also a way of taking care of the community. If the targets of safer sex campaigns are sexually active queer people, then taking care of one's individual health means that queer men are also, at least potentially, taking care of the larger queer community. This community-based ethics also queers public health campaigns targeted at gay men, by appealing to a feeling for the community, a dedication to the health and well-being of the community that comes from within the community, i.e. uses the community's language, culture and symbols, rather than a community that is named, defined and targeted from the outside. The Sisters' role as activists is made up of agitations for social justice, affirmations of queer people's lives and struggles, and a deep *affection* for the people in the community. The Sisters, as activists, live out their sacred vows to pay attention to the marginalised and oppressed in society, affirming each person as having value and dignity and expressing an optimistic outlook on the different ways of living and being in the world. The following section describes the Sisters' activism and draws out the implications of the ways they perform social activism in San Francisco's queer community.

## Performing Activism / Performing Queer Community

### *Agitation*

In 1982, the San Francisco Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence produced the first safer sex pamphlet in the US written in everyday sex-positive language and, in 1983, they organised the first candlelight vigil for AIDS in the US in 1983 (The Sisters of



Perpetual Indulgence, 1978-2016).<sup>8</sup> Leading many of these early performances of agitation was Sister Florence Nightmare, otherwise known as Bobbi Campbell. Campbell, a public health nurse, co-authored *Play Fair!*, a sex pamphlet with sex-positive language and campy humour. The pamphlet is written as a cartoon strip where the Mother Abbess notices one day that the Sisters were complaining of various ailments, such as a burning sensation when urinating. With her help, the Sisters learn about the symptoms of common STIs like gonorrhoea and chlamydia as well as syphilis. The first edition (1982) mentions a cancer-like illness emerging among gay men and notes that it is a new illness. The pamphlet lists Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) skin lesions as a major symptom of this illness and people with these symptoms are urged to see their doctors. The pamphlet was handed out on the subway system, on the streets of the Castro and the SOMA districts. The performance of handing out the pamphlet embodies and enacts the Sisters' geography of care, illustrating the Sisters' agitational sexual health interventions into the networks of routinized urban life. The original pamphlet, revised in 1999 for up-to-date information about HIV/AIDS and with more gender-inclusive language, also exists as a documentary artefact of the period in time (Sister Dana van Iquity and others, 1999).

Campbell was a Sister who exemplified their agitational activism. Not only did he help design and write the *Play Fair!* guide, he was also featured on the 8 August 1983 cover of the US magazine *Newsweek* for its «Gay America» issue. He is pictured hugging his lover and would later proclaim himself as the «AIDS poster boy.»<sup>9</sup> Although, he did not always engage in performances of public activism wearing his nun's habit as Sister Florence Nightmare, his dedication to the struggle for PWAs put a human face on the pandemic. One important example of his Sisterly activism «out of face» was a speech he delivered outside the 1984 Democratic National Convention in San Francisco.

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<sup>8</sup> For more see Meredith May (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Campbell's 1983-1984 diary is held in the Archives of the Library of the University of California, San Francisco.

*Our First Lesson comes from the «Letter of Sister Florence Nightmare»:*

The video shows a crowd of people in front of a stage outside the Moscone Convention Centre in San Francisco. The rally coincides with the 1984 Democratic Party National Convention. Campbell is introduced as a «gay activist, a feminist, registered Democrat, a mountain climber, a flute player, a drag queen, a reporter, a public health nurse» who was diagnosed with AIDS in 1981 and helped organise the National Association of People with AIDS. Campbell is wearing jeans and pink t-shirt with a large Lambda on it. He approaches the microphone and speaks to the crowd:

You people are beautiful! I have a message for the nation. Very often lesbians and gay men are portrayed as isolated, alienated and alone. Or else, in a pathetic search for desperate sexuality. I don't think that that's true. And I think it's important that people understand that lesbians and gay men don't exist outside of a context. We exist in a context of the people we love and those who love us. I was on the cover of *Newsweek* along with my lover in an embrace, showing middle America that gay love was beautiful. And I'd like to show that message to middle America now.

He asks his lover to come stand next to him at the microphone. He approaches and they kiss each other, the crowd applauds and cheers. Campbell continues:

Gay love in '84! We're not victims standing here assembled before the Democratic convention and the United States. We are your children and your mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers. I have a message for the right wing fundamentalists who would deny us our civil rights because of their two-thousand-year-old archaic philosophies. That message is that I would like to repeat for you all today what Jesus Christ said about homosexuality: ...

He stops speaking. The crowd eventually «gets it» and starts cheering applauding.

If Jesus Christ did not condemn me, then I stand before God, man and woman saying that I am proud and strong. I have a message for the Democrats: We who have AIDS have

a disease that is poorly understood, often fatal, expensive, disruptive of our lives and those of our loved ones, inadequately testable and, so far, incurable. We have been evicted from our homes, fired or forced from our jobs, separated from our loved ones, disowned by our blood families, denied public accommodation because society fears us and does not understand that AIDS is not casually transmissible. AIDS is not just a disease of gay men. People with AIDS are also women, heterosexual, black, Hispanic and Asian, infants, Haitians and recipients of blood product transfusions.

I have a message for the lesbian and gay community: It's important for us to learn about AIDS but not to panic. There is no reason to become hysterical. It's important to support the AIDS effort with money, with your energy and with your votes this November and subsequently. It's important to understand that sex does not cause disease. Homosexuality does not cause disease. Germs do. Learn and practice safe sex. Don't discriminate against us who have AIDS. Don't evict us from your houses—we're not contagious to you in those ways; and don't support people who do.

Finally I have a message for people who have AIDS: we have a right to full and satisfying sexual and emotional lives, to quality medical treatment and quality social service provision without discrimination of any form. We have the right to full explanation of medical procedures and risks, the right to choose or refuse our treatment, to refuse to participate in research if we wish and to make informed decisions about our lives. We have the right to privacy, confidentiality, to human respect and to choose who our significant others are. We have the right to die and to live with dignity. Harvey Milk used to talk about some gay man living in Indiana who was just coming out and who could take hope in the fact that Harvey had just been elected to the Board of Supervisors. Well I have a message for the Person With AIDS who may be in Des Moines or Indianapolis or in Queens or anywhere: Keep the faith, baby! I love you!

He flashes the sign for «I love you» in sign language and steps away («AIDS at 25»).

### *Hear what the Spirit is saying to us*

Campbell's speech was delivered in a very calm manner, unlike many other AIDS activist speeches. He delivered the speech in a passionate but reserved demeanour that belies the fact that he

would die only a few weeks later. The video was posted to *YouTube* by the GLBT History Society in San Francisco and serves as a very small archival testimony to his life and activism. Because Campbell was also an influential member of the Sisters, although he did not deliver this speech as Sister Florence Nightmare, his political speech at the 1984 Democratic Convention embodies the *agitational* activism of the Sisters.

The archival footage of Campbell's speech can also be interpreted as a performative invocation of an alternative vision of US society. His speech was offered in the context of the 1984 Democratic Party's national convention at which it nominated Walter Mondale for its candidate for US President and Geraldine Ferraro as its candidate for US Vice-President, the first woman nominated by either major party for that office. Each national political party's quadrennial nominating conventions is a large media event, staging each party's ideologies and competing political programmes as well as each party's vision of what US society is or ought to be. Campbell's speech outside the convention centre in San Francisco, on a raised platform near the centre, is literally marginalised from the proceedings going on inside the convention. The numerous shirtless gay men attending the rally, no doubt rejoicing in the few brief moments of July warmth before the afternoon fog rolls in, are the «converted» audience, yet still marginalised from the decision-making processes going on inside the venue. Waving rainbow flags and hugging and kissing each other, the men in the crowd are potentially a sympathetic audience to Campbell's words yet, in the context of a public gathering, constitute a counter-public audience that embodies a wide open space of appearance. What might be the efficacy of Campbell's words beyond shoring up and inspiring the converted? As performance theorist Jill Dolan notes in her book *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (2005), «live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting imitations of a better world» (2). Dolan (2005) describes utopian performatives as:

small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense (5).

Campbell's speech enacts a *utopian performative* that encapsulates the social drama of AIDS in 1984 US society by drawing attention to the social and political needs of PWAs. He also addresses the lesbian and gay community who discriminated against PWAs. He highlights the discrimination instigated by right wing fundamentalist Christians and urges the Democratic Party to remember its commitments to the poor and marginalised people. Campbell's speech also speaks directly to PWAs with his repetitive use of the phrase «we have the right to...» enumerating rights that, if actually existing, were hard to imagine in reality. This is why he ends his speech, directly addressing PWAs around the US «to keep the faith» — keep the faith that you have rights, keep the faith that the US can, and ought, to be a different place.

Campbell also constitutes and addresses these four publics: right wing fundamentalists; the Democratic Party; the lesbian and gay community; and People with AIDS in different ways. Each one of the peoples is addressed in the manner of the prophetic messenger «I have a message for...» and strategically and performatively addresses the issues of concern to those audiences. His message to right wing fundamentalists *reverses* their discursive use of Biblical texts as instruments of hate; this is significant because of the performative silence with which the message is delivered. Campbell's message to the Democratic Party challenges them to fight for the rights of PWAs and to recognise that PWAs come from different ethnic and social backgrounds, a call, it seems, for the Democratic Party to remember its voter base. His message to lesbians and gays calls for an ethical response to PWAs, for them to remember that they are still members of the community who deserve respect.

Campbell's message to PWAs is a prophetic call for justice, to remind PWAs of their rights and to offer words of encouragement in the struggle. His dedication to the rights of PWAs is rooted in his

activism as a one of the founders of the National Association of PWAs and he helped write the 1983 Denver Principles at the Second National AIDS Forum («Denver Principles»)<sup>10</sup> The Denver Principles call for the greater involvement of PWAs in community organisations, research projects and treatment experiments, and calls for PWAs to know their rights. In fact, the last section of Bobbi's 1984 speech is a direct quote of Section III of the Denver Principles: «Rights of People with AIDS.» While his speech outside the convention centre lacked the typical flair of the performance of activism done by other Sisters, the speech is a political performance that represents the love and care with which the Sisters enact their passionate politics. He does not speak with anger. In fact, he speaks in a rather monotone voice, reading from crib notes at times, but the emotional impact of his speech comes, appropriately, at the end of his address. He speaks «off-the-cuff» invoking the gay martyr Harvey Milk and references the hope of which Harvey spoke only six years earlier, when hope was needed not only to come out of the closet but to go on living with dignity.<sup>11</sup> Campbell's speech brought the issues and concerns of lesbians and gays and PWAs into the public and, coupled with other performances, such as the joining the Sisters in organising the first candlelight vigil, marching in the Gay Freedom Day Parade with the banner «Fighting For Our Lives» or helping to create the *Play Fair!* pamphlet, is an illustration of the Sisters' *agitational* activism.

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<sup>10</sup> See the article, «Your Brighter Future Begins Here» (2009) for more information on the group of activists, including Campbell, who coordinated the writing of the Denver Principles.

<sup>11</sup> Harvey Milk's famous phrase, «You gotta give them hope» was used in many of his speeches. An example of from one his speeches:

And the young gay people in the Altoona, Pennsylvanias [sic] and the Richmond, Minnesotas who are coming out and hear Anita Bryant in television and her story. The only thing they have to look forward to is hope. And you have to give them hope. Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are too great. Hope that all will be alright (Shilts, 1982: 363).

The *YouTube* clip posted by the GLBT History Society not only serves as an archival testimony, but also as an elegy to Campbell that expresses the continuing utopian inspiration for an alternative vision of US society. He was dedicated to the dignity, respect and rights of PWAs and worked to ensure that gay men were empowered to learn about sexual health and to make their own decisions about their health. To think of their sexual health as a political issue was a radical shift in thinking among many gay men at this time and Campbell's speech and activism with NAPWA and with the Sisters should be remembered as a lasting performative act of *agitational* politics that the Sisters continue to embody with their charitable fundraising for HIV/AIDS service organisations and the care, love and support they offer PWAs.

Because the speech was done «out of face,» it serves as an example of the strategic decision by a fully-professed Sister to appear in public as a «normal-looking» human being. However, the Sisters also engaged in performances of political agitation «in face,» as Sisters. One of their early and most widely reported acts of agitation occurred in 1980 when the Sisters protested the University of San Francisco, a Jesuit Catholic institution, and its decision not to recognize the formation of a gay and lesbian student organization on its campus (Soami, 2008). Twelve years later, the Sisters were escorted off the USF campus for trying to distribute condoms to students (The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, 1978-2016).

The Sisters continue to dedicate themselves to the availability of condoms but these acts of agitation politics continue to evolve. In early 2011, the city of San Francisco Health Department began distributing free «female,» or internal condoms at City Hall (Melendez, 2011). The Sisters were on hand to distribute the condoms and Sister Sharon Dippity Reveal said, «We have a product now that allows people to get a little closer together, express their love and then also be safe» (Melendez, 2011). The Sisters' early days of agitation against Roman Catholic institutions, such as the University of San Francisco, and their agitational politics against the spread of HIV demonstrate the organization's entrenched perspective that condoms help save lives, and these performances of community-engaged politics reveal their

commitments to expiate stigmatic guilt, by turning condoms into the instruments of human salvation.

## *Affirmation*

Performing affirmation is one of the central tenets of the Sisters' vows and also helps identify them as «non-traditional» nuns who serve, and reflect their community and its values. The vow to «expiate stigmatic guilt» represents the desire and dedication that Sisters have to affirm the value and dignity of the lives of the people they serve. The *Play Fair!* safer sex pamphlet ends with a section on guilt in relation to health and well-being.

*Our Second Lesson comes from the Sisters' safer sex guide, Play Fair!*

**GUILT!** This is the deadliest of STDs. It hides in the deepest, darkest places in our hearts and minds. We often don't even know we have it.

**Symptoms:** Feeling bad after a trip to the bars, dark rooms, saunas, bushes, and cottages, waking in someone else's bed or watching porn. Low self-esteem, excessive drug use, being mean and/or judgmental to friends, family, co-workers or total strangers.

**Symptoms Appear:** From two to three years of age and in many cases persist throughout life.

**Untreated:** Can result in loss of ability to be happy; loss of spontaneity; large therapy bills, loss of love; Random Acts of Meanness; impotence; sexual dysfunction; excessive drug use; epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases.

**How You Get It:** Someone Else's Family Values; Catholic, Jewish, Mormon or Muslim schools; three or more hours of TV a day; letting someone else decide what is good for you; politicians.

**Cure:** Respect and love yourself; Random Acts of Kindness; your own family values; a good giggle; lighten up (Sister Dana van Iquity and others, 1999)

*Hear what the Spirit is saying to us*

Describing guilt as a sexually transmitted illness drives home the point that guilt can lead to self-destructive behaviours. The affirmation of a life that is free from the damaging emotional



effects of guilt —especially guilt for being who one is— remains a radical act of consciousness-raising that does not apply to only queer people. The reach of the Sisters' affirmation activism extends to anyone who needs to remember that we all could use some «lightening up» in our lives from time to time.

Affirmation as activism also means welcoming people to the community, ensuring people feel they belong, and standing up for the values of the community. Affirming queer people means that the Sisters meet people where they are at, emotionally and spiritually. For these reasons, the Sisters affirm queer people by attending religious services, memorial services and ordinations, that mark gay and lesbian people's spiritual lives. In 2006, the Sisters welcomed the new Roman Catholic Archbishop Niederauer to the queer community. Niederauer was the newly-appointed archbishop for the archdiocese of San Francisco and was making his archiepiscopal tour of parishes. On 7 October 2007, the archbishop celebrated Mass at queer-friendly Most Holy Redeemer (MHR) Parish located at 100 Diamond Street (at 18<sup>th</sup> Street) in the heart of the city's Castro District. Most Holy Redeemer parish counts among its members many gay, lesbian and transsexual Roman Catholics.

*The Spirit be with you.*

*And also with you.*

*The Hol(e)y Gospel according to Queer Experience:*

Sister Delta Goodhand and Sister maeJoy B. withU attended the 10:00am Mass at Most Holy Redeemer Parish (hereinafter cited as «MHR»). MHR has a long reputation of serving the gay and lesbian community. Since the 1980s it has worked to educate the community about HIV/AIDS and has special services throughout the year for PWAs (Most Holy Redeemer, 2016). The Parish describes itself as «an *inclusive Catholic community* embracing all people of good faith, Catholics as well as those people interested in learning about the Catholic experience regardless of their background, gender, gender identity, race, social status or sexual orientation» (Most Holy Redeemer, 2016). On this Sunday in early October, the newly appointed Archbishop Niederauer is celebrating the Eucharist. At the moment of distribution of the Host, Sisters Delta and maeJoy stood reverently in line with other

communicants. They approach the Archbishop who gave them the consecrated Host. There is video of this event. How odd! Someone in the congregation seems to have used their cell phone to videotape the moment of individual devotion when the Sisters received the consecrated Body of Jesus. The video went viral on the internet and right wing Roman Catholic groups were outraged.

The extremist Roman Catholic group *Quamdiu Domine* posted the video and it was picked up by US television host Bill O'Reilly who stated on his Fox Network program: «Certainly the 65 million American Catholics should be deeply offended by the city's behaviour» (Bajko, 2007). O'Reilly didn't blame the Archbishop. Instead, he blamed the city of San Francisco as a city run by «far-left secular progressives who despise the military, traditional values and religion» (Guthrie, 2007). On 19 October, the Archbishop published a letter in *Catholic San Francisco* apologising for giving communion to these two Sisters:

Although I had seen photographs of members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, I had never encountered them in person until Oct. 7. I did not recognize who these people were when they approached me. After the event, I realized that they were members of this particular organization and that giving them Holy Communion had been a mistake. I apologize to the Catholics of the Archdiocese of San Francisco and to Catholics at large for doing so (Imbelli, 2007)

The afternoon of the event, Sister Delta Goodhand sent an email to MHR:

Your entire congregation was so welcoming and it was great to be able to participate in the mass [sic]. The service was absolutely beautiful and I know that I personally walked away very inspired by both the Archbishop's message and the angelic voices of your choir ringing in my ears! Amazing! (Bajko, 2007).

The ensuing debate rehearses the argument over whether or not the Sisters were mocking nuns—even the Archbishop claims in his letter that the Sisters mocked women religious—. Bill O'Reilly's diatribe, however, shifts the debate onto the city of San Francisco.

Taking the events at MHR as an example, he claims San Francisco is outside of the mainstream of US values.

*The Gospel of Queer Experience*  
*Praise to You Spirit of Queerness*

The Sisters, wherever they exist, stir controversy of this type, but the San Francisco Mother House represents San Francisco's diverse cultures as well and the Sisters are often brought into US culture wars over morality and politics. Even though the Sisters attended the Mass of their own volition, they showed respect and reverence in their participation. They wore their ceremonial black habits — something they do on great occasions. They affirmed and enacted the MHR's commitment to diversity. They were expressing the mutual interest and dedication to service to which both the Sisters and MHR are dedicated. For years, MHR had even offered their hospitality to the Sisters who held their popular monthly bingo nights in the parish hall of MHR — that is until Archbishop Niederauer put a stop to all that frivolity.

It probably does not matter whether the Sisters carried themselves respectfully during the Mass. Their very presence was offensive to some Roman Catholic groups. Their campy makeup and dress, even though it was relatively understated, signifies queerness in a way that the casual dress of other parishioners does not. However, the Mass took place in the context of the Castro Street Fair that occurred later that same day. The Castro Street Fair was started by Harvey Milk in 1974 to celebrate the Castro neighbourhood. Street Fairs are common in San Francisco where people occupy the streets, vendors sell food and drinks and local businesses set up booths to sell their wares. In addition to bringing thousands of people to the Castro District, the Castro Street Fair also invites donations for local charities (Castro Street Fair, 2016). As a day dedicated to the queer community, the Mass at MHR takes on new meaning. The Mass is a Mass for the queer community. The Sisters' presence at the Mass at MHR was their way of participating in the spiritual celebration of the queer community and performs an affirmation of the community to whom they have taken vows to serve.

Compared to ACT UP New York's «Stop the Church» demonstration inside St. Patrick's Cathedral nearly twenty years earlier, the Sisters' participation in the Mass can seem rather mild. In 1989, nearly 5,000 ACT UP activists stood inside the Cathedral blowing whistles drowning out the sermon given by Cardinal John O'Connor. In 1989, ACT UP was challenging the Roman Catholic Church's opposition to condom use and homosexuality. In 2007, the Sisters were joining the members of Most Holy Redeemer parish in welcoming the new Archbishop to San Francisco. The Sisters participated in the Mass with respect and stood out from the parishioners only because they were dressed in their formal habits. First, it is important to note that the difference between the 1989 ACT UP demonstration and the participation in the Mass at MHR in 2007 does not reflect a dampening of criticism against the Roman Catholic Church's teachings on condom use and homosexuality. Second, it does not reflect a warming of relations between the Sisters and the Roman Catholic Church. What it shows is the Sisters' respect for the gay and lesbian parishioners at MHR, the Sisters' performance of their vow to serve the community, and their affirmation of the role of spirituality in the lives of queer people. The Sisters' presence and participation in the Holy Communion sent a signal to the Archbishop that, like it or not, the Sisters are part of the queer community. The act of participating in the spiritual life of MHR represents overlapping ministries that converged in the ritual space of MHR parish church. The Archbishop's apology for distributing Holy Common to the Sisters symbolizes an intransigent Roman Catholic Church. The Sisters' email response to the parishioners of MHR conveys their gratitude for the hospitality they received at the parish. The Roman Catholic parish takes on paradoxical meanings. For a parish that is largely made up of queer people to welcome the Sisters demonstrates the parish's wide-open hospitality while the Archbishop's apology demonstrates the unwillingness of the Roman Catholic Church, as an institution, to be as welcoming.

These two performances —hospitality and hostility— convey competing ideologies of the use of sacred spaces. Sociologist Bernard Giesen (2006) writes that «[s]patial modes of symbolic representation assume that there are particular material objects or places that are fused with sacrality, that recall past worlds or

promise future ones and thus embody collective identity» (323). By participating in the Mass at MHR on the day of the Castro Street Fair, the Sisters' performed an affirmation of the values of diversity and dignity for all people that represents the values both of MHR and the queer community. The debate over the appropriateness of their attendance at the Mass rests on the fault line of the sacred and profane as Giesen notes. The Sisters respected the sacredness of the Mass but, in the opinions of conservative Roman Catholics, because of what the Sisters stand for, they were seen as profane intrusions into both sacred space and sacred time. The Sisters unhinge this debate by performatively refusing to obey the rules over what is sacred and what is profane. They do not simply overturn or reverse the sacred/profane dichotomy. Rather, and this is what I believe to be the unspoken controversy, they infuse the sacred with different ideas of what ought to be assigned to sacred space and sacred time. Queerness is not usually considered in relation to the sacred apart from work done from within queer religious studies and queer theologies. However, the queering of the sacred is a project that affirms that queer people's spirituality matters and the Sisters' rituals recognise and honour the sacredness of all life—their vows to expiate stigmatic guilt—and this is the reason and purpose for their performances of affirmation.<sup>12</sup>

## *Affection*

The Sisters' affectionate politics respond to feelings and experiences of suffering caused by social injustice, discrimination and stigma. As I mentioned above, utopian performatives provide audience and actors the chance to create new images of the world, to stop for a moment, in the space of performance, and critique the way things are and incite new ways of being and living. Affectionate politics, rooted in embodied feelings of suffering, name those experiences of suffering as such and appeal to different ways to respond to social crises by appealing to these inner feelings

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<sup>12</sup> The conversations between religious / theological studies and queer theory are disproportionately one-sided. Queer theorists rarely engage religious and theological scholarship, although there are exemplary texts. See: Jeremy R. Carrette (1999); Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini (2003); and Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini (2004).

of suffering. Affectionate politics also offers new visions of how to live one's life that acknowledge that suffering, although caused by institutionalized discrimination, can be ameliorated by acting and thinking in new ways. An example that illustrates this approach to activism is the Sisters' Condom Saviour Consecration and Vow. This Vow was written in 1991 by Sister Xplosion in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis and offers participants an image of the condom as saviour.

### *Liturgy of the Condom Saviour Vow*

We have gathered here today to consecrate and receive the Holy Communion Condom.

As I take it unto myself, so shall I keep its ritual sacred.

The condom is a part of my life, part of my responsibility now.

If I desire to live, and let my sex partners live, I must sanctify my vow to hold the Condom Saviour eternal.

My seed is under siege by a horrific virus.

Let me not become horrific as well, with careless disregard for my life and the lives of those with whom I share the divine gift of love.

My life is to promulgate universal joy and expiate myself from stigmatic guilt and His kindness is alive and I must protect His handiwork.

I vow to look into my heart and further into my soul, where I know that my humanity and salvation depend on how sacred I hold the Condom Saviour vow.

Everyone repeat after me:

Latex equals sex

Latex equals life

Latex equals love

Praise be!

The Condom Saviour Vow was first performed in Paris in June 1991 when Sister Xplosion, Sister Vicious and Sister Psychedelia attended the inauguration of the Couvent de Paris of the Soeurs de la Perpetuelle Indulgence (The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, 1978-2016). In the history of AIDS, 1991 saw the US Food and Drug Administration approved a new drug called dideoxycytidine (ddC) for treating HIV positive people whose bodies could no longer tolerate AZT. Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* premiered at the Eureka Theater in San Francisco in

May 1991 (Kushner, 2003). In November, basketball player Earvin «Magic» Johnson publicly admitted that he had tested positive for HIV and vowed to use his celebrity status to spread messages of prevention.

The Condom Saviour Vow is a key example of the Sisters' affectionate politics. As a vow, it asks those participating in the ritual to promise to use condoms to protect themselves and the ones they love. As a ritual, it bears witness to the feelings of being «under siege» and the «horrific» result of this intrusion into the intimate lives of gay men. As a public performance, it enacts a utopian performative constructing a community of feeling, supporting one another in what was, in 1991, the continued onslaught of a virus with few treatment options. The condom was, for many gay men at the time, the only thing they could use to stop the spread of the virus.

A psychological study of gay men in San Francisco in 1991 demonstrated that, at that time, gay men who had more informal social support networks were more likely to have higher rates of condom use (Catania et al., 1991). These men were also more likely to be HIV positive and more likely to have had a feeling of responsibility not to spread the virus to others. This sense of responsibility for oneself and for one's community is the heart of the Condom Saviour Vow. The Vow, in both its content and in its performance, represents one way gay men could find social support for the ongoing struggle to live with HIV and live with the desire not to infect others. In an essay written in 1991, AIDS activist, Simon Watney (1994) noted that the social and cultural narratives of AIDS:

belong essentially to the orders of pre-modern thought, which have long posed the sick as essentially dangerous individuals. Thus AIDS has tended to be narrated in a heavily over-determined manner, in which highly charged fantasies of gay men and prostitutes and junkies as uniformly predatory seducers of the «innocent» and «vulnerable» are woven together with ancient folkloric notions of disease as retribution, and deep cultural fears of contagion (198).

Some elements of the idea of «gay men as contagion» could be interpreted as central to the *Condom Saviour Vow*, for example,

the line «let me not become horrific as well.» However, the ritual is concerned with stopping the spread of the virus among gay men and affirming that sex between gay men is about responsibility to themselves and their community. The *Condom Saviour Vow* creates new images of condoms, as sex, life, and love. These were not, and are not, the most popular images of condoms, demonstrating the continued potential impact of the Sisters' rituals on AIDS discourse.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

This article on the performances of social activism by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence has explored three modes in different times and places. The *agitational* aspect of activism represented by Sister Florence Nightmare / Bobbi Campbell's speech outside the 1984 Democratic Party Convention in San Francisco challenges the Democratic Party and right wing fundamentalist Christians with a different vision of US society. He names the social situation of PWAs and their struggle for dignity and rights. The performance geography of his speech demonstrates the utopian performative of invoking rights when PWAs were continuing to be marginalised by politicians and by some in their own communities, and summons a public audience to rally to the support of PWAs. The *affirmation* aspect of the Sisters' activism, like their participation in the Mass at MHR, represents their willingness to interrupt the sacred/profane dichotomy and to embody hospitality and welcome. The Sisters affirm the dignity of queer people's lives, the «San Francisco» values of diversity and the role that spirituality plays in many queer people's lives. The performance geography of the Sisters' affirmative activism demonstrates that even Roman Catholic parishes are part of the queer community in San Francisco. The Sisters' *affectionate* activism, embodied in their *Condom Saviour Vow*, shows the motivation behind so many of their public performances and the Sisters' deep love for queer community.

Bobbi Campbell's speech, the safer sex guide, the Sisters' participation in Holy Communion at MHR parish and the *Condom Saviour Vow* are all invocations and embodiments of utopian performances of the ethics of a queer community. Each of these performances enact ideas and images of nation, city, community



and self that counter dominant discourses and situated practices in US society. The political struggles in which the Sisters have participated, from HIV/AIDS to religious-based oppression, are the struggles for queer communities to identify who they are, what they want to be and where they want to be located. The Sisters have helped identify queer political issues, have led struggles to identify and keep queer community spaces and have accompanied queer people along the historical journey toward visibility and potential freedom. The Sisters have challenged the slogans that HIV Equals Death, that Homosexuality is a Sin, that Queers are Unhappy. Along this journey, the Sisters have helped queer people remember the rewards of visibility and acceptance and the possibilities of new forms of kinship and belonging within queer community spaces at different scales. The Sisters have also accompanied queer people through the difficult moments of queer community life: the loss of lives to HIV/AIDS, violence and drug abuse and the toll on physical and emotional health brought on by guilt, shame and hatred. The Sisters' unique brand of social activism draws on the secular and the spiritual, sacred clowning and a drag queen-like campy brand of US political activism to live out their sacred vows in such a way that not only changes people's perceptions of queerness and queer affections, their activism and ministry challenges all people—queer and non-queer alike—to reconsider, re-cognize, and re-en-ACT what an ethics of community can be.

*A-men, A-women, and All the rest. Blessed be.*

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