"Go Forth and Sin Some More!" A Performance Geography of the San Francisco Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

Jason B. Crawford

A Thesis in the Humanities Program

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

May 2011

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE
STUDIES

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By: **Jason B. Crawford**

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Frances Shaver **Chair**

Amelia Jones **External Examiner**

Donald Boisvert **External to Program**

Julie Podmore **Examiner**

Edward Little **Examiner**

Thomas Waugh **Thesis Supervisor**

Approved by

Erin Manning
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Dean of Faculty

Abstract

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Jason B. Crawford, PhD
Concordia University, 2011

This thesis is a performance geography of the San Francisco Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Founded in 1979, the Order is a group of queer nuns who take vows to "expiate stigmatic guilt, spread universal joy and commit to serve the community." The Order now counts thirty-seven chapters around the world, each "house" reflecting the social and cultural context of its locale. The San Francisco house is considered the "mother house" of the Order and this thesis will focus solely on the mother house. The Order is recognizable for their whiteface makeup and distinctive wimples and veils. They employ the traditions of street theatre, clowning and drag to raise money for local community organisations and causes. Known for their pioneering work in the early 1980s on safer sex campaigns, the Sisters have been at the forefront of AIDS activism in San Francisco and continue to raise people's consciousness about discrimination and homophobia.

Performance geography is a way of mapping how performances give places meaning and how people make meaning through cultural performances, and the thesis explores several of the Sisters' rituals and ceremonies in their geographic contexts. After an Introduction outlining the performance geography approach and a Chapter on the history, organisation and aesthetic styles of the Sisters, I describe the Sisters' roles as nuns, clowns and activists—Chapters 3, 4, and 5 take up each of these roles specifically. Each chapter manouevres between a performance-based autoethnographic "voice" to

evoke my experiences as an observer/audience member at several of these performances and an academic "voice." Performances are analysed through the lenses of queer studies, performance, and cultural geography in order to provide an interpretation that: 1.) maps the spaces of queer community in San Francisco through the performances of the Sisters; 2.) sheds light on the constitution of "community" in these performances; and 3.) critically analyses the intersubjective relationship between the Sisters and those who attend their performances. In the Conclusion, I discuss how queer performance geography contributes to the analysis of cultural practices, point to its limits and address ways in which this approach can be applied to the study of cultural performances in other social dramas.

Acknowledgements

I owe an immense debt of gratitude first of all to my doctoral thesis committee who joined me in this conversation, who contributed hours of intellectual and moral support and who shared my highs and lows in this process with patience, calm, and unwavering support. Ted Little's friendship and collegiality introduced me to Canadian hospitality early on in my studies and made my transition to life here easy. His passion for social justice and for the art of teaching is inspirational. I hope that his skills with the written word have rubbed off on me and found their way into this thesis. I first read Julie Podmore's work in Berkeley and, over the years, I have grown to appreciate Julie not only as a first-rate scholar, but also as a friend. Julie has received my over-enthusiastic musings on geography with mutual excitement and I have learned much from her encyclopaedic knowledge of geography and Montreal history as well as from her infectious geographic imagination. I hope that this thesis is as inspiring for her as her intellect has been for me. Finally, I struggle to find the words to acknowledge the tremendous amount of support that Tom Waugh has so freely given to me throughout my time at Concordia. From the moment I met him to the many behind-the-scenes machinations on my behalf, I have been overwhelmed by his generosity. For all the hugs when I didn't think I could carry on, for the awe-inspiring dedication to the success of your students, thank you. To an admirable and honourable man who uses his powers for good, I hope this manuscript is the "dynamite thesis" that you are owed.

To my family in the United States, thank you for always loving me and supporting me. Your love helped me endure the difficulties of being a bookish Southern boy with a dramatic flair. To my mother, Suzanne Crawford, thank you for giving me

life and making it good. To Ryan and Vicky Crawford, thank you for constantly urging me to "hurry up and write that paper." To Poppaw, thank you for teaching me about the world in which you grew up and for inspiring a respect for Native American cultures and traditions. To the rest of my family, thank you for your love and encouragement.

To my new family in Canada, thank you for welcoming me into your circle of love. I will always be grateful for the happiness you have brought me. To Leonard Johnston and Susan Héguy for offering support, advice, guidance and for accepting me as your son-in-law. To Cory Johnston, Angela Héguy-Johnston, Christopher Curtis and Daniel Petrella, thank you for helping me feel at-home in my new home. Also, to Dutch, Casey, Calpurnia and Brownie, thank you for your unconditional love.

Although the list of friends who have supported me in so many ways since my days in seminary in Virginia, in Berkeley and in Montreal is too lengthy, I must include those without whom, I could not have achieved the end of this particular journey. Friends from my seminary days: Ann Gibbs, Amelia B. Cannon, Dr. Donna DeSarro-Raynal, Zach and Treva Sasser, David and Mandy Ealy, Sean and Carrie Smith-Coons, Jason Harvey, John and Lolimarta Reiter, Camille LeBron and Clint Mitchell—thank you all for your solidarity and for being brave advocates for LGBT people and also for all those times at Dot's! Friends from my Berkeley days: Tom Longino, Molly Haws, Liza Stein, Peter Schell, Rondesia Jarrett, Hanna Smidt, and Joshua Hurni—thank you for sharing your impressive intellects and for all the love and good times. Friends in Montreal: Karen Herland, queer sister; Thomas Haig, dear friend; Jennifer Wilkes, intellectual sparring partner and adventurous friend; Melody Fletcher, who makes me happy and whom I admire greatly; and Anne Golden, fellow lover of scary movies.

I have been incredibly blessed to have had teachers who were dedicated to intellectual rigour and to the love of learning who inspired me to become a teacher. In elementary school: John Northcutt and Sally Cain. In high school: Laura I. Hodges. In university: Dr. Bonnie Todd. I have been blessed to have had teachers who were also social justice activists who supported me when I came out of the closet while in seminary: Dr. Frances Taylor-Gench, Dr. Pamela Mitchell-Legg, Dr. Isabelle "Izzy" Rogers, Dr. Craig Stein, and Dr. Susan Fox. In Berkeley, Dr. Allan Pred opened up my geographic imagination and showed me a new world that continues to breathe creative life into my work. He is deeply missed. Finally, Dr. Michael Mendiola, whose struggle with illness taught me the meaning of gratitude and joy, offered care and support when I needed it the most. Michael was a fierce friend whose love of life translated into an unwavering dedication to his students and his friends. Michael exemplified how one could be an openly gay man within religious institutions, how to be a compassionate teacher and how to do scholarship committed to "difficult listening and difficult speaking." Michael and his husband Paul opened their home and hearts to me and for that, I will be eternally grateful.

Finally, thanks to the San Francisco house of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence who inspired the thesis topic and who showed me the meaning of queer community. In particular, I want to thank the following Sisters: Edith Myflesh, Mary Timothy Simplicity, Constance Craving of the Holey Desire, Hellen Wheels, Lily White Superior Posterior, Sybill Libertease, Ann R. Key, Roxan Rolls, Mary Mae Himm, and Gina Tonic the Sparkling.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to two people who have given me immeasurable support and love, without which I would never have been able to reach the end of this process:

To Buppy, who did not live to see the finished thesis, but who accompanied me in spirit. For her eternal love and for her eternal presence, I will always be grateful. Thank you for being my grandmother, my guide in Southern hospitality, my couch-buddy for countless viewings of *The Sound of Music*, and for showing me how to be a gentleman.

To Eric, my husband, who accompanied me in the last few and most difficult years of the writing. Thank you for your not-so-subtle encouragement, your laughter, your celebrations of my little successes along the way, for the happiness you have given me, and for showing me what it means to be loved.

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Pre)Facing the Reader[1]

This is a story about the San Francisco Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. The Sisters were founded in 1979 by three gay men who "borrowed" Catholic nun habits from a convent in Iowa on their way to San Francisco. Once there, they paraded on nude beaches wearing the habits, roller skated down the city's rolling hills and became a popular movement of merrymaking, consciousness-raising and an effective charity organisation. Over the years, the Sisters have been influenced by the Radical Faeries and gay and lesbian activism as well as by centuries-old traditions of European clowning, Native American tricksterism, drag and camp. Despite their arresting style and boisterous personas, they have become well-respected as community activists, even to the point of being called on to perform blessings at Mayoral inauguration ceremonies. Since the 1990s, the Sisters have also expanded to include thirty-six chapters in Australia and the UK, France, Germany, Uruguay, Columbia, and recently Canada.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are contemporary queer nuns. They take life-long vows to spread universal joy, expiate stigmatic guilt and commit themselves to serving their communities. Each chapter of the Order of Indulgence, called houses or convents, adopts its own aesthetic style, responding to the specific culture of each locale. They are united, under the inspiration and guidance of the Mother House (the original house) in San Francisco, by their commitment to their vows and to perpetual manifestation—appearing in public in their unique habits and veils (and usually with their striking whiteface makeup). They employ the traditions of street theatre, clowning and

1. I have borrowed this and other neologisms from geographer Allan Pred's performative/montage-style writing. He uses "(Pre)Facing" in his book *Even in Sweden: Racisms, Racialized Spaces, and the Popular Geographical Imagination* (2000, xi). For more information on the meaning and use of Pred's neologisms, see page 33 in this thesis.

drag to raise money for local community organisations and causes. Known for their pioneering work in the early 1980s on safer sex campaigns, the Sisters have been at the forefront of AIDS activism in San Francisco and continue to raise people's consciousness about discrimination and homophobia.

This is also a story about me, a gay man who grew up embedded in the Christian fundamentalism of the Southern United States and made my way to the San Francisco Bay Area for doctoral studies and encountered the Sisters as I explored the cultural fabric of that West coast queer urban centre. In many ways, the Sisters became part of my everyday experience of life in San Francisco (I chose to attend their events when I could but I also frequently "bumped" into them) and, through their impressive body of work and inspiring commitment to joy and service, they insinuated themselves, so to speak, into my academic studies until, one day, I felt it was impossible to ignore the fact that I was "called" to study the organisation's history and performance culture. I say that I was called because the Sisters were fascinating to me not only as a gay man who had a growing sense of his own inner drag queen or who was interested in queer political performances, but also as a burgeoning queer academic who was powerfully drawn to their witness to the lives of queer people.

And this is also a story about performance geography. Performance geography was developed by Jamaican cultural theorist Sonjah Stanley-Niaah in her experiences of Dancehall culture in Kingston. For Stanley-Niaah, Dancehall is not just an event where people gather to dance to music. From her years of going to Dancehalls and through her academic exploration of its histories and practices, she recognised that people who participated in Dancehall were participating in a long history of slaveship dancing (such

as the limbo), rooted in the Black Atlantic diaspora against a backdrop of colonial exploitation and contemporary discrimination and poverty. She discovered that Dancehall was not just a musical or dance style, it was also a place where people celebrated life (in the midst of poverty) and created a sense of their own identities and communities in those Dancehall venues. Performance geography, then, is a way of mapping how performances give places meaning and how people make meaning through cultural performances. This thesis uses performance geography to tell the story of the Sisters, offering a holistic way of telling the story of the Sisters through the exploration of their rituals and ceremonies in their geographic contexts.

However, there is room to expand the study of the Sisters to include religious or theological analysis of the ways they create new spiritual communities (their adaptation of Native American and New Age and Pagan rituals) as well as a sociological analysis of the Sisters as a social activist organisation (their interior structure, their recruitment efforts, their process of responding to social issues). In contrast to the very limited research on the Sisters, this thesis seeks to contribute to an interdisciplinary dialogue on queer history, cultural geography and community-engaged performance as a way of living, as a research method and as a way of writing research (Glenn2007). The thesis, then, centres on the performance of queer space and the spatial aspects of the Sisters' queer performances and I am primarily concerned with how the Sisters' queer performances change the meanings of place. I believe this approach, even with its own limitations and blind spots, is better suited to analysing how the Sisters have, over their more than thirty-year history, interpreted, critiqued and shaped the cultural spaces in San Francisco. The performance geography approach to cultural studies remains an area for

further elaboration and this thesis contributes to the methodology of this approach to studying culture.

After an Introduction (Chapter 1) outlining the performance geography approach, my research methodology and a literature review, Chapter 2 explains the history, organisation and aesthetic styles of the Sisters. Based on my observations and attendance at various public rituals and events, I chose to study the Sisters' role in the culture and history of San Francisco. Inspired by British director, circus performer and theatre scholar, Bim Mason, I deduced three characteristic roles the Sisters perform in queer spaces (Mason 1993). These roles are explored and analysed invidivually in Chapter 3 (nuns), Chapter 4 (clowns) and Chapter 5 (activists), with analysis of their performance histories, texts and spaces. Each chapter also weaves an autoethnographic "voice" that evokes my experiences as an observer/audience member at most of these performances together with an academic "voice," situating these performances in a conversation on queer culture, geography and performance. My textual strategy includes personal narratives, eyewitness accounts of rituals and performances and the presentation of archival materials and documentary videos. I also use geographer Allan Pred's inventive (mis)spellings of words, such as "corpo-really" and "imag(e)inings," to emphasize the embodied nature of the Sisters' performance and to draw attention to the fact that the Sisters are simultaneously producing new images and different imaginings of the world (Pred 1995, 1997) Each Chapter begins with a narrative prologue drawn from my ethnographic field notes and archival materials that sets the mood of each section. Other personal narratives are arranged within each Chapter to perform a dialogue between the personal and academic "voices." This style of writing, using Pred's textual performance

montages as well as recent experiments in autoethnographic writing, offers first-person experiences alongside critical analysis to respond both to the need for new ways of writing research and to respond ethically to my experiences among the Sisters (Pred 1986; 1995; 1997; 2000). Selected performances are analysed through the lenses of queer studies, performance, and cultural geography in order to provide an interpretation that: 1) maps the spaces of queer community in San Francisco through the performances of the Sisters; 2) sheds light on the constitution of "community" in these performances; and 3) critically analyses the intersubjective relationships between the Sisters and those who attend their performances. In the Conclusion (Chapter 6), I discuss how a performance geography approach contributes to the analysis of queer culture, point to the limits of this approach and address new directions for applying this approach to the study of culture.

From the first moment that Sisters Mary Timothy blessed me with sacred oil and glitter at a Pink Saturday street party in 2002 to the day I walked into the Sisters' archives, I have been deeply moved by their performances. Even now, as I put the finishing touches on this text, the Sisters remain a comforting and stimulating presence in my life. I hope, dear reader, that as you make your way through this sometimes nomadic, sometimes personal, sometimes academic, sometimes hilarious tale of San Francisco queer cultural history, you will find the Sisters as inspiring as I have, that you will find the Sisters to be stimulating—not merely as a subject of study—but as a group of people who have served their community for over thirty years and continue to celebrate queer communities in San Francisco.

Chapter 1
Introducing the Project

Sister Hellen Wheels unlocked the door and I stepped into to the Archives of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. I couldn't believe my eyes. The room was packed with relics, statues, habit-wearing mannequins, posters, photographs, file cabinets, banners, dolls, buttons and an old photocopy machine. Once I got over the initial shock of seeing all of this, I reverently strolled around the office space (why reverently? I was in awe, like walking into Notre-Dame Cathedral for the first time). Sister Hellen opened a file cabinet that was stuffed with yellowing newspaper clippings, magazines and papers. She showed me articles describing the antics of the Sisters from the early 1980s. She picked up a small vial and told me it contained the ashes of the Barracks bathhouse—it had mysteriously burned down during the height of the AIDS-phobic debates over the future of bathhouses. Inside the tiny black bottle were ashes gathered by Sisters who had, hearing of the fire, hurried down to the smouldering wreck to reclaim some of the sacred territory of the bathhouse. It suddenly hit me: in this room, sitting on shelves, crammed into file cabinets and dripping from the ceiling were relics from over thirty years of gay and lesbian

history. I realised that I had been "called" to the Sisters to write about them, to write their story.

I. Positions

As a way of beginning the introduction to the subject of study in this thesis, I want to offer my positions as researcher and author. I do so to lay claim to the determinants of my own identity in relation to the research on the Sisters. Because of my theological training in seminaries and universities and my position as a queer-identified gay man, I drew near to the Sisters because of their sexy celebrations of life, their creative aesthetics and their bold political innovations. However, as my intellectual and personal journey took me further away from the study of religion—both institutional and popular—my growing geographic imagination and readings in performance studies pulled me closer to the Sisters not only as research subjects but also as a way to understand what we mean by queer communities, queer geographies and queer cultures.

I wish to avoid narcissism in this text. Yet the portrayal of my subject position is as an audience member and eyewitness to some of the Sisters' rituals and queer performances—asking questions, seeking answers, struggling for expressions. It is impossible to give a complete representation of the Sisters. My responses to my experiences and reflections produce incongruities with others' perspectives. There is a wide range of representations of the Sisters, from the gay news media that celebrate the Sisters to conservative Catholic groups who see the Sisters as anti-Catholic hate mongers. My own crisis of representing and analysing the Sisters is, however, due to the Sisters' tricksterism with my methods of ethnographic research. I had perceived my role as an observer, as one who ought to hover around the edges of their sacred circles, taking notes

and reflecting on them later. The Sisters were quick to deflate these expectations—drawing me directly into the sacred circle as active participant, not as a shy bystander. This is not because I willingly identified myself as a "researcher," but because audience participation is a characteristic element of both ritual and community-engaged performances. More than anything, the experience of my research with the Sisters exemplifies their own missionary position—to draw each of us out of ourselves as individuals and into the messy business of community.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to doing this research on the Sisters is that the literature on the Sisters is very thin. Cathy B. Glenn's article "Queering the (Sacred) Body Politic" is a key starting place (2007). She constructs a short version of their origins and the Sisters' initiation process. While offering clues into the inner workings of the Sisters as an organization, Glenn's analysis is focused on showing that the Sisters' performances employ both "culture" and "politics." She criticises arguments that cultural politics are "merely cultural" and demonstrates that a cultural politics like that of the Sisters has the potential to challenge discourses of heteronormativity and religious intolerance. Apart from Glenn's essay, there are numerous newspaper interviews, reports and coverage of their events, not only in San Francisco, but also in the other urban areas where there are chapters of the Order of Indulgence. Newspaper coverage documents the Sisters' events and offers direct quotations from Sisters, commenting on their rituals and events and the controversies surrounding some of these events. However, newspapers do not usually offer in depth analysis or critical reflection on social and cultural performances and, while I make use of them in this thesis, they are limited in what they, alone, can contribute to a complex and nuanced study of the Sisters.

In addition to the limited amount of scholarly research on the Sisters, it seemed, at first, that there was little in their rituals and queer performances that could relate to geographic analysis. However, the congruity between the Sisters' sense of history, place and community, introduces nuances to the study of geography and performance that requires new methods of research, analysis and writing, methods that are, as I demonstrate in the thesis, well-suited to interdisciplinary studies of place, culture and community. I accept the Sisters' gracious gift of performance which gave me a different point of view on what it is like to live out one's *calling*, something not unfamiliar to me as a former seminarian. I am grateful for their desire to play with me as a researcher (playing with my role as audience member) because, despite my initial fears over the quality of the research, they demonstrate what queer community means and inspire new ethnographic methods and open possibilities for renewed forms of kinship, meaning, belonging and identity formations. I hope this thesis does approximate justice to representing their ongoing story. The story of the Sisters is, after all, the story of a particular queer community in a particular place.

II. Approaching Performance Geography

Performance geography is an approach that emerged from recent theories and research methods in cultural studies, performance studies and geography. As noted, Stanley-Niaah developed the concept of performance geography to map the spaces used by Dancehall as a way to understand performances of Black Atlantic cultures across different histories and spaces. She defines performance geography as "how people in particular locations give those locations meaning through performance" (Stanley-Niaah

2006, 194). She includes in her definition the "interplay between spatial use, character, identity construction, and citizenry" (Stanley-Niaah 2008, 344) and theories of non-representational geography (Nash 2000 and Thrift 1997) to reconsider how we think about embodied practices within space (see Sonjah-Niaah 2004b for a demonstration of her use of non-representational theories).

Stanley-Niaah contributes to research on Dancehall by connecting histories of oppression with cultures of survival and celebration. She links histories of the slave trade with the cultural practices of survival and celebration by slaves both onboard slave ships and within the poor centres of economic depression in Kingston (Stanley-Niaah 2004a; Stanley-Niaah 2006; Stanley-Niaah 2009). She attends to popular dance styles and shows their lineage from slave celebrations to contemporary West African and South African choreographies (2004b; 2008; 2009). In addition, her writings on Dancehall include a map of the interiors/exteriors of a typical dancehall site that illustrate the uses of the performance space by the participants. Mapping the space of performance is a useful contribution to our knowledge of Dancehall culture because it visually represents the spatial arrangements in a typical dancehall space, showing the relationship between the built environment and the people who use the space—including vendors, models, dancers, spectators and DJs. Stanley-Niaah's work also presents genealogies of Dancehall musical and dance styles across borders as they circulate through the Black Atlantic diasporas in England, the United States and in South Africa, demonstrating the trajectories of cultural diffusion (Stanley-Niaah 2004a; 2006; 2009; 2010).

Specifically, performance geography offers a human ecology of culture that analyses embodied performances, people's experiences of place and their place-making

strategies and the ways that places take on meaning through performances. Stanley-Niaah offers this more detailed definition in her recent book *Dancehall: From Slave Ship to Ghetto*:

> Performance geography provides innovative ways to conceptualize space, place and their interconnectedness. It is about the link between the self, identity, place and certain acts. Developing a perspective on the link between location and performance requires engagement with individual and collective power that transforms a space into a place through acts of display. In looking at the ways in which people living in specific contexts give those locations identity through performance, I analyze the interplay between spatial use, character, citizenry, identity construction and community building strategies. I use performance geography to refer to a mapping of the material and spatial conditions of performance: entertainment and ritual in specific sites/venues, types and systems of use, the politics of their location in relation to other sites and other practices, the character of events/rituals in particular locations, and the manner in which different performances and performers relate to each other within and across different cultures. (Stanley-Niaah 2010, 33)

Stanley-Niaah notes the shared cultural heritage of contemporary dance movements and their antecedents in African slave ship dances as well as African choreographies. Stanley-Niaah refers to this shared heritage as "boundarylessness" which links current cultural performances of dancehall to the Black Atlantic diaspora, making joyful celebration and creating identities within harsh economic and social conditions (2004b,

1). In other words, these bodily performances (re)enact the past through references to performances linked to the cultural history of the diaspora. These performances contest marginalization through celebratory rituals and help to define a Jamaican national identity—one that is diffused around the world through the marketing of dancehall music and the adoption of its dance moves (Stanley-Niaah 2004; Stanley-Niaah 2006; Stanley-Niaah 2008a).

Stanley-Niaah's performance geography approach to culture also works well for queer studies. Queer people also enact this type of trans-history through contemporary cultural performances. Drag queens and kings rehearse a long tradition of playing with gender on stage and in bars (Rupp and Taylor 2003, 179-188). The hanky code persists as both a commodity item and as a fetish, marking its role in the preservation of coded games of queer self-presentation and community identification. Lesbian aesthetics of hair and the butch-femme personas remain symbolic of women's desire to construct their own identities apart from the male gaze as well as constructing their own spaces—places of leisure and social interaction (See: Trotka, LeBesco, and Noble 2002; Case 2000; Garber 1992). And gay neighbourhoods around the world signal the historical practice of queers carving out space for themselves within hetero-patriarchal public places. Despite the myriad problems associated with acts of claiming space—white male privilege and neoliberal economics to say the least—gay neighbourhoods are stratified by different types of places, used by different types of people for different purposes, and therefore cannot be classified as either wholly assimilationist spaces or entirely as spaces of radical resistance.[2] Despite the unevenness of the makeup of these neighbourhoods, hegemonic

2. The literature of gay, lesbian and queer places and cities is extensive. For a selection of representative scholarly texts, see the following: on rural and small towns, see Stein 2001; on Christchurch, NZ, see

powers and privileges work through specific practices to mark these areas in particular ways, leading to the marketing of cities, like San Francisco or Montreal, as "LGBT-friendly" destinations for tourists of all sexualities. I will attend to some of these power relations throughout the thesis, particularly race, class, and gender identity in relation to the political activism of the San Francisco Sisters.

Queer people share similar stories of decentred subjectivities. We are often alienated within our own biological families, in our work places and in our social lives, unless we make our own families, homes and communities (Weston 1991; Douglas 1999; Constantine-Sims 2000; Phelan 2001; Wilcox 2003). We have created social networks across cities, regions, nations and cultures grounded in our desire to recognize one another, and in our desire to appear to others who share similar experiences of living in a hetero-patriarchal world. Recognizing and attending to our multiple subjectivities and our ways of living and relating to one another carries with it political possibilities, as Larry Knopp and Michael Brown demonstrate in their comparative research on urban and rural gay and lesbian social networks. Understanding the ways in which queers live, relate, make culture and construct biographies, "has the potential to reveal a great deal about the limits and hidden power relations implicit in many otherwise critically informed approaches to these issues" (Knopp and Brown 2003, 420). With reference to this shared yet different history, queers as subjects-in-historically-and–culturally-contingent-process, construct stories and practices of survival, resistance and celebration that lend hope to challenging hetero-patriarchal norms and values.

Brown 2000; on Cape Town, see Elder 2003, 2005 and Tucker 2009; for London, see Houlbrook 2006; on New York City, see Chauncey 1994; for lesbians in Montreal, see Podmore 2001 and Montreal gay and lesbian histories, see Demczuk and Remiggi 1998; on Manchester, UK, see Binnie and Skeggs 2006; on San Francisco, see Califia 1997 and Rubin 1991, 1998, and 2000. For collections that cover a variety of topics on queer space, see Bell and Valentine 1995 and Ingram, et al 1997.

However, it would not be useful to describe this shared experience of decentred subjectivity as anything like the production of a queer "diaspora." Diaspora presumes an original geographic point of origin (Africa, Israel, etc.) as well as some form of forced migration (slavery, persecution, etc). Queers also inhabit classed, racialized and gendered subject positions and "diaspora," used in this way, fails to articulate the multiple relations of power among varied queer lives. Rather than diaspora, I propose we think, along with Knopp and Brown, about *queer diffusions*—"the spread of phenomena through space and time" (Knopp and Brown 2003, 409). So thinking about queer phenomena—such as sexual cultures, relationships, and politics—should also be thought alongside critical analysis of hegemonic structures of race, class, gender and ability, particularly paying attention to the cross-national shared biographies of difference, stigmatization, and marginalization alongside our place-making, home-making, friend- and family-making, and culture-making practices (Knopp and Brown 2003, 409-424). These spatially situated practices influence the meanings we make of our sense of ourselves and are rooted in how we react to and are governed by relations of power in everyday life.

In addition to contemporary performative acts with residual links to past survival and celebratory strategies, Stanley-Niaah's performance geography approach also draws attention to the bodies of the dancers (Stanley-Niaah 2004a, 112-113; Stanley-Niaah 2004b, 124-128). The dance moves she discusses are linked to the Black Atlantic diasporic cultures situated in the dancehall sites (and also in the shebeens, juke joints) located at the margins of "respectable" Jamaican society (See Stanley-Niaah 2005 on the moral geography of "slackness" in Jamaican culture). Focusing on the manoeuvres

themselves places the embodiment of situated practices in a central place in her analysis. Stanley-Niaah acknowledges discourses of slavery and resistance cultures as well as the power relations within Jamaican society that seek to police the bounds of respectability by temporarily raiding dancehall sites as well as the struggles between armed gangs for territories within the poor neighbourhoods where dancehall originated. What is useful for further developing performance geography as both a subject of analysis and as a method of interpretation, is that she centres her research on the embodied actions and movements of the dances themselves. Her attention to the body of the dancer takes her analysis beyond a static interpretation of historical lineage and classification of cultural practices. Instead, Stanley-Niaah asks that we come to an understanding of dancehall—its meanings, rituals, practices, histories and places—not only as a system of codes and signs but also as performances of community, identity, politics and history. Performance understood this way gives bodily agency to the people she is describing, articulates the ways that bodies communicate ideas and histories and acknowledges the ephemeral character of performance.

On the one hand, performance geography joins performances studies in creatively analysing that which moves, sweats, dances or, in other words, that which gives performance its dynamism. As Stanley-Niaah writes, "[s]pace is a central concern for geography, and performance is a vital part of human existence, so a mapping of the nexus created by these elements is crucial to our understanding of humanity and the sociocultural systems that humanity has fashioned" (Stanley-Niaah 2010, 34). If we think of this nexus as embodied—process, becoming, flow, dynamism, desire, drive, urge—then we must think about how to attend to performance as something

geographically situated that emerges and lasts for a few moments then recedes into memory. This is central to cutting-edge work in performance studies. Peggy Phelan, Jill Dolan and David Román have theorised the process of remembering our experiences of performances and how we as individuals piece the shady images in our minds together that create new kinds of performances (Phelan 1993; 1997; Dolan 1988; Román 1998). On the other hand, what performance geography brings to performance studies is a focus on the relations between performance and the sites of performance. Recent work in performance studies has begun to focus on the complexities of site-specific performances as well as the spaces that performances create (Fuoss 1997; Pearson and Shanks 2001; Kwon 2002; McKinnie, 2007; Kershaw 2008). Since performance geography takes seriously both situated practices and embodiment *as* performance, this approach to cultural studies focuses on different scales of performance spaces and the variations and choreographies of embodiment in those spaces. Stanley-Niaah's analysis of dancehall dance moves acknowledges macro-global scales of cultural flows and histories of marginalization along with spaces of global cultural markets and the diffusion of dancehall culture beyond Jamaica. She attends to intermediary scales of the politics within the Kingston neighbourhoods and the organisation of dancehall spaces themselves. Finally, her analysis includes a discussion of the micro-negotiations of dancers both with each other and the music.

To summarize, Stanley-Niaah's recent body of work on dancehall cultures introduces performance geography as an approach to studying cultural performances and geographies. She shows that dancehall: 1) re-enacts the past through practices and rituals of a shared cultural history among the Black Atlantic diaspora; 2) resists marginalisation

and helps define Jamaican national identity; 3) mobilizes the diaspora by integrating responses to the Pan-African experience by means of translocal cultural practices; and 4) is a place where a particular community's identity, history and culture are performed, negotiated and affirmed. These activities are similar to the practices of queers who experience life as de-centred subjects in a context of political, social and religious marginalisation, but who also have a shared cultural legacy of resisting stigmatization through cultural practices, and who have developed a repertoire of translocal cultural practices (drag, camp humour, neighbourhoods and other social places).

What, then, does "queer" add to a performance geography approach and what does performance geography bring to queer studies? Since Stanley-Niaah's performance geography approach emerged from her research on Dancehall culture in Jamaica, it is necessary to distinguish my use of her approach and extend this research to an analysis of the construction of queer community by means of performance. My queer performance geography approach gleans from Stanley-Niaah's work attention to both the translocal diffusions of cultural performances with their residual historical choreographies and the movements of bodies that constitute the everyday *habitus* of cultural practices within site-specific locales. I do this in order to think about queerness, community and identity through their spatialised and embodied performance practices. Writers such as Judith Butler (1990; 1993; 2004) and Elizabeth Grosz (1995) have made significant and influential contributions to thinking about the materiality of the body and its relation to discourses of sexuality and gender. What many queer theories following Butler lack, however, is the consideration of the dynamism of a corpo-really situated analysis of

performativity.[3] Yet, it is not only that Butler's concept of performativity has not addressed corpo-really situated practices, it is that she reduces the ebb and flow of emotions and the ambiguities of desire to discourse, that poses a problem for my concerns in this thesis.[4] Feminist and queer geographers have offered theories and insights into the nexus of performance, sexuality, body, gender and space, that shift the way we think about the relationship between discourse and performance and (re)focus our attention on bodily acts within their historically and spatially situated contexts.

One feminist geographer's work that helps us think about performance, sex, sexuality, desire and space without reducing culture to discourse is Gillian Rose's essay "Performing Space" (Rose 1999). Rose argues that Butler's understanding of the performative is spatial. Rose suggests that we consider space to be performative which, like gender, is also governed by sedimentary norms that can be disrupted by challenging their regulatory power (Rose 1999, 248). Rose offers a sympathetic critique of Butler's use of performativity in relation to thinking about space, but she challenges Butler's theory of performativity as being reduced to the level of the discursive (based as it is on Austin's and Derrida's theories of language as constitutive of "reality"). Since Butler's concept of the body is a consequence of discourse and her notion of the subject is both a product of, and regulated by, discourse, then, as Rose (following Joan Copjec) contends, all bodies/subjects are able to be fully known and fully exposed to critique: "[i]f all is discursive, all is also amenable to the critic who knows how discourse works; and if

3. See Knopp and Brown's essay "Queer Diffusions" which argues that "many queer theorists continue to implicitly to work with rather limited and hierarchical notions of diffusion, in which centralized forms of power more or less determine the geographical patterns whereby subjectivities, cultures, and politics spread. Yet more critical approaches to diffusion actually have much to offer queer studies and queer theory" (2003, 409).

4. I write the word "corpo-really," borrowed from geographer Allan Pred, to emphasize that the kinds of situated practices under discussion in this thesis are embodied (corporeal) with material ("real") effects. See page 33 of the thesis for full explanation of my use of Pred's neologisms.

subjectivity is produced through discourse then all subjects can also be fully known" (Rose 1999, 251). This omniscient "critic" is at odds, Rose claims, with Butler's deconstructionist approach to subjectivity and Rose likens it to the operations of a phallocentric structural logic, one that Butler is heavily invested in dismantling (Rose 1999, 253).

Rose draws on the writings of Luce Irigaray and Kaja Silverman for ways to articulate that which is on the edge of discourse—that which cannot be reduced to speech—to break away from the dualism of the knowable and unknowable and to dislodge the operations of power that are concentrated in the "knowledgeable critic" who can singularly define, describe and then deconstruct all reality. Beyond this, Rose seeks different imag(e)inings of the body, desire and fantasy, pointing out that our experiences of these elements often lie beyond discourse. In other words, Rose asks what might be the implications of rethinking space beyond the realm of the fully intelligible (i.e., more-than-representational)? What Rose's critique does for geography is to ask that we theorize the performance of space "beyond, as well as in, the discursive" (Rose 1999, 255). Butler's body of work offers us tools for thinking about the performance of gender within the space of the discursive, yet, as Rose's essay convincingly demonstrates, there is more to performance than the discursive. Anyone with even a minimum of experience of theatre and performance art need not be convinced of this—the experience of live theatrical performance whether on the proscenium stage or on a street corner or in a public park electrifies numerous impulses. Effective theatrical performances call forth memories, create sensations in the bodies, stimulate the imagination and inspire critical thinking about the world.

How then might the performance of gender identity and sexuality be theorised beyond the discursive and linked to the performance of space? Rose points to theories of fantasy and desire offered by Luce Irigaray and Kaja Silverman that imagine subjectivity as relational rather than discursive. Irigaray uses the image of two lips joined, yet separate, as a way to think about *desire*; desire that escapes the phallocentric logic that all phenomena can be fully known and understood. Rather, Irigaray talks about desire as flows and breaths. Rose notes that , for Irigaray, desire is "[n]either active nor passive, neither completely fused nor absolutely distinct, this morphology eludes the bipolar spatiality divided between tumescent solid and abject liquid" (Rose 1999, 254). This (what-it-is-not) image of desire allows for both containment and differentiation, a desire for the other that does not presume a singular subject desiring another singular subject, nor expects that one subject be subsumed into the other. This perspective is in direct contrast with Butler and highlights a flaw in her logic: Butler's reliance on the concept of discourse leads her to describe all phenomena as discursive, i.e., there is nothing outside discourse. Yet it does not seem useful to queer and feminist theories (including feminist geography) that desire be fully knowable in discourse because, if it is knowable, discourse limits thinking about constructing and inhabiting different kinds of relational spaces, to those spaces that transgress heteropatriarchal norms. What is needed, then, is a way to think "beyond" discourse, or at least, "at the edge" of discourse.

Rose notes how Kaja Silverman uses the notion of *fantasies* as the "mise-en-scène of desire; they are the scenarios, the settings, the articulations of desire that are impelled by the search for an irretrievable lost object" where "[t]he subject is simultaneously inside and outside the scene" (Rose 1999, 256). This allows for us to disconnect

aesthetics from their heteropatriarchal fictions, creating the opportunity not only to perform subjectivity differently, but also to desire and fantasize about those re-worked fictions (Rose 1999, 257). Fantasies, then, are the desire for particular attributes (physical, intellectual, emotional) of a body where the difference between the desiring subject and the subject of desire are at the same time connected and separated—my fantasy is the performance of my desire for that which is in relation to myself and yet is not fully me. Silverman uses the desire for the attributes of a particular lesbian body to illustrate her concept of fantasy, which can be seen in butch-femme relationships where there are desires for particular performances of the attributes of lesbian identity.

Moreover, Irigaray's notion of *desire,* as the desire to be in relation with the other, and Silverman's concept of *fantasy,* as the desire for the attributes of a particular lesbian body (Rose 1999, 255-256), are performed spatially, i.e. the performance of desire and fantasy create spatial relations that bring about the possibility of critiquing dominant spaces and imag(e)ining alternatives (Rose 1999, 258). What are the spatial relations of desire? Cultural theorist Elspeth Probyn conceives of desire as a productive spatial force:

> [I]t is what oils the lines of the social; it produces the pleats and folds which constitute the social surface we live. It is through and with desire that we figure relations of proximity to others and other forms of sociality. It is what remakes the social as a dynamic proposition, for if we live within a grid or network of different points, we live through the desire to make them connect differently. (1996, 13)

The spatial relation, then, is the nexus between bodies, desires and fantasies—the space of relating to others. Rose's critique of Butler's concept of performativity results in an

important nuance for thinking about gender/sexuality that has value for theories of performance geography.

In a similar way, Elizabeth Grosz discusses the relation between space and the body, using a Bergsonian phenomenological approach to note that,

> [s]pace makes possible different kinds of relations but in turn is transformed according to the subject's affective and instrumental relations with it. … It is our positioning within space, both as the point of perspectival access to space, and also an object for others in space, that gives the subject a coherent identity and an ability to manipulate things, including its own body parts, in space. However, space does not become comprehensible to the subject by its being the space of movement; rather, it becomes space through movement, and as such, it acquires specific properties from the subject's constitutive functioning in it. (1995, 92)

In other words, our movements through space—our performances in space—create a feeling and an idea of who we are and what that space means to us; the living in and through space renders our subjectivity knowable in relation to other subject-bodies and objects (Grosz 1995, 93).

This does not mean that we do away with discourse as a critical concept. It means that we should think about space as both a product of discourse and a producer of discourse. It also means that we should analyze the ways that space is rendered knowable through discourse beyond such static spatial categories as zones, territories and scales. We should attend to the ways in which people make meaning out of their experiences of those things that are, and are not, discursive like desire and fantasy. Desire and fantasy

are "on the edge" of discourse, as we experience them, yet they are also made knowable through, and productive of, discourses. Queer performance geography seeks to analyze the space where the "not quite discursive" and the "discursive" overlap and are incongruous to help us think of space as the effect of the body in performance (i.e., embodiment as spatialised performances), emphasizing the constitution of space by means of corpo-really situated performances.

Recent work in geography has shown interest in performance, both as a subject of study and, increasingly, as a research methodology. Nikki Gregson and Gillian Rose's essay on the use of performance/performativity in geography surveys some of the ways in which performance has been adopted by geographers (2000, 433-452). They note that most geographers have used the concept of performance along the lines of Erving Goffman's concept of performance: as theatrical metaphor that acknowledges individual actors/agents performing their identities for audiences (Gregson and Rose 2000, 433-434; 436; 438). However, they extend Judith Butler's theories of performativity in a new direction—to extend performativity to an analysis of the ways in which identities are constructed through performances in relation to structures of power *and* discourse (Gregson and Rose 2000, 434). Their interest is in developing critical human geographies that acknowledge: 1) "the provisionality of social identities, social differences and social power relations" and 2) that performers are not pre-existing agents but are, themselves, produced by relations of power (Gregson and Rose 2000, 441).

In addition, Gregson and Rose note, and here they are similar to Stanley-Niaah, that "[s]pace too needs to be thought of as brought into being through performances and as a performative articulation of power" (2000, 434). Gregson and Rose's research with

arts communities and with car-boot sale exchanges is illustrative of *how*, rather than simply *that*, space and performance are interrelated, in the sense that they show how "specific performances bring these spaces into being" (2000, 441). They write that they are concerned with performances "where the distinction between 'actor' and 'audience' is displaced, fuzzy … where power operates in a rather different, altogether less predictable manner than that implied by the reading of Foucault's account of power which currently dominates the geographical literature" (Gregson and Rose 2000, 442). Gregson and Rose are interested in the interrelational aspects of performance and space, where the performances of people's identities in space produce that space, but not in easily identifiable ways. For example, Gregson's research on car-boot sales shows that while these alternative markets potentially subvert some dominant capitalist market practices and offer a space to critique the dominant retail system, the social relations (the bargaining, the gendered aspect of shopping) that are performed in the space of the car-boot sales reveal a dependence of the pricing and popularity of items found in mainstream markets (2000, 446).[5] This conclusion leads her to assert that "the space of the car-boot sale is produced through the citation in performance of particular subject positions, and that—precisely because of this—that it, the space, is citational, and itself iterative, unstable, performative" (Gregson and Rose 2000, 447).

Butler's theory of performativity has offered ways to think about the productive power of discourses in relation to gender and sexuality, and Gregson and Rose's application of that theory beyond the scope of gender and sexuality points to the availability of performativity as a theoretical lens with which to critically dissect, and

5. Car-boot sales are open-air markets in Great Britain where people sell household items from the trunks (boots) of their cars.

potentially disrupt, operations of power in arenas at various levels of everyday life (body, consciousness, cultural activities and social exchanges).

Yet, as mentioned above, in the essay, "Performing Space," Rose admits that not all human experience, or anything that we might call "human experience," is discursive and, to consider it so, renders the critic an all-knowing subject who can, with the right theory, interpret all experience. When applied to geography, this is akin to de Certeau's critical stance against taking the "bird's eye view of the world" that many spatial and urban planners have adopted, where they assume that they can see and interpret all things (1984, 93).

How might we avoid playing the role of the all-knowing critic and come down from the bird's eye view of the world to walk around and do research on the ground? How might we avoid reducing human experience to discourse in order to attend to corporeally embodied performances that are the effects of that which is "at the edge" of discourse? How might we ethically respond to the ways in which people experience the world, putting those experiences into discourse without privileging the discursive over the affective experiences of feeling ourselves bumping into the world and people around us? In this thesis, my ethical commitment to valuing people's experiences, while acknowledging the limits of my ability to understand fully what those experiences might mean, ultimately requires an exchange of trust and respect for the Other, whom I cannot fully know but am ethically compelled, as Irigaray might say, to rub against, to embrace yet not own (Irigaray 1985; Irigaray 1993).

My research with the Sisters was informed by these theories and ethics and led me to investigate the performances by Sisters with a mind towards understanding the mutual

(or dialectical) relationship between my subjective experience of their performances and the spaces of their performances, co-constituted by their embodied queer performances and my embodied memories of those performances. I found it compelling and more politically relevant to reconstruct the performance events that emerged from the "fuzzy" mix of field notes and philosophical and geographical musings, noting the effects/affects/aesthetics of the "feelings of community" and "communities of feeling" that were produced by these performances. Ultimately, for me, Butler-inspired theories are insightful for thinking about how our identities are formed through discourses and relations of power, yet unnervingly, not so much in the loss of the "active, prior, conscious, and performing self," but in the way that this does not *feel* like what I experienced in these events (Gregson and Rose 2000, 433). Nor does Butler offer an approach to performance that does full justice, in my opinion, to the celebratory political work experienced when the Sisters host an event, hold a vigil, or animate political rallies with their campy humour. Arguments for the mixing of Butler-style performativity with an *in situ* reading of performance (Gregson and Rose 2000) represent exciting and forward-thinking work in geography, but they seem to leave out the emotional work and the embodied feeling of the kinds of queer performances described in this thesis.

In order to offer an *in situ* reading of performance with these ethical and methodological questions in mind I have chosen an autoethnographic style of writing about my experiences of the Sisters' performances. Autoethnography is a qualitative method that describes one's personal feelings and experiences of real-lived everyday events and subjects and then exposes those experiences to critical reflection. It also assumes that the researcher is a member of the social world being studied; that there is

analytic reflexivity, there is narrative visibility of the researcher's self, a dialogue with texts, research and other informants beyond the self, as well as a commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson 2006, 379).[6] It is essential to construct a "thick description" and develop a narrative analysis that "takes us into the heart" of the interpretation, and so I have constructed performance-based narratives—putting a literary and sometimes poetic spin on my research observations as well as reflecting on my ethnographic field notes (Geertz 1973, 18). I did not engage in traditional participant observation or make use of in-depth interviews. Instead, I followed Allan Pred's montage approach which "is much less an analysis of research findings than an attempt to bring intelligibility to that which is in process, that unavoidably shows as much about the author as anything else" (Pred 2000, xvi).

Performance theorist Peggy Phelan suggests that writing about performance is similar to writing about history, since the performance event has ended and is, in a sense, dead. She remarks that "[t]he desire to preserve and represent the performance event is a desire we should resist. For what one otherwise preserves is an illustrated corpse, a pop-up anatomical drawing that stands in for the thing that one most wants to save, the embodied performance" (Phelan 1997, 3). She goes on to say that writing about performances should evoke the affective experiences, rather than obsessively marking the details of the event(s) (Phelan 1997, 11-12).

I push Phelan's thinking on this since not all performance events are situated on an even playing field of power relations and often go unrecorded or are recorded for political purposes that may be at odds with the intent of the events. The Sisters'

6. For more examples of recent experiments in autoethnography, see the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography. 2006 Volume 35, No. 4 (August).

performances have been the subject of extensive public debate and scrutiny by conservative Christians who characterize the Sisters as mocking and offensive to religion. At the same time, many queer people perceive the Sisters merely as a group of provocative but fun-loving "men in drag," an attribution which renders their performances benign. My desire to evoke the affective experience of witnessing the Sister's performance events, as well as my inclination to intervene against these polarised characterizations of the Sisters have required manoeuvres between re-presenting events in as much detail as possible (risking the re-presentation of an "illustrated corpse") and evoking affective memories (mourning the inability to re-enact "embodied performance").

Even though the embodied performance events have "died" and thus have eclipsed my ability to fully re-present them, I have risked writing my memories of these events because they continue to inform how I make sense of those events and how those memories of those events "live on" to inform my perceptions of events. The autoethnographic and performative writing styles attend to these memories, intervene in "flattened" characterizations of the Sisters, and open an interdisciplinary dialogue between geographers interested in performance research and performance theorists interested in the geography of cultural performances.

I find that performance geography centres our attention on the dynamic movement of bodies, histories, meanings and aesthetics that colour the experience of much of queer life and politics. I propose that a performance geography approach, while in critical dialogue with both social theories and the experiences of political activism, can

offer creative ways to re-write, rehearse, re-tell the ideas we have about what our shared human experiences are and might mean for one another.

III. Mise-en-scène

The French phrase "mise-en-scène" refers to the process of putting on a play, film or other similar type of performance. I use this phrase to convey my performance research methodology, interpretation and analyses and my textual strategy. My research methodology is interdisciplinary in that it employs ethnographic note-taking, audience reception theory, and performance-based writing. My analytical lenses are informed by performance studies, queer cultural studies and recent work in cultural geography as well as a political commitment to disrupt assumptions about the meaning of queer community.

A. Method of research

Audience Member: During the research phase of this project, I attended nearly thirty events sponsored by and/or hosted by the Sisters in San Francisco. These events included "penny drives," where Sisters would solicit donations for charities by walking through the Castro with large paint buckets, and rituals and celebrations performed in bars, cafés, and on the streets—including festivals and parties that took place in public parks. I wrote field notes during these events using ethnographic notes according to the approach suggested by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw's *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (1995) and then digitally transcribed the notes as references for reconstructing events. I wrote notes directly on tourist maps of the Castro and the South of Market (SOMA) Districts to jog my memory of where events took place and I also took photographs at these events to help stimulate my memories and to document the events. I have selected some of these photos for inclusion in this thesis.

An extended caveat about the performance research: Since many of the Sisters' activities were both free and on weekends, I chose to rely primarily on the data collected from my observations as an audience member eyewitness. This reflects my perspective that the public interactive rituals and performances conducted by the Sisters are central to their *raison d'être*. Because the general public commonly experience the Sisters in this face-to-face manner either by happening on them in the streets or attending their events, I focus my interpretations on these events.

Website: I also used the Sisters' internet website as a source of information on the history, organization and structure of the San Francisco Mother House. The website was the primary resource I used for knowing when and where the Sisters' events were to be held. The material on the website that noted historical performance events led to further investigation in local news media for coverage of those events.

Newspapers: I made use of the LGBT newspapers, *The Bay Area Reporter* and *The Bay Times* as well as the main city newspaper, *The San Francisco Chronicle* for descriptions of performance events that took place before I lived in the area and to gather a sense of what the Sisters had done in the past. I conducted archival searches on the websites of all three newspapers for the coverage of Sisters' events. Not all newspaper coverage was available online so my research of historical performance events was weighted towards the performance events with the most available news media sources as well as towards the cultural significance of the events.

Archives: I spent a total of six hours in the Sisters archives—housed in a building with other community organisations and labour union locals in the Mission District. I asked, and received permission, to use the Archives and Sister Hellen Wheels escorted

me to the archives where I perused newspaper and magazine clippings and hundreds of photographs. Of particular interest were the hundreds of *objets d'art* and artefacts, e.g. a six-pack of Sister Beer, buttons, dolls, habits, paintings, posters, photographs, advertisements of events, etc. As part of the Sisters' 30th Anniversary Celebration, an exhibit of many of these items was curated by a special committee of the Sisters and put on display in the gallery space of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in the SOMA District of San Francisco. I visited this gallery in June 2009 and the captions of the items offered more information on their significance to the Order.

B. Interpretations and Analyses

In *Even in Sweden*, geographer Allan Pred describes what is called a *becoming analysis* based on piecing together of methods- and theories-*en-procès*. Pred describes how, in his forty years of experience living part-time in Sweden, he "became sensitized to the nuances and fluidities of practice-embedded meanings," and how he developed his interpretations of historical and contemporary racisms in Sweden through an "unsystematic assembly" of materials and conversations (2000, xii-xvi). Pred reconstructed the taken for granted meanings of everyday racisms in Sweden from texts as varied as government documents, graffiti, political campaign posters and news media, combined with his conversations with academics, alongside his own experiences of over thirty years of everyday life in Sweden coupled with the situated practices of racial profiling, segregated "immigrant" housing and racist government policies. The evaluation of the "data" Pred collected is based on "their being social facts in themselves, actually produced texts and images, actually circulating representations, actually existing

components of discourse, that were pivotal to, but not solely determinative of, central elements of the popular imagination" (2000, xvi).

Responding to the research materials on the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence requires sensitivity to both the particular landscape of queer cultural life and practices in San Francisco and the space of their performances. This requires doing a landscape analysis that engages popular media representations of the queer culture of San Francisco, community-based representations and my own personal experiences of that landscape, in conversation with others. Reflecting on decades of geographical research on landscapes, Nancy Duncan and James Duncan discuss how "distinctive landscapes work to establish place-based senses of community and can be mobilized to maintain and contest individual and collective identities and to advance the attainment of political or economic goals" (2010, 237-238). I chose to follow this line of thought in doing a kind of landscape analysis, by way of a performance geography approach. The analysis in this thesis, then, is my interpretation of the Sisters' queer performances coupled with analyses of their situated practices within the historical and political context of San Francisco's queer culture. I am also compelled ethically to centre my analysis and writing on the performances by the Sisters because they are the performers that concern this thesis, it is my reading of *their* stories that *I* am telling, where the text of the thesis reflects the space of relations between *us* and the *readers.* I also acknowledge that my writing about the Sisters is:

> a critical intervention that cannot possibly pretend either to closure or to anything resembling comprehensiveness, a critical intervention that inevitably leaves much unshown and unsaid, that inescapably raises as

> many questions as it answers, that unavoidably shows as much about the author as anything else. (Pred 2000: xvi).

I have deployed the method of audience member-as-researcher as the lens through which the cultural landscape of San Francisco is portrayed, privileging my embodied experience (i.e., where I was, what I saw and felt there) in a phenomenological manner as an archival document of performance events. Where the Sisters' rituals provide it, I relay their stories as collective memories. What Duncan and Duncan's theory of landscapes offers is that this notion of collective memories is "constructed socially not individually and must be stored in communal spaces, in public landscapes, not just written texts" (Duncan and Duncan 2010, 240). Duncan and Duncan introduce the idea of public landscapes in order to shift how we think about the ways that collective memories are constructed. Archives are repositories of collective memories but we could also consider the ways that communities tell stories about themselves, particular through public rituals and ceremonies, as public landscapes as well. My re-articulation and re-presentation of historical documents and my experiences of the Sisters' queer performances is an attempt to portray these public landscapes.

C. Textual Strategies: Some Words about Words

Allan Pred was dedicated as much to the politics of research as the politics of representation. He sometimes combines two words into one to make them difficult to read. This melds with his political intention to make the writing of his research cohered with the subject of his research. In his words, "…the p(r)o(s)etics of one's textual strategy are the politics of one's textual strategy" (1997, 119). In the spirit of Pred's own

performance-based writing style, I have developed a textual strategy that performs two different "voices," marked by different `font types`. The two voices in this text—the voice of the academic record and the voice of me as researcher/student who experienced most of the rituals and events described in the thesis—create a cacophony textually and visually on the page which may lead to confusion on the part of the reader for, at times, the voices overlap in their descriptions of events. By providing visually different and aurally unique voices, I create a space of conversation with the reader that provides analysis and insights into the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, resulting in a non-linear juxtaposition of perspectives, a dedication to multiplicity and reflexivity rather than a uni(ted)-vocality and singular authorship. The performance-based text acts on the stage-page, representing different voices and using creative spellings to resurrect events, memories, sensations, sounds, visuals and emotions—to glean meaning, however temporarily, and to understand, if only partially, how queer communities are spatially situated, construct and react to discourses and are caught up in multiple relations of power. As Peggy Phelan has written: "[p]erformative writing enacts the death of the 'we' that we think we are before we begin to write" (1997, 17). At times performative (showing what the text says), at times performance-based (inspired by dramaturgical writing), this thesis is a fledgling attempt to make use of politically-engaged and ethically-response(able) writing as well as to strongly suggest that geographers take up this practice where necessary, following Pred's invigorating invitation. During the writing of this thesis I have kept the following questions primary among others posed by Pred in mind (primary among others) as I dealt with the oddities of rehearsing narratives, making sense of field notes, wrestling with theories of

representation and spatiality:

> In our writing,
> how may we as intellectuals,
> as human geographers,
> as corpo-real beings,
> as knowing, thinking and feeling subjects,
> as self-reflexive women and men,
> make sense of the world
> for ourselves and for others;
> at one and the same time make the dangerous here and now,
> and its then and there antecedents,
> intelligible,
> while still giving artful, art-filled play
> to our imag(e)inations?
>
> How may we (re)constructively re-present the present,
> creatively produce on-the-page images
> of our mental images and reflective reworkings
> of the contemporary world(s)
> in which our everyday lives are interwoven,
> in which our observations and hearings are enmeshed,
> from which our categories and metaphors are derived?
>
> How may we critically capture those sounds
> which resonate with the circumstances of hypermodernity,
> with the very condition(ing)s of our lives
> and our writings? (Pred 1997, 118-119)

Pred makes use of neologisms, such as "corpo-really" and "imag(e)inings" in order to arrest easy readings of these words, to highlight their multiple meanings and to drive home a point. Pred introduces the word "corpo-really" to emphasize the embodied ways in which humans experience the world around them (Pred 1995; 1997). He explains in his article "Re-Presenting the Extended Present Moment of Danger," that "[n]o body may become disembodied, may be removed from the present moment, may escape the local situation and its wider, or global, interconnections" (Pred 1997, 129). His point here is that the ways in which we experience the world and how we construct our identities are done as "inescapably embodied beings" who make meaning out of the world through

"situated practices" (Pred 1997, 121). I use Pred's neologism, corpo-really, in order to do a similar performance of the text on the page. For this thesis, I mean corpo-really as a performative sign that emphasizes that the performances of which I am writing, are both embodied acts and have real material effects on the people and spaces in which they take place.

Pred also creatively misspells the words "imag(e)inations" and "imag(e)innings" in order to emphasize the ways that images reflect our imaginations of our world as well as the ways that popular imaginations of places and people are heavily influenced by visual and imagined representations. In *Even in Sweden*, Pred quotes geographer Doreen Massey to emphasize the importance of visual images and representations of people and places: "representation is not merely reflection; it is itself an active force in moulding social relations and social understanding" (2000, 124). With this is mind, Pred's analysis of racism in Sweden relies on critical reflection on the ways that images in culture, the media produce the mental pictures/ideas (imaginations) of who is/not Swedish. He shows how these visible and invisible geographies of the popular imagination inform both public policy decisions and racist discourses. In this thesis, I use Pred's formulation of imag(e)inings to performatively and simultaneously emphasize that the Sisters are producing new images of nuns, clowns and activists, are relying on reconstructed past images of nuns and clowns and, through their public performances, offer new mental and physical images of what it means to serve one's community. My textual approach, here, is to put Pred's neologisms into operation, albeit in a different context, in order to visually underscore on the page my perspective that these words can have simultaneous

meanings that sheds light on how we understand the complexities of the Sisters' performances.

IV. Vocabularies

In light of this approach, I must lightly on the ground of definitions of the three central keywords of this thesis: *queer*, *community*, and *performances*. This is done not out of sense of fear and trembling of any potential critique, but because the source material for the research requires it. The geographic location of San Francisco and its multiple cultural phenomena, as well as my ethical commitment to diversity and difference, require me to name the constellation of meanings and practices that I identify as something like those three terms. How then to see, experience, feel, think, write plurality? Performative writing is one way to attend to the … at-the-same-time-ness of these queer events. If the hesitant "…" is a SIGN of *p a u s e*,

and

slowing

down,

then it is so because I want to find a way to perform/write critical attention to the difficulty, the effects, and the affects of these words. Therefore, I linger momentarily on these definitions because the pull of the text and the push of the discursive formations require me to do so. However, I will do a bit of pushing and pulling on these words throughout the thesis, stretching them to respond to the historical and spatial context in which they are being discussed.

A. Queer

For the purposes of this thesis, I use "queer" to mean those aesthetic, emotional and political performances that resist heteropatriarchy and its normative discourses and practices. This means that queer is primarily a *verb*, an action or a set of actions. This is an improvement over its use primarily as shorthand for anything or anyone not heterosexual, for three reasons. First, queer (as a verb) moves us away from the solipsistic tendencies of strict adherence to distinct subject categories and open us to the possibility of deconstructing and reconstructing ways of organising communities, animating spaces and developing relationships (Jakobsen 1998). Second, queer (as a verb) refers to the critical reflection and political resistance to both heteropatriarchal *and* homonormative values and practices. This work points to, and challenges, the racial, gender and class foundations of the legal sanctioning of homosexuality by State authorities on the one hand, and, on the other hand, strategically laying claim to both established identity categories and rights-based claims that recognise multiple and intersectional identities and the need to increase the possibilities of erotic freedom (Brown, Browne and Lim 2007, 12; Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003). Third, queer (as a verb) brings out the constructed and performance qualities of human activity. The first two points above, each in their own way, point out the ways that social norms and values are constructed, this is their political potential. Yet these critiques and deconstructions are animated by an understanding that identities are situational performances, that are productive of, and produced by, discourses and shot through with different/differ-ing power relations. Focusing on the performance of queer (as a verb), then, displays the inherent inability to ever fully know what is queer.

Performing queer, then, creates the possibility through the vehicle of performance to enact/embody/emplace a desire for what, in a specific context, is queer to us then and there.

Yet, I also make use of queer as an adjective to describe how the Sisters are "queer" nuns, meaning they identify as a collection of queers who are also nuns. In this sense, queer refers to an *identity* that is not necessarily based on heterosexual object choice per se (Sister Hedra Sexual, is a self-identified heterosexual man). Rather, queer, as in queer nun or queer community is meant to convey a sense of the odd, the bent, the off-kilter qualities of non-normative family and social networks, cultural practices, and place-making strategies of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, that are, in part, a critique of heteropatriarchal logics, values, practices and spaces. Often, queer is used as an umbrella term, to stand in for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgendered, questioning (LGBTTQ). Yet the word "queer" should not merely stand in as a category or box filled with the plethora of subjectivities, practices, geographies and negotiations among LGBT people. It should also act as an event, an opportunity to describe the multiple and different ways that the word is put into use by those who use it and what they want, mean, and desire when and where they use it. Queer theory has to articulate the differences and interrelatedness of both identity and practice while, as Janet Jakobsen argues, emphasizing the verbal activity of queer-ing norms, normativity and the normal (1998, 517-518).

Also, queer is one of those "visceral identities" that affects all parts of human life and activity that, as Jean-Ulrick Désert describes, "can be defined elastically to include sensibilities other than the normative with a propensity toward, but not exclusive of, the

homoerotic" (1997, 19). More recently, queer has come to describe a "relational process" whereby individuals with similar affinities engage in political action, where the *process* of relating is based not on fixed identity categories but on affinities—similar interests or goals (Brown 2007, 197). As Gavin Brown writes, queer "is produced through the very process of working collectively to create a less alienated and more empowered space in which to explore a multiplicity of sexual and gendered potentialities" (2007, 197). This use of queer, allows for experimentation and playfulness of identity categories, yet is not shorthand for LGBTQ. Nor is its goal simply to transgress heteronormativity. Brown points out that, as relational process, queer is concerned more with "modest steps towards the development of alternative sexual and social values" (2007, 202).

Queer, then, in this thesis, is used to reflect the ways the Sisters perform queer (as a verb), i.e. the ways in which they deconstruct and reconstruct notions of community in their performances. Queer also operates as a sign of multiple and experimental identities, affinities and relational processes. As an adjective, queer is used to describe the Sisters' corpo-really situated performances and the places associated with their values of difference, playfulness, experimentation, and non-heteropatriarchal norms.

B. Community

The second major keyword in this thesis, community, conjures up many emotions and ideas about the meaning of that term. David Román writes that, in identity politics, the use of the term community is often done "without ever questioning its rhetorical, political and performative employments, let alone the term's inability to accommodate all the various identities imagined under its usage" (1998, 77). Rather than hold to an

illusory sense of belonging to a generally identifiable social group in a geographic location, the Sisters use community to name those invested in and affected by the politics of gender and sexuality, religion, health, and human rights. One does get the feeling that the Sisters use community in this way, i.e. as a rhetorical strategy. In other words, it makes sense in the American political and social context to use community to refer to a group of marginalised people seeking rights and freedoms. This sense of the term community, in identity politics, I emphasize, is used strategically on the part of the Sisters. In their performances and social interventions, they make use of "community" as an umbrella term in relation to dominant heterosexual society. Yet they also embody a vision of community in some of their festivals and street parties that reflects a specific group of people—albeit a group with a wide diversity of sexual and gender preferences that could be described as the "strange" and "at odds with" norms of public behaviour. These two uses of "community" (as anyone working for sexual and gender freedom *and* a motley-crew of difference) are reflected in the phrase "queer community-at-large," or, that collection of people invested in queer political, social and cultural issues/events, *tout court*.

There is, then, no coming together of individual selves who atomistically decide to join "the" community. Rather, as Nikki Sullivan points out in reference to the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy, since "being is always already a being-with, the subject is always already part of the social, the world of others—and vice versa," then community is not a collection of like-minded individuals but a "compearance" [*la comparution*]—Nancy's term for the "'appearing together' (the being-with) of the singularity (or subject as we might prefer to call it) and the social (others)" (2003, 147). When people appear

together with others, then we get something like how we often hear the Sisters use the term community.[7]

Yet there is a historical link and translocal reality to this kind of community. Others have appeared together in particular places in specific times before us, and the archive of those appearances has produced imaginary belongings of the past that influence the present feeling of belonging or investment in contemporary political struggles. Rather than fight over who has claims to "authenticity" to this legacy, the Sisters revere those who have struggled to create queer spaces in the past and elevate many of them to queer sainthood—as those who can inspire contemporary struggles.[8]

With reference to the geography of the community, the Sisters are most often concerned with the cultural and political context of the relatively identifiable queer neighbourhoods of the Castro, the Tenderloin and parts of the Mission Districts in San Francisco. However, this cannot be overemphasized as Sister events have been, and are, held throughout the San Francisco Bay Area (including Oakland, San José and Marin County). Their geographic scope of concern for queer community also extends to mission houses. A mission house is the name given to a group of people who have applied to become a chapter of the Order of Indulgence, and who must work through several steps, such as achieving charitable non-profit tax status, hosting several public events and recruiting at least four members (Sisters "Contact"). Every year there is a conclave held in a different city each year that gathers Sisters from around the world for sharing experiences, rituals and supporting each other in their work. These scales of the

7. While I find Nancy's term "compearance" theoretically useful, it has ambiguous and ineffective rhetorical punch in the climate of queer cultural politics.
8. See Román 1998, 78-80, on the problems of claims to "authenticity" in queer community politics.

community—from San Francisco to Missions to Global Sorority) reflect the Sisters' concern for what Sarah Ahmed calls the "skin of the community." (2005, 104).

Ahmed draws out the affective character of the meaning of community by focusing on bodily feelings and the relationship to the world around us: "[i]t is through the intensification of feeling that bodies and worlds materialize and take shape, or that the effect of surface, boundary and fixity is produced" (2005, 102). Through this relationship of bodily sensations and the material world, we move "towards and away from others or objects" and are "aligned with some others and against others, a form of alignment that temporarily 'surfaces' as the skin of a community" (Ahmed 2005, 104). Ahmed's theory of community offers an elastic and affective sensibility to the meaning of the word community. Ahmed suggests we think of community as shrinking to encompass two subjects or expanding to include many subjects; shrinking to include the immediacy of the local or expanding to include the global; taking into consideration the intermediary connections that blur the lines between you and me, here and there.

However, it is important to have a critical perspective when we think about how "community" is used, both by the Sisters and other queer activists/performers. Deborah Gould's historical analysis of the early days of HIV/AIDS in the US and ACT UP's struggle to draw public attention to the epidemic illuminates the way that appeals to "community" and "pride" were often rhetorical tactics used by gay and lesbian activists to suppress anger and rage (2001, 144). This led to an abundance of emotions that lacked vectors for expression, leading to the emergence of more militant and radical political activist groups like ACT UP (2001, 147). The ambivalence, she argues, that gays and lesbians had over their identities in relation to the larger dominant heterosexual social

context created crises over how to respond emotionally and politically to HIV/AIDS. Taking pride in the community and volunteering with grass-roots groups was one response to the pandemic while militant rage and performative politics were how other people responded (2001, 149). Despite her historicization of gay and lesbian HIV/AIDS political groups, her notion of *ambivalence* around identities and communities reminds us to ground our discussions about queer community historically and spatially as well as affectively. This allows us to take a pragmatic, yet critical, look at how the term community is employed.

The Sisters use of the term community is influenced by several factors: the strategic use of liberal rights discourses, identification of/with spatially bound yet translocal bodies and places, the emotional push and pull of political battles, and the erotic draw towards certain others as well as the repulsive rejection of others (e.g., the Sisters ritually protest and drive out evangelical Christians who invade the space of the Castro to preach against homosexuality and have publicly exorcised "Dr." Laura Schlesinger for spreading hate-speech on her radio talk show). As the above argument shows, the Sisters perform community in various ways and the following chapters of the thesis will describe particular performances of queer community, in the past and present.

C. Performances

The kinds of performances I refer to in this thesis are cultural performances that constitute, and are constituted by, social dramas. Kirk Fuoss, following Singer and Turner, identifies a social drama as a "disharmonic episode that is processual in form and reflexive in nature" (174, n.2), the moments of social contestation over scarce resources, competing agents or interests or individuals or groups with varying economic, cultural,

symbolic capital to pursue their interests and attain goals (Fuoss 1997, 175, n.3). Social dramas occur when norms are violated, people and groups take sides, redress is attempted and there is social reintegration or schism (Fuoss 1997, 174, n.2). The Sisters' performances have been, and are often caught up in social dramas over gender, sexuality, pleasure, human rights, access to healthcare, and their performances, rituals, happenings and events are essential to understanding how these social dramas play out.

Cultural performances, continuing with Fuoss, are performances such as plays, prayers, ritual recitations, rites and ceremonies, festivals, aesthetic or staged dramas, carnivals, spectacles and film. These performances share characteristics of being temporally framed, spatially framed, programmed, communal/spectatorial, "heightened occasions," reflexive and reflective and "tend[ing] to be prepared for in advance" (1997, 173-174, n.1). The Sisters' public actions will be, in this thesis, thought of, and analysed through the lens of this definition of cultural performances, within the context of particular social dramas.

Why think of performance in this way? There are many definitions and uses of the word performance, many of them rubbing against one another, whose friction makes up the stuff of contemporary performance studies.[9] Responding to the Sisters' history, mandate, and embodied practices within the erotic political context of San Francisco, it is necessary to think of their performances—their activism for guilt-free and fun-filled erotic life—in light of the continuing American struggle over just who can be a member of that society and how one might go about living out the promise of freedom, sexual and otherwise. Fuoss convincingly argues for a framework that analyses cultural

9. See Shannon Jackson's *Professing Performance* (2004) for an insightful historical interpretation of the development of the discipline of performance studies.

performance as produced by and productive of, the political struggle over the meaning of community (i.e., social dramas) and his framework rests on an agonistic thinking about performance. It is useful to think about the cultural performances of the Sisters in an agonistic framework because their events emerge from and, at the same time, create social dramas over who belongs, who counts, and who matters in society. In addition, Fuoss' agonistic performance framework acknowledges debate and struggle not just between groups, but also within groups, allowing for a blurring of the binary between "us" and "them" (1997, 8-11).

In addition to Fuoss' agonistic framework for analysing cultural performances, his approach substantially relies on geography as well. He explains that this framework draws our attention to the "spatial sphere of contestation" and focuses on the "politics of space" (1997, 89). He draws on Lefebvre's now-famous aphorism that "space is not a container" and emphasizes that space, theatre spaces as well as the spaces of performances, are shaped by and productive of political ideologies (Fuoss 1997, 89). He is concerned with three central modes of analysis: *the location of theatres in space, the deployment of space in theatres, and the representation of space in performances* (1997, 90). Fuoss defines theatre as the "site of performance, not a permanent or semipermanent structure erected intentionally for the presentation of performances" (1997, 178, n.4). With this understanding of theatre-as-site-of-performance, Fuoss' analytical framework is set up in the following way:

1.) location of theatre in space:

a.) what spaces are used as performance spaces;

b.) where are they in relation to spaces reserved primarily for other uses;

c.) whether the use of the space for performances is sanctioned or nonsanctioned.

2.) deployment of space in theatres:

a.) how does the architecture of the theatre affect audience members' relations to one another and to the performers.

3.) the representation of space in theatres:

a.) how the spatial representation in the performance reproduces or diverges from existing cultural uses of space. (Fuoss 1997, 90-91)

Along with Fuoss' analytics of the spaces of performance, we should add Stanley-Niaah's classifications of performance space as the actions of bodies in those spaces, what is "consumed in them" and the "events associated with them" (Stanley-Niaah 2010, 17). My goal in this thesis with regard to my performance analyses of the Sisters' events is to put these sets of questions into operation in order to demonstrate the spatial, cultural, political and agonistics qualities that make up their performances of queer community spaces. As Fuoss notes, an agonistic approach to studying performances focuses on "performance as *inherently* political, as *necessarily* a site of contestation wherein communities with different and often competing interests vie with one another" (1997, 163, emphasis in the original).

While I rely on Fuoss' basic framework for my analysis of the complexities of different kinds of Sister performances, I also approach the concept of performance along

the lines of Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks who, in their collaboration on theatre/archaeology, attend to performance as multiple, embodied, situational, spatial. Pearson and Shanks integrate social archaeology and performance studies based on an understanding that the social is an

> embodied field: society is felt, enjoyed and suffered, as well as rationally thought. The statistical analysis of social science is not enough. Social archaeologists, like others in the Humanities, are now attending to the phenomenological qualities of things and places, what it means to experience architectural space and landscape, the significance of different experiences." (Pearson and Shanks 2001, xvi)

Their theatrical/archaeological analysis of varied performances and sites, like performance geography, emphasizes material, embodied and corpo-really situated performance practices within the context of the historical present. For them, the past is very much alive in contemporary performance, it "bubbles around us," where the contemporary is contingent on historical events, making up the "very social fabric, its materiality and temporality" (Pearson and Shanks 2001, xvii). This is an important theoretical framing for analysis of the Sisters' events, not simply because the Sisters have a long history of social actions that need to be unpacked, but also because the Sisters have built up a performance history that is a constituent part of contemporary understandings, workings, and performances of queer community in San Francisco. This is a central theme of this thesis and will be demonstrated in each of the following chapters.

This approach to performance enriches Fuoss' agonistic framework of cultural performances in social dramas, by its specific geographic/environmental language that helps further our theorizing about performance geography as well as draws attention to, and holds together, important elements that make up the rites and rituals and performances of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

The distinct categories of Sister performances that I have constructed: nun, clown, and activist, artificially separate different kinds of performances in order to focus on the specific spatial and performative qualities of these kinds of queer cultural performances. Infusing queer studies and community-engaged performance studies with a geographic imagination is a central contribution of this thesis, and an offering of interdisciplinary alliance works in the hopes of better understanding the articulations and negotiations of those keywords: queer—community—performances.

V. Synopsis

The contemporary landscape of San Francisco pulses with its history as a place of welcome for those on the margins of society. The social dramas over tolerance and discrimination have constructed the city as a site of experimentation with and on the individual and collective body. It is important, then, to understand this landscape as a seedbed for the emergence of the Sisters. Chapter 2 introduces key aspects of the cultural geography and queer history of San Francisco that served as catalysts for the development of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Why did they begin in San Francisco? What was/is it about San Francisco and the queer communities there that remains a seedbed of political and cultural developments? Chapter 2 also serves as an

introduction to the Order of Indulgence more generally, its origin story, aesthetic development and organization and member structures.

Bim Mason's classifications of street theatre performers in Great Britain model thinking about the various roles played by actors who make site-specific art in public. Mason's description of the roles of street performers can be used to frame analysis of the roles that the Sisters perform. The Sisters emerged out of street theatrics and continue to use streets and other public places (such as bars and cafés) as sites for their rituals and performances. Mason deduces four motivations for doing street theatre: entertainers, animators, provocateurs and communicators (1992, 26-27). Mason describes *entertainers* as artists whose performances are about "pleasing the audience" with little demand on the public and as decoration for other activities (1992, 31). *Animators* play games with their audiences in order to break down barriers between individuals and the group—to develop a rhythm of the group by gathering individuals to a collective (Mason 1992, 37). *Provocateurs* issue complaints against the system using satire. They make fun of taboos and seek to debunk ideas often playing on the borderline of what is acceptable (Mason 1992, 52). *Communicators* are educators, criticising wider aspects of society, advocating a certain ideology or action usually responding to current events. They often simplify complex issues of the day to reaffirm this perspective for the already converted and to persuade the not-yet converted (Mason 1992, 67). Mason describes each of these motivations within the large perspective of the role that performing artists play in society as creators of interesting visual images that are often site-specific, influenced by Dadaist and surrealist "happenings," where form is often emphasized over content (1992, 74). Inspired by Mason's model, I developed the three roles (nuns, clowns, activists) that the

Sisters embody in their public performances. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are dedicated to each of these roles. In each chapter I retell stories about the Sisters—both historical and contemporary—through textual strategies that evoke the particular characteristic of nun, clown, and activist.

Paying close attention to the corpo-really situated performances within each story, I interpret and analyse these roles in order to: 1) understand the interfusion between place and the construction of community, i.e., to map the spaces of queer community in San Francisco through the performances of the Sisters; 2) shed light on the taken for granted meanings of community in these performances; and 3) critically analyse the relations of power that produce the possibilities for the Sisters' political and cultural interventions.

In the Conclusion, I discuss 1) how queer performance geography contributes to the analysis of cultural practices building on theories from Sonjah Stanley-Niaah's pioneering research on Dancehall, work by cultural geographers, queer theorists and practitioners of popular political and community-engaged theatre in conversation with my research among the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence; 2) point out the limitations of performance geography as an approach to studying cultures; and 3) point to where performance geography can go next, where it might be applied to analyse other cultural phenomena.

VI. Dramatis Personae

Each Sister adopts a unique and campy name. Cathy B. Glenn's interviews with San Francisco Sisters reveal that their "chosen names reflect the creative wit inherently

part of the SPI persona. The emphasis here, in both embodying and naming the nun persona is on creative human artistry, rather than on an effort to appropriate gender" (2007, 252). To respect their "creative human artistry," I use the Sisters' chosen names when I refer to specific individuals in this thesis. I have also chosen to do this because the Sister names perform the humour and characteristics of each Member of the Order—I could not, with all my creative capabilities, do justice to their own names by weaving pseudo-sisterly names as the actual names.

When appearing in their habits in public, Sisters wear nametags on their habits, identifying them as members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. These nametags helped identify particular nuns who participated actively in rituals and public performances and I documented these names in my field notes. I also used the Sisters' website (Sisters, Meet the Sisters 2010) which displays photos and biographies of each member of the San Francisco Mother House to learn their names.

VII. Openings…

> Performance geography is built on an understanding that acts of performance are linked across space through ritual, dance movement, production and consumption practices, as well as the movement of aural and visual images. There are spatial texts that can be read at various levels in and around performance. (Stanley-Niaah 2010, 33).

Researching the material for this thesis I struggled with the subject position of research/observer/interpreter—as the Sisters gently undermined my position as audience member by welcoming me along with other audience members to participate fully in their

rituals. Writing the thesis, I struggled to present an interdisciplinary constellation of personal and scholarly voices that keep the text from becoming a closed thought process, e.g. my textual and typographical strategies. The struggles of the research process and its accompanying ethical negotiations insinuate themselves into this study in the representations of my experiences alongside the Sisters that reflect the incongruities of researching such a playful group.

Inspired by Stanley-Niaah's ground-breaking interdisciplinary research and writing on Dancehall, this thesis seeks to extend her work to the areas of queer cultural performances, specifically the historical and contemporary performance geography of the San Francisco Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. This inspiration comes not from any personal desire to be innovative or *avant-garde*. Rather, my passion for the research and theoretical possibilities presented in this thesis comes from my own experiences of living in and around San Francisco and my personal interactions with members of the Order. Perhaps you, dear reader, were an audience to some events that I describe or you are already well acquainted with the tales. Retelling them in this text, I hope, will stimulate our collective memories not in order to reconcile our different interpretations of what went on or their meanings, rather to reactivate our emotions and our own imag(e)inings of the structures of feeling at play at those events, at that time, in that place called San Francisco.

Chapter 2
History and Context

I really enjoy reading those big, colourful, popular books on queer culture, the kind you find in gay and lesbian bookstores, filled with glossy pages hailing the freedom and fun of being queer. While living in Richmond, Virginia in the late 1990s, I ventured into a quasi-gay and lesbian bookstore in that city's proto-gay neighbourhood where I came upon Mark Thompson's edited volume *Long Road to Freedom*, which chronicles gay and lesbian culture and politics through the timelines and articles pulled from the past thirty years of the American gay and lesbian magazine, *The Advocate*. This book beckoned to me with its stories from a seemingly foreign land where queers have been marching and fighting for their rights long before I ever knew there was such a thing as a queer. The black-and-white photographs of thousands of gay men and lesbians stunned me. Was this place real? Were there really thousands of gay men and lesbians roaming the streets of San Francisco? That sounded fabulous to me and I dreamed of visiting one day (I never expected, at that time, that I would live there). In the book, the article on Castro Street notes the debate over the meaning of that neighbourhood: "Mecca or Ghetto" seem to be the only way to

frame how San Francisco is understood in this article. For a young man making his first toddling steps out of the closet door, there was no debate—the Castro was something to be seen and experienced.

Several years later, when I was living in the San Francisco Bay Area, I stumbled into Moe's Bookstore—a bibliophile's dream—and I found another glossy queer pop culture book. Entitled *Queer,* it had articles on the different aspects of queer culture, history, politics and life but this time, with a far-less serious take on the world than *Long Road to Freedom*; its forward was written by Boy George for crying out loud! This time, when I looked at the flashy, tourist-board-approved, photographs of the city that I was now living in and around, I had a more critical reception to the article naming San Francisco "arguably the best world to be gay in" (Gage, Richards, Wilmot 2002, 106). I was frustrated at the endless praise of a city where economics was ignored and everyone in the photos seemed lusty, busty and gorgeous, even though I knew different. I knew that it was nearly impossible to rent an apartment anywhere in the area without an enormous income or roommates to share the exorbitant rent. I knew that if you were overweight and didn't consider yourself a "bear" or a "cub," then it took a lot of work to find sex in that

"city of desire" (Cilicia 2002, 177). The last paragraph of *Queer*'s entry on San Francisco reads:

> From Hispanic gay bars and transgender meetings, to lesbian mums, book clubs and leather bars, there's a little bit of something for everyone, it seems. And the best thing? Whether you live here, or are merely a wide-eyed visitor, you can get on with your life without your sexuality ever being (2002, 106)

The article finishes this way. I'm sure it's due to a copy editing error. However, I find in the inability of this book's article to go on a sort of queer refusal to say what one's life could be. The "San Francisco" entry, the first in this chapter, extols the city as one populated with happy queers and as "the kind of place that you'd imagine would grind to a standstill if the queer folk of the city were to ever go on strike" (2002, 106). Even as it gushes homage to San Francisco the queer mecca, the article also reads like a travel magazine advertisement publicising "Gay Pride events, the Gay Film Festival [sic]" as well as the "Castro and Folsom Street Fairs" (2002, 106). The article works against its own text with its inability to finish, but the reader has already been swimming in lavish photos and descriptions of all things popularly queer in this

book—as well as possibly already coming to the text with knowledge of San Francisco as a gay mecca—and there doesn't really need to be an ending to this article. However, this essay leaves me wanting more, not to mention a concluding period, and my eye is drawn across the page crease to the group of nine postcard-esque photographs of the San Francisco landscape.

Situated in the chapter titled, "Location, Location, Location," this entry is one of several that celebrate queer cities like New York, London, Sydney and Amsterdam. It maps "the gayest places out there" and, of course, San Francisco is listed as number one (2002, 108). Queer people have worked for so long to create and sustain queer communal spaces and histories in San Francisco and in the surrounding Bay Area. Yet, I wish that the article, celebrating San Francisco's virtues, could have portrayed the gritty reality of trying to make one's life there, where racial and gender discrimination were rampant in the Castro, where people were being denied entry to a bar for being a woman. Queer indeed?!

I. San Francisco

San Francisco—that metonymic city of diversity, multiculturalism, sex and sexuality—vibrates with the history of the homophile, homosexual, feminist, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and queer movements. It is a city resplendent with

monuments and memorials to gay and lesbian politicians and activists, the largest rainbow flag I've ever seen, and a large population of politicians, city employees and people who live their lives "out of the closet." Because of its history as a city quite literally on the edge of a nation, as well as its place as an outlaw city in that nation's history, San Francisco has been settled, over and over again, by those seeking fortune, freedom, fun and all combinations of the three (Figure 1). Its historically constructed image as a place of tolerance (at least in relation to tolerance of difference in other urban areas in the United States) has made San Francisco today a city where people who are suffering heteronormative oppressions often flee (Castells 1983; Berubé 1990; Boyd 2003).

With its persistent queer media, the gay and lesbian culture of San Francisco has produced constellations of (selected) images and stories about queer life that have flowed through global circuits of sexual culture to the point that other large cities in the world have produced their own "gay villages." This has led some cities to paint a portrait of themselves as places that are particularly welcoming of queer people. The connection between the reality of large numbers of sexually diverse (and proudly deviant) folk and the city's ability to tolerate diversity is the subject for another discussion. What is central to my discussion in this chapter is the focus on the *where* and *how* of queer culture as it has developed in this context.

Figure 1. San Francisco Bay Area.

In other words, I am interested in the geography of queer cultural performances in San Francisco, rather than making a case for the city's level of acceptance of queer people. In order to locate the *where* of queer community, I focus on one of San Francisco's icons of queer-ness, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and tell stories of *how* this organisation queers the operations of power, discourses of identity and community and the corpo-really situated practices of living out their callings through public performances and charity work within specific geographic locales. These logics—power, discourses, and spatial activity—are the matrix through which I interpret the queer spatial performances of the Sisters.[10]

10. This interpretive lens is based on Allan Pred's theory of place, practice and structure. Pred developed this theory in relation to Torsten Hägerstrand's concept of time-geography. For the evolution of Pred's theory, see Pred 1986; 1995; 1997; 2000.

People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transsexual, transgendered, must carefully ply the waters of heteronormativity in their daily lives within specific geographic sites. In addition to norms of heterosexuality, to be a sexually and/or bodily different person in the United States requires one to negotiate religious concepts and images that seek to prohibit, preclude and proscribe what one does with one's body and desires in particular spaces (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004). Even with San Francisco's tolerance for sexual and gender diversity, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence rework the religious symbols of habits, wimples, and the rituals of Holy Communion and confession, in order to take the sting out of the use of these religious icons by institutions and groups whose hate speech and discriminatory politics rally queer people in the Bay Area together.

The ongoing political battles over gay marriage, hate-crime laws and workplace protection for lesbians, gays, and transsexuals convey the immense rhetorical work needed to carve out a place for one's self in the quotidian life in the United States. The language of hatred for anyone not publicly fitting white Anglo heteronormative social expectations is extremely stigmatising. In San Francisco, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence struggle to provide a perspective of the world that is founded on the freedom to explore one's limits and boundaries of bodily and emotional existence, respect for other's desires and bodies, and the desire for joy and happiness. The Sisters' point of view is articulated in opposition to the rhetoric of religious and political groups whose vision of the world for the sexually and bodily different is less than joyful or happy.

Not only do queers have to struggle to accept themselves and to work on their own identities in the full presence of religious and political hatred, they have also

constructed material places for themselves (bars and clubs, for example). Gay men have appropriated places from others (neighbourhoods, being a prime example) and they have used already-existing places for a variety of purposes, often not for what they were originally intended (cruising in parks and public washrooms and using homes and apartments for meetings, debates, organizing and health care).

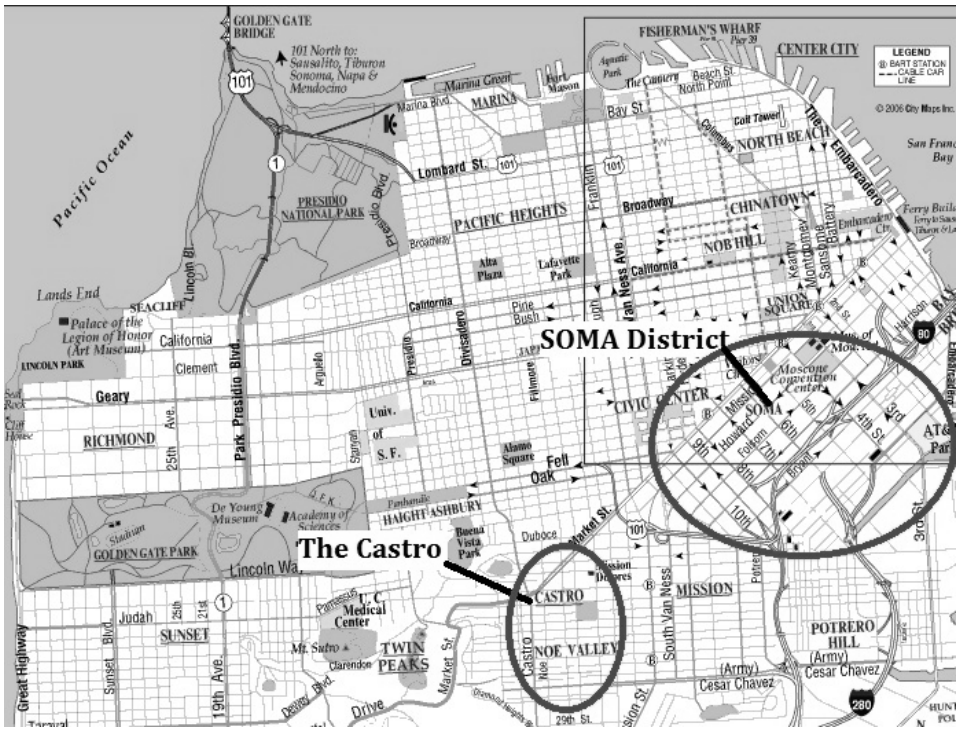

Figure 2. Location of the Castro and SOMA Districts, San Francisco

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence circulate through San Francisco's gay-identified spaces, marking those spaces as such (Figure 2). Yet, they are not restricted to those spaces. They also move about San Francisco, encountering people from all walks of life—but, nonetheless, helping to mark San Francisco, in the minds of its citizens and tourists, as a place of *difference* (what could be more "different"—or more "San

Francisco"—than bumping into a six-foot man in nun drag while walking along the beach in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge?). For example, if you encounter a queer nun on the beach, it is most likely a very different kind of nun from what you have ever experienced or imagined before—even if you have indeed encountered Roman Catholic nuns on a beach somewhere. Yet, in San Francisco, one expects that being confronted with difference is part of the reality of living in and/or visiting this city, as well as how the city is marketed in the tourism industries. Seeing difference in the street identifies certain places as sites of difference and potential spaces of community formation (Rothenburg 1995; Domosh 1998)

Julie Podmore's analysis of the everyday practices of lesbians on Boulevard Saint-Laurent in Montreal applies Iris Marion Young's concept of the "space of difference" to a specific place. Her discussion of the history of Boulevard Saint-Laurent highlights the ethnic and cultural diversity reflecting Montreal's immigrant histories:

> As a civic and commercial site, therefore, the street has developed as an interstitial space, a between space where social and ethnic groups that do not fit into the city's imagined binary [i.e. Francophone and Anglophone] have created social worlds, making difference an integral element of social interaction along the street. Not only has difference been assigned to, or found a place, along this street, but, like many border zones, it is here that differences interact and overlap. (Podmore 2001, 338.)

Given the history of Boulevard Saint-Laurent as a "space of difference," Podmore shows how some lesbians navigate that space, how they locate each other, and how they experience that space. Podmore's analysis describes how lesbians use small clues to

locate one another in the space of difference, feel they can use this space to locate one another and to make a life in the area, even though the Boulevard is not "lesbian territory" (Podmore 2001, 351).

This concept of the "space of difference" can also be applied to San Francisco. Within San Francisco there are multiple, coexisting and often overlapping spaces of difference (even within the Castro) that, when taken as a whole, create the conditions for the marketing of San Francisco as a city of differences (Figure 3). However, it is not just the consumers of the city as a site of tourism, or the gay men and lesbians far away dreaming of visiting that rainbow neighbourhood that contribute to this mark(et)ing of San Francisco as a space of difference. The inhabitants of the city also contribute to the formation of the city as a space of difference through the performances of their identities in both their everyday lives and through the various cultural and economic practices—block parties, festivals, parades, and tourism—that point to the many identities and cultures that give meaning to San Francisco as a place of difference.[11]

11. Podmore describes spaces and places of difference as sites where people from different ethnic and social backgrounds "have created social worlds, making difference an integral element of social interaction along the streets" (2001, 338).

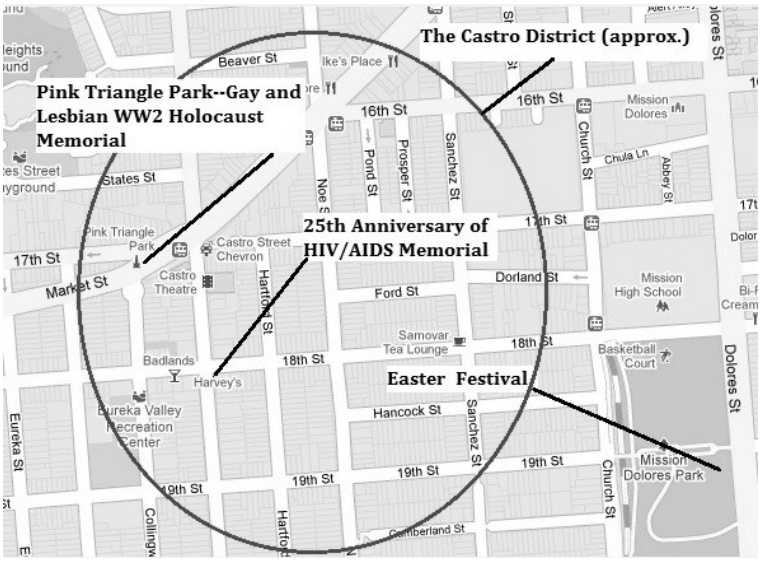

Figure 3. Detail of the Castro District, with performance sites.

The Sisters are participants in this construction of spaces of difference, delineating where the queer community can be found and simultaneously coding the whole city of San Francisco as a space of difference—even outside of queer spaces.

II. Social and Cultural Background of the Sisters

In this section, I demonstrate that the cultural spaces—and the performances within them—important to gays and lesbians in San Francisco have provided a cultural repertoire for the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Drawing on selected discussions of the history and culture of gay and queer life in urban areas, I link the aesthetics and community work of the Sisters to this political and cultural legacy in order to situate the Sisters within the unique culture of San Francisco as a place, and show how they have contributed to sustaining and changing queer cultures in the city by the bay.

Many authors have explored the particularities of San Francisco's gay and lesbian histories, namely Manuel Castells's exploration of the emergence of gay territory in San Francisco and Patrick Califia's and Gayle Rubin's writings about leather and S&M

culture in the SOMA district. In addition, popular photography books such as the ones I mentioned earlier visually retell the history of the development of gay spaces in the city. In this section I trace the cultural and political lineage of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence but I do not want to retell such well-known stories over again. Instead, I will draw attention to the cultural aspects of the development of queer spaces in San Francisco that are developed by these and other authors.

George Chauncey's history of pre-1940 gay life in New York opens us to the variety of sexual topographies within urban areas as well as to the cultural performances that construct queer identities in those landscapes. For my purposes, what is interesting about Chauncey's text as a whole is that what the aesthetic displays, codes and mapping strategies reveal is a history of gay men looking for one another, seeking kinship and creating community in and through geography by means of show, display, theatricality and camp—all strategies of resistance to dominant heterosexual norms in society. Despite the, at times, constant threat of phalanxes of police invading bars, hotels, baths and parks, gay life continued. In Chauncey's words:

> [t]he determination of gay men to claim space for themselves in the city's eating places…occasionally provoked a sharp reaction from social-purity forces. But gay men developed elaborate stratagems to protect such places, precisely because they played such an important role in their lives. (1994, 164)

Chauncey's history of gay New York is saturated with performance geography. Chauncey describes the cultural life of pre-World War II New York "cafeteria society," the city's parks and streets and bathhouses. The aesthetic displays of gay men who

frequented those places are reconstructed in detail from diary entries, court documents, and autobiographies. These texts record the meaning-making practices of identifying places as gay territory, whether they be private establishments (cafeterias, bars, bathhouses) or public places (parks, streets and other cruising sites). Discussing the theatrical displays of the gay men in New York's Life Cafeteria, Chauncey specifically names this kind of display as

> one of the central strategies deployed by gay men for claiming space in the city. They regularly sought to emphasize the theatricality of everyday interactions and to use their style to turn the Life [Cafeteria] and other such locales into the equivalent of a stage, where their flouting of gender conventions seemed less objectionable because it was less threatening. (1994, 168)

The fairies that gathered in cafeterias and other spaces were aligning their aesthetic displays with historically-specific and culturally-situated notions of gender. Chauncey argues that this effeminate gender performance as having "offered many men a means of constructing public personas they considered more congruent with their 'inner natures' than conventional masculine ones, but that were also consistent with the terms of the dominant gender culture in which they had been socialized and that had, therefore, helped constitute those 'inner natures'" (1994, 49). In other words, the fairy was an available social role for certain men to perform that gave congruency to their perception of their true selves. The codes developed to support the fairy role included "styles of clothing and grooming, mannerisms, and conventions of speech" (Chauncey 1994, 188). What is significant, is that these fairies gathered in relatively public places such as hotel bars and

cafés out of a desire to recognize one another, a desire for a place for sociality and kinship, developing rituals of mutual acknowledgement and affirmation, and creating a geographical "point of entry into the gay world for young men just coming out" (Chauncey 1994, 167).

It was not only the inside space of the café or the hotel bar in which men looked for and found each other. They also looked and found each other in the streets and in the public parks, using the male ga(y)ze that led to the creation of "double codes." Such codes included asking another man for a cigarette—innocent enough if one man was not interested in the other, but full of glorious possibilities if the men were indeed looking for something more than a smoke (Chauncey 1994, 188). Chauncey notes that this kind of public manoeuvring—cruising the streets and parks—led to "a gay map of the city" with which men could identify specific sites of sexual encounter (1994, 189). This sexual topography was, in Chauncey's words, "a finely calibrated map of the city" wherein men could find other men "who felt isolated and uncertain of their own 'normality'" (1994, 200). Whether it was fairies openly flaunting and overturning gender conventions in cafés with their makeup, coiffures, clothing and speech or whether it was a more passable heterosexually-acting man having sex with another "normal" looking man in a public toilet, gay men have sought out each other in many ways, have created communal spaces through both spectacular display and by means of fleeting performances of identity and desire.

Chauncey's history of gay cultural practices in New York, serves as an example of how one can do the performance geography of queer culture because it not only delineates the "where" and "when" of queer culture but also the "how" and "why," how

queer culture is performed and defended in both public and private spaces and why people engage in these social rituals. As geographer Larry Knopp has remarked, "[b]ecause human beings exist in space, these [sexual] differences and the social relations which they constitute (and through which they are also reconstituted) are also inherently spatial. The relations of sexuality are no exception" (1995, 159).

I want to turn now to examples of research on San Francisco to specifically show other examples of the geography of San Francisco to show the cultural and spatial developments that created the conditions for the emergence of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Manuel Castell's research on San Francisco's gay political and social development is an early study into the development of the Castro neighbourhood, connecting historical shifts in immigration and urbanization with the political activism of gays and lesbians to explain how San Francisco became a city known for its gay neighbourhoods and culture (Castells 1983). The study is also significant, here, because the research was undertaken at the same time as the emergence of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (late 1970s), allowing us to catch a sociological glimpse of San Francisco at the time in which the Sisters was being formed. From Castells's research, we are able to contextualize how gay men and lesbians were able to carve out a place for themselves in the city's cultural and political landscape.

Castells introduces the notion of gay territory as an "earmarked place where they [gays and lesbians] could be safe together and could develop new lifestyles" (1983, 139). Noting that gay territory has become a city within a city, Castells traces the origins of San Francisco's distinct gay culture back to the end of World War II, where, as a major port

city, San Francisco saw many returning soldiers and navy men and women from the Pacific theatre:

> Many service men and women were discharged from the military for homosexuality. Many of them were serving in the Pacific area and were ordered to disembark in San Francisco. Since they did not wish to return home bearing what society deemed to be the stigma of homosexuality, they stayed in the city, and were joined at the end of the war by many others who had discovered their sexual and cultural identity. They met in bars, particularly in the Tenderloin area. Bars were then the focal points of social life for gay people; and networks were constructed around these bars: a specific form of culture and ideology began to emerge. (1983, 141)

Castells' focus on gay bar culture leads him to mention some of the early gay bars such as The Black Cat and its well-known performer, José Sarría. Castells acknowledges the role that José Sarría's drag shows at The Black Cat played in the early formation of a feeling and sensibility of queer community.[12]

Sarría's role in developing a queer community was in his abilities as both a performer and an activist. His weekly Sunday shows at The Black Cat, according to Castells, were "fundamental to the creation of networks, making gay people visible, and stating their right to gather in public places" (1983, 141). The Black Cat was located at 710 Montgomery Street (now considered part of San Francisco's Financial District) and served as a queer community space for over thirty years. However, Castells quickly

12. Despite Castells's perspective that lesbians are less territorially-inclined (Castells 1983, 140), there have been numerous explorations into lesbian spatial cultures and practices. See Forsyth (1997), Johnston and Valentine (1995), Munt (1995), Murray (1995), Peake (1993), Podmore (2001, 2006), Rothenburg (1995), and Valentine (1993).

moves on to discuss the links between gay culture and the beatnik and hippie movements, ignoring the nuances of Sarría's performance of gender, sexual and racial identities on the stage and in the streets, as well as ignoring the reality that the Black Cat was also populated with lesbians and transgendered people, all of whom were considered part of that bar.

Nan Boyd's oral history and documentation of Sarría's life in those days (2003, 21-24; 56-60) underscores his role in the emergence of San Francisco's gay culture and community. According to Boyd, Sarría "galvanized the gay community and transformed the Black Cat" through his teasing and interactions with bar patrons—many of whom were heterosexual—but also through his decision to "address the Black Cat's regular customers as part of a community, a 'gay community'" (2003, 59).[13] Sarría, and bar waiters and patrons, would joke with the heterosexual men in the bar, flirting with them in front of their girlfriends or wives, making tourists the object of attention in his performances, blurring the lines between performer and audience/spectator (Boyd 2003, 58-59). Sarría (Figure 4) would sometimes dress in drag (such as Madama Butterfly) "read and comment on articles from local newspapers, sing opera, help serve brunch, and deliver notices from the local police" (Boyd 2003, 211). He often ended his performances by asking the audience to stand and sing "God Save us Nellie Queens" as an "'anthem, to get them realizing that we had to work together, that we were responsible for our lives'" (quoted in Boyd 2003, 59).[14]

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13. For more on the role that Sarría and the Black Cat bar played in the formation of gay and lesbian politics, see D'Emilio 1993, 66-69.

14. The documentary *Before Stonewall* shows Sarría and former Black Cat patrons at a reunion where he leads them in singing this anthem once more. The tune is to "God Save the Queen" and the lyrics are: "God Bless us Nelly Queens, God Save us Nelly Queens, God Save the Queens. From every mountainside, long may we live or die. God Save us Nelly Queens, God Save us Queens!" (Schiller and Rosenberg 1985).

Figure 4. José Sarría performing in the Black Cat, ca 1961 (www.foundsf.org)

Sarría's activism was, however, about more than entertaining and educating people while on stage: Sarría also helped organize the League for Civil Education in 1961, to work for cooperation between the bar owners, gay political activists and the police (Boyd 2003, 221). Sarría eventually ran for city supervisor in 1961 using the slogan "Gay is Good." In the mid-to-late 1960s Boyd notes how Sarría's "stage presence shifted toward political mobilization, but his capacity to successfully engineer this shift reflects a legacy of queer entertainers who pushed themselves away from the objectifying gaze of the tourist or voyeur to creatively assert a critique of normative same-race heterosexuality" (2003, 60). We will see similar a shift towards direct political activism among the Sisters in Chapter 5.

In 1965, José Sarría and gay bar owners founded the Tavern Guild of San Francisco, uniting their efforts at community formation in the face of continued police harassment of gay bar owners and their patrons. The Guild created the Beaux Arts Ball

where hundreds of gay men and lesbians, in all sorts of drag, danced and raised money for bail and to help struggling bars (Imperial Court). The creation of the Tavern Guild was one of the first large-scale cultural interventions into the defense of queer territory in San Francisco. The drag balls associated with the Guild established both a public face to an increasingly defiant gay and lesbian and transsexual collectivity and created a bolder political will for, and catalyzed, the formation of queer communities. Sarría's subsequent identification as Empress Norton I led to the creation of the Imperial Court of San Francisco, a charitable organization that organizes drag balls as fundraisers for the city's gay organisations (Imperial Court). The Imperial Court remains an active charitable organisation with courts throughout the United States and Canada.

Many current members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence first began their involvement in community support by participating in the Imperial Court and today many members volunteer their time and money in both organisations and it is not just incidental that the Sisters have taken up a similar style of organizing themselves. The details of the Sisters' organizational structure will be discussed in Chapter 3, but for the moment, it is sufficient to note that the two organizations share similar histories, aesthetic styles and social purposes.

What is significant about Sarría's story is the legacy of using drag culture to create communities, support political resistance to homophobia and charitable service to those in need. The Imperial Court describes its history as originally intended "for 'camp' fun" and it was under this campy sensibility that members of the Imperial Court have been elected to the positions of "Emperor and Empress, Prince and Princess" (Imperial Court Forty-Five Years 2010). The camping of royal titles, while mockingly

imperialistic in nature—after all José Sarría remains honorary Empress of the United States and Canada and Protector of Mexico—is deeply-rooted in Sarría's own identification with the legend of "19th century San Franciscan miner and rice baron" Joshua Abraham Norton (International Court System Founder 2010). This camping royalty is similar to drag queen performers proclaiming themselves "divas" or "queens" or advertising oneself as the "the best drag queen in the world." The campiness of these self-aggrandizing declarations imitates celebrity cultures, affirming royalty, diva-ness and celebrity as a marker of status that requires respect, awe, loyalty and honour. However, these performances of "queen, diva, celebrity" also disrupt their operation in culture because they are (almost always) performed by gay men. What is more, the Imperial Court System makes use of drag cultures and the royal household system, not merely because it is campy, but as an organizational model for charity fundraising and volunteer work. This, more than anything, exemplifies how these campy performances of "Empress" and "Emperor" both affirms and transgresses these aspects of social status.

The Imperial Court has also been one of the few places where transsexuals have been adored, worshiped and given the chance to be role models for community service. The election of a new Emperor and Empress is akin to a Hollywood film premiere with news media coverage, elaborate costumes and performances with an adoring fan base. The Imperial Court's mission is also very similar to the Sisters' vows: "to further relationships with businesses and organizations within our local communities; to hold functions and fundraisers to benefit the communities; and to help those in the community who are in need of our assistance" (International Court System Forty-Five Years 2010). The Imperial Court, in its over forty-year history, has created spaces for the development

and expression of feelings of community, the possibility of performing shared identities and supporting the work of local community groups through publicity and fundraising.

Another Bay Area group that served as both an aesthetic and organizational inspiration for the Sisters were the Radical Faeries.[15] The Faeries have created their own rituals and ceremonies, celebrating an erotic and embodied spirituality, often wearing makeup and dressing (or not) in colourful clothes. Anthropologist Will Roscoe writes that "[t]he basic idea [of the Radical Faeries] was simply to get out in nature, away from the prying and judging heterosexual eyes, and be with other Gay [sic] men" (Hay 1996, 245). As with the Imperial Court, many Sisters were or are deeply involved in this spiritual community network and many of the ceremonies and rituals of the Radical Faeries have inspired some of the rituals and aesthetic styles of the Sisters. Founded by in 1979 by Harry Hay, Don Kilhefner and John Burnside, the radical faerie concept is, in the words of Harry Hay, a desire among gay men:

> To share new insights about ourselves;
>
> To dance in the moonlight;
>
> To renew our oaths against patriarchy/corporations/racism;
>
> To hold, protect, nurture and caress one another;
>
> To talk about the politics of gay enspiritment/the enspiritment of gay politics;
>
> To find the healing place inside our hearts;
>
> To become Inspirer/Listener as we share new breakthroughs in how we perceive gay consciousness;
>
> To soar like an eagle;

15. The Radical Faeries are a spiritual community with roots in the back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s. For more on the origins and practices of this group, see Morgensen 2009.

To re-discover/re-invent our myths;

To talk about gay living/loving alternatives;

To experience the groundedness of the calamus root;

To share our gay visions;

To sing, sing, sing;

TO EVOKE A GREAT FAIRY CIRCLE. (Hay 1996, 240)

The Faeries' ideology mixed politics and spirituality in the late 1970s, and found sympathy among people along the West Coast who had become disillusioned with traditional left-wing politics and who were seeking ways to connect with other gay men through means other than urban bar-centered cultures. Harry Hay's long history of activism—he was a labour organizer in the 1930s and 1940s and went on to co-establish the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles in 1950—and his vigorously researched anthropological studies of ancient spiritual cultures, inspired other gay men to seek "a process for self-development, growth and change, a way of 'being and becoming'" (Hay 1996, 246).[16] For Hay, the radical Faeries were about exploring "gay consciousness" and finding connections with ancient and Native American traditions of "third gender" subjectivity as inspiration and resources for developing/recreating gay spirituality. Hay defines spirituality as

> the accumulation of all experiential consciousness from the division of the first cells in the primeval slime, down through all biological-political-social evolution to your and to my latest insights through Gay

16. The Mattachine Society was formed in 1950 by Harry Hay, Rudi Gernreich, Chuck Rowland and Dale Jennings. Will Roscoe describes the group: "The Mattachine movement, launched in the midst of the anti-Communist, anti-homosexual hysteria of the post-war era, would involve, in three short years, an estimated five thousand homosexuals in California, while its name, carrying the promise of freedom, spread throughout the United States and the world" (Hay 1997, 4).

> Consciousness [sic] just a moment ago. What else can we call this overwhelmingly magnificent inheritance—other than spiritual? (1996, 255)

To explore this gay consciousness, Faeries established a rural retreat in southern Oregon called the Nomenus Wolf Creek Sanctuary. The dream here, again according to Hay, is to retreat from the urban areas, return to a "natural" setting wherein they could:

> begin to throw off the filthy green frog-skin of Hetero-imitation and discover the lovely Gay Conscious not-MAN (*anandros*, as the discerning early Greeks called us) shining through. Fairies must begin creating their new world through fashioning for themselves supportive Families of Conscious Choice within which they can explore, in the loving security of shared consensus, the endless depths and diversities of the newly revealed subject-SUBJECT inheritances of the Gay Vision!" (1996, 263)

Stuart Norman describes the "fey way" of the Radical Faeries as an androgynous and sensual exploration of body, mind and spirit "[p]romoting a playful, open, loving brotherhood" wherein the rituals and communal gatherings of Faeries "are magical events stressing open affections, communal meals, ceremonies and revels, often nude, sometimes in drag, in rural outdoor settings" (1991, 282). The Faeries use rituals to help rid individuals of their Western socialisation that rejects the body and has sought to destroy the celebration of the interconnections between humans and nature. A Radical Faerie named Ganymede writes that the "ritual mind-set" of faerie practice seeks to "reclaim our individual power and our divinity simply by creating our own rituals of meaning and identity" (1991, 298). These rituals, according to Ganymede, seek to

liberate people from "self-perpetuating repressions" in order to "regain the perspective and the freedom to make sense out of the untruths and senselessness" (1991, 298). Ganymede goes on to describe their own spiritual understanding of these rituals as a way to rekindle "the child's mysterious way of experiencing the world: freedom to trust, to explore, to learn the real truths, sometimes startling, sometimes shocking. Life-work becomes Life-play" (1991, 300). Not all Radical Faeries believe in or are on the same spiritual journey. However, they do agree that the creation of sacred space through rituals can lead toward the healing of individuals and the community. This "ritual mind-set" pervades the attitudes and practices of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Specific Sister rituals that explore spirituality and the creation of sacred space will be explored further in subsequent chapters.

III. In the Beginning…

If one were to find parchment scrolls in clay jars in a desert somewhere that unravelled the mystery of the origins of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence it might read like this:

And three gay men who were travelling on their way to San Francisco came upon a monastery in the region of Iowa.

They were greeted by the Sisters therein.

The three gay men asked nothing of the Sisters but to borrow some habits,

for, as they told the Sisters, they were a troupe of players and in need of nun costumes:

'twas the Sound of Music that was to be played in the City by the Bay.

Full of grace and hospitality, the Sisters gave the gay travellers some habits,

and down from Iowa these gay men went and arrived at the Golden Gate of the City by the Bay.

The men put on the habits and went walking around the streets of the City, causing joy and laughter wherever they went.

That musical was never performed but a new thing was created—

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

Here endeth the lesson. A-men, A-women.

The text on that fictional scroll is incomplete—perhaps some pages are missing, having long ago been used to light a cigarette because what happened next is somewhat blurry and must be construed through various interpretations handed down from eye witnesses to the faithful. Co-founder Sister Vicious Power Hungry Bitch says that she was "bored" and threw on the habits to have some fun. The *In the Life* documentary on the Sisters provides numerous versions of the origin story of the Sisters (*In the Life* Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence 2009). Laurence Sennelick recounts that the beginnings of the Sisters lie in a performance art group called the "Sugar Plum Faeries" who acquired the habits from un-suspecting nuns in Iowa (2000, 466). He goes on to note how one member "unpacked the habits, added toy machine-guns, and, as Sister Adhanarsvara, led

'demonstrations' at tourist spots on Easter, and zapped a café where gay employees were on strike" (Sennelick 2000, 466). According to Sisters Phyllis Stein the Fragrant and Sister Kitty Catalyst, O.C.P., both former Mistresses of Archives, these three men's performances were set in the time of the hypermasculine gay cultural phenomena known as the "Castro Clone" (Sisters A Sistory Blow By Blow 2010) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Castro "clones" ca. 1977.
(Source: Flickr.com, http://www.flickr.com/photos/37996646559@N01/2869980641/in/set-72157607378107391/)

This performance of masculinity required a flannel shirt, tight blue jeans, moustache and preferably a well-developed hairy chest. For three gay men to flaunt their disidentification with this subcultural look challenged the fashion of the day and was probably the reason why so many other people were intrigued by what they were doing.[17] These acts of disidentification with the "clone" look show that, from their beginnings as

17. Disidentification is used by performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz to describe the ways minority groups disrupt ethnic and cultural stereotypes by performing them in a way that radically critiques their social and symbolic power. For more examples, see Muñoz (1999).

clowns/jesters, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence have performed their campy "dissing" of norms. In a 1981 interview in *The Alternate*, the Sisters declared that "'[t]he image of gay male nuns says it all: it just blows a hole in everybody's belief, sanities, hierarchies and all that … We are reinstating that tradition of sacred clowns which has been noticeably lacking in much of Christianity's history'" (Sennelick 2000, 467). As Sister Dana Van Iquity wrote almost thirty years later, "the Sisters have been employing satire and high drama to shed light on serious issues since 1979. … Each individual Sister is artist and subject, priestess and counsellor, nurturer and provocateur in the human quest for a joyful life" (Sister Dana, Thirty Years).

In those early days, the Sisters drew a lot of public attention and many people wanted to "join" this order of nuns. It was decided to draw up a constitution—which took place "under a full moon"—and develop a rule (the Roman Catholic institutional term for a code of behaviour/practice of monks and nuns) for the Order.[18] Some "older" Sisters never had to abide by a rule and someone who was in the order in the early days simply had the veil bestowed upon them and were declared a nun: no instructions, no vows, just do it. Today, this rule of the order sets out three stages through which a person must pass to be inducted into the order as well as expressly stating that the vows one takes are for life. The vows that each Sister takes are: "to expiate stigmatic guilt, spread universal joy and to serve the community."

The process to become a Fully Professed Black Veil takes over a year of one's life. It also requires working with a highly diverse group of individuals—getting along

18. The Sisters' recent celebration of their 30th Anniversary, took place in the Yerba Buena Centre for the Arts in San Francisco and consisted of displays of habits, artwork and relics, photography and video documentaries, as well as re-performances of previous rituals and community activities in the centre. The theme of these events in June 2009 was "Under a Full Moon."

with some strong "diva" personalities, and vowing a life-long vocation of service to the community. There are three levels one must successfully achieve to become a fully-professed Black Veil (and voting member) in the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence: aspirant, postulant and novice. Anyone interested in becoming a Sister (regardless of gender or sexual identity) can begin the process. Aspirancy is a sit-and-watch process, where you express your interest in joining the Sisters but you are allowed to do nothing but observe. During aspirancy, individuals are expected to be:

> developing relationship with the Sisters, participating in our events and watching how we work and operate. At this stage you are not a member and have no rights within the Order. If we decide that you are a good fit, you will need to get the Novice Mistress' recommendation and select two Fully Professed Members to be your sponsors (we call them your Big Sisters). The Membership then votes on your elevation; if you get a majority vote you are elevated to Postulant. (Sisters Becoming a Sister 2010)

Once an Aspirant is ready, they may approach a fully-professed Sister for mentoring:

> As a Postulant, you are a Member of the Order although you still have no rights. In addition to continuing to further your relationships within the Order, you are required to attend all of our meetings, most of our events and you must spend at least six hours in the Archives learning the history of the Order. You cannot wear whiteface or a wimple, but we do encourage you to wear festive garb that fits in with the Order; a Catholic

school girl's uniform, for example. Postulancy lasts for at least six months. Near the end of that time, if we still agree that you are a good fit, you will need to find a Fully Professed Member to be your main sponsor (your Mother). With the Novice Mistress' recommendation and the sponsorship of your Mother, you will be brought up for elevation. Should you get the two-thirds vote required, you will be elevated to Novice (Sisters Becoming a Sister 2010).

After the period of Postulancy comes the Novitiate:

> The Novitiate begins to manifest the outward appearance of a Sister. A Novice wears the whiteface and wimple, although she is only allowed to wear a pure white veil. Despite this, general public still perceives you to be a Sister and your interactions radically change. The Novitiate lasts for at least six months. During this time you are a member without rights, you must attend every meeting, nearly all of our events and you must spend eight hours in our Archives. With your Mother's help, you must also plan, organize and throw an event. Once you complete the requirements and have the Novice Mistress' and your Mother's support, you may ask to be elevated to Fully Professed status. As with the other steps, you will be voted upon by the membership; should you receive the three-fourths vote required, you will be elevated to Black Veil (Sisters Becoming a Sister 2010).

The process, while long and meant to test the willingness of the individual to join the Order, allows for mentoring and guidance from the Big Sisters. The hours spent attending meetings and not being able to speak up, can teach you about how to listen to others. The days spent in the Archives perusing old documents, photos, and relics exposes you to the individual stories that make up the collective history of the order, asserting the need to be aware of and appreciate the history of gay activism and community engagement. These forms of discipline are similar to the ways in which Roman Catholic orders of nuns expect their members to obey the rules of the order. This parallel, between a queer community group with roots in the consensus-based organizing methods of the Radical Faeries and a Roman Catholic hierarchy, is striking for their similar intentions—to shape members in the image of the organization. However, it can be argued that the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, by requiring new applicants to go through this process, are also passing along their experiential knowledge of gay and lesbian history and activism and ensuring that members are truly dedicated to the difficult and often thankless work of community service. This keeps the organization stable and constant.

If the Novice is ready to move to full membership, she must prepare herself along with the Mistress of Novices and her Big Sisters for a gruelling and stressful occasion:

> Although this is the last step in the formal process of *becoming* a Sister, it is the first step towards *being* a Sister. As a Fully Professed Member of the Order, you have all the rights and privileges of a Member: you may vote, represent the Order and manifest as you feel called to do so. Fully Professed Members also may hold office and help shape the direction and

development of the Order. Our Fully Professed Members serve in the Order in many different roles; taken as a whole, they make the Order what it is (Sisters Becoming a Sister 2010, emphasis in the original).

Once a month on a Sunday afternoon at San Francisco's oldest leather bar known as The Eagle Tavern (on Harrison and 11th Street) (Figure 6), the Sisters host their very well attended beer busts (you pay $10 for a plastic cup that you can refill for the duration of the event). The beer busts raise money for certain charities and organizations. The Eagle Tavern is known for its independent punk rock and dyke band shows on Thursday nights and has served to anchor the South of Market neighbourhood in the gay leather cultural scene across North America.

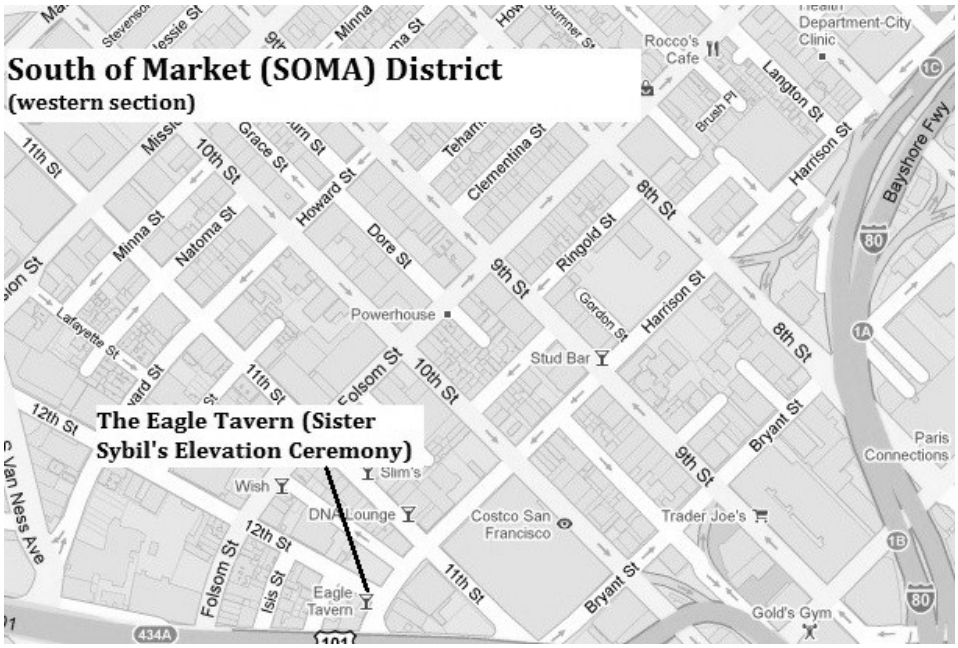

Figure 6. SOMA District, Eagle Tavern.

With motorcycles frequently parked out front, the bar uses the symbols typical of many other biker bars: dark interior, rock music, walls covered in posters, license plates, and other rebel artefacts. The outdoor patio is one of the largest in the city and includes a stage area along one wall. There is a performance of masculinity here, typical of leather bar spaces, which one might assume excludes drag queens, women, and effeminate gay men. However, the queerness of the place and the queerness of the clientele allow for varieties of performances of maleness often by female-gendered people. Overall there is a relaxed atmosphere of camaraderie infused with a gay biker/leather aesthetic of hypermasculinity that isn't afraid of wearing heels. The owners of the bar are also well-known for donating to charities and have been hosting the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence for their monthly beer busts for years.

The Sisters' Beer Bust Sundays include a raffle with sexy prizes for the lucky winner (I know because I was once the winner of the biggest dildo I'd ever seen). Sisters gather early to set up the food and to greet the burly men who arrive. This past July one of the beer busts had a particularly different order of business. Novice Sister Sybil Libertease was joining the ranks of the Sisters as a

fully-professed Sister, otherwise known as a black-veil. (This nick-name comes from the characteristic black habit of voting members of the order.) The event began on the stage at one end of the outdoor space of the tightly-packed bar. The ceremony began quietly and with little fanfare. Sister Lily White Posterior Superior harshly reminded the Sisters that they needed to announce to the crowd exactly what was going on before starting their rituals in order for it to be a real community event. So Sister Sharon Dippity Reveal made an announcement using the microphone as to the nature of the ceremony and invited the crowd to watch and join in the prayers. Sister Mary Timothy gave Sybil a candle, a kiss and offered her a blessing using sage. Now shirtless, Sybil was surrounded by other Sisters each waiting their turn to take hold of the electric razor and shave her head one strip at a time. This was a common practice amongst Roman Catholic nuns as well. After having her hair shorn, another Sister began to apply the typical white face base, reminiscent of clowns and mimes. Sister Sharon Dipity explained that the Sisters believe this whiteface makeup not only carries on the tradition of the role of the sacred clown in aboriginal societies, it also serves as a palate to express the spiritual aesthetics of each individual Sister. Novice Sister Sybil then became a

fully-professed Sister when she took her vows: 'to spread universal joy, to expiate stigmatic guilt and to serve the community' and received the black veil from her other Sisters.

IV. The Outward Sign of an Inward Grace[19]

The development of the Sisters' habits, veils and whiteface makeup tells the story of the Order's evolving sense of mission and purpose. Newspaper coverage often refers to the Sisters as "(mostly) men in drag" (Ruberg 2009). However, some Sisters say that drag is a narrow description and misrepresents the deeper meaning and purpose of their particular way of appearing in public. In Cathy B. Glenn's research on the Sisters, she quotes Sister Phyllis Stein the Fragrant on the differences between drag queens and the Sisters:

> There's a vast difference between the Sisters and the drag community, while there is a lot of overlap…Drag queens are about reclaiming your own gender identity, and female impersonation, and flexing those boundaries. The Sisters are not about drag. "Drag" is an acronym for "dressed as a girl." We're not dressed as girls, we're dressed as nuns…A lot of people refer to us as drag queens, but we say we're in nun drag. We are nuns. (quoted in Glenn 2007, 253).

The Sisters declare on their website that: "Sisters do not wear 'costumes.' As with more traditional nuns, our attire is called a *habit*" (Sisters Frequently Asked Questions 2010, emphasis in the original).

19. This section only provides introductory background to the history of the Sisters' habits and make up. A more detailed exploration will follow in Chapter 3.

The habit of each of Sister—as with many drag queens/kings—varies according to her own sense of self and her own interpretation of how she wants to present herself to the world. Early photos of the Sisters show them wearing black floor-length skirts and black veils without whiteface make up (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Mother Inferior, ca. 1981
(Source: The Power House Museum, http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/the80sareback/index.php/category/remembering-the-80s/people-of-the-80s/page/2/)

One of the founders of the San Francisco Sisters, Grand Mother Vicious Power Hungry Bitch—who originated wearing whiteface during her Radical Faerie days in Iowa—explains how the Sisters came to wear the whiteface makeup:

> In the years 1979 to 1984 most the Sisters were negative about wearing whiteface because they felt they couldn't be "real nuns" if they wore whiteface. After all, Catholic nuns don't wear makeup. For mostly this same reason, the Australian and British Orders did not wear whiteface and only recently have some begun to appear in makeup. Gradually San

Francisco Sisters began to wear whiteface because they realized that in interactions with the public, people were more drawn to the makeup with comments and enthusiasm. … Besides artistic expression, I used whiteface to disguise myself from potential sex partners (Figure 8). In the early 1980's it was NOT acceptable for "real" men in our community to do drag. You were considered not a "real man" if you did drag. Word would get around that you were seen in drag and your sexual prospects dwindled accordingly. Drag was anathema, essentially "in the closet." The thinking was "we have to be acceptable to straight people so they will GIVE US our civil rights." As well, I just like the idea of anonymity. (Tampa Bay Sisters A note about whiteface 2010)

Figure 8. Sister Vicious Power Hungry Bitch
(Source: The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Website, http://www.thesisters.org/userImageFlow/63)

Sister Mary Juanita High explains in the *In the Life* documentary on the Sisters her perspective on wearing the whiteface:

Whenever I started doing whiteface, there's always a point at which I go from feeling like Nick, so to speak, or referring to myself that way, and start thinking of myself as Mary Juanita. So definitely, I feel that the face allows me to interact with people in a way which I wouldn't always feel comfortable. I don't think of being a Sister really as being in drag. I don't think of myself as a drag queen. I am not a performer. I'm a nun, 24/7, whether I'm in habit or not. How we choose to dress or how we choose to express ourselves is not the total sum of who we are. Putting a face on is definitely about respecting that tradition of the Sisters who've gone before me and [who] made this a trademark, in a sense (*In the Life* 2009) (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Sister Mary Juanita High
(Source, (Source: The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Website,
http://www.thesisters.org/users/%24user-26)

Today, many Sisters wear short skirts or dresses, often decorated with pins (many of which carry political statements) and medallions, necklaces and sometimes cheap jewellery. Sisters often choose to wear matching high heels, but this varies, again, with each individual Sister's personal taste. This is the usual habit of Sisters. However, on

very special occasions Sisters will don the ceremonial habit. This more traditional-looking habit consists of a black floor-length dress with or without a black scapular and starched white bib around the neck that covers the shoulders and chest. The ceremonial habits are striking in similarity to traditional Roman Catholic nuns (very similar in fact to the early twentieth-century habits of the Franciscan Sisters of Charity). Sisters wear long pendants and necklaces of various styles, again often with pins and buttons carrying political and/or sexual images/messages.

In Catholic terminology the wimple, or *guimpe*, is the piece of starched white material that covers the neck and chest (Kuhns 2003, 5). The Sisters call their headdress a wimple (Sisters Frequently Asked Questions 2010). It consists of a simple white cloth cap (*coif*) with an elastic band (*bandeau*) at its base that fits around the temple, behind the ears and rests on the upper part of the neck. On either side are two large stuffed bulbs known as "ear brassieres." This term comes from the fact that the original wimples of the Sisters were made from stuffed brassieres. Over this is sewn either a white veil (for Novices) or a black veil (for Fully-Professed Sisters). Many Sisters will attach more pins and jewellery to the veil itself, both to keep it in place and to add flourish to the simple design (Figure 10). Sisters claim the style of the wimple originates from the headdress of fourteenth-century Flemish ladies in waiting (Sisters Frequently Asked Questions 2010).

Figure 10. Reverend Mother Abbess, 1984
(Source, Jean-Baptiste Carhaix, http://www.bm-lyon.fr/lepointg/affichage_image.php?img=image/carhaix/grande/jbcarhaix05.jpg)

The humility that Catholic nuns possess is maintained by the uniform look of the habit and the disguising of the head with the wimple. Although originally signs of Christian faith that set the wearer apart from the community, habit design was still based on the vows of poverty that the nuns took. Habits were simple in design and the nuns were responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the habits. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence could not possess a similar anonymity by wearing their habits alone, because, as gay men dressed like nuns, they were such provocative figures in the Castro. The whiteface makeup provided anonymity and protection in public and they allowed those who witnessed the Sisters to *see* them performing their nun personas in public. The presence of a Sister wearing her habit in the public streets identified her as a nun. The whiteface makeup provided the anonymity that allowed the Sisters to perform their roles in public without people knowing their individual identities. Noting the political significance of the Sisters' habits, Mother Vicious states:

> Today, whiteface is part of the worldwide uniform of SPI queer nuns, along with our individual wimple design. Without the wimple and habit we would just be clowns. The wimple and habit add the political aspect. The whiteface is the artistic aspect. I'm sure the Catholic Church would prefer we stop wearing the wimple and habit and just wore the whiteface (they'd be our best friends!). The reason the church to this day is so OUTRAGED about us is that this iconic symbol has been expropriated by SPI for our own purposes. And that is POLITICAL. Whether you choose to be conscious of that political aspect of your image or not, every time you put on your habit you are making a political statement. The makeup makes us pretty. (Tampa Bay Sisters, A note about whiteface 2010)

The iconic image of the queer nun in whiteface makeup, wimple and habit continues to be controversial. Mother Vicious alludes to the political divides between assimilation into mainstream society and a more radical critique of gender and sexual norms. Even as these rather broad descriptions of political strategy still hold, the Sisters continue to mark their presence in the world by donning the "cultural costume" of the community—drag—while "raising the skirts" of the Catholic Church to expose its heteropatriarchal intentions and values.[20]

To don the habit, veil, wimple, and makeup and to go out in public to do the work of the Sisters is called "manifesting." Sisters will often say: "Are you going to manifest at the event tonight?" Fully-Professed Sisters can choose whether or not to manifest at events sponsored or held by the Sisters, but whenever a Sister manifests, she represents

20. Thanks to Edward Little for this campy turn of phrase.

the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence to the public and, if she is a Black Veil, she may speak to the media and to the public on behalf of the Order (note that only Black Veils are able to do so). To manifest, then, is to show or demonstrate the ideas and practices of the Sisters in a public manner. This striking proclamation of guilt-free joy and community service is not, however, immediately obvious, unless you attend an event and hear the Sisters explain publicly the meaning of their mission and purpose. Yet, even those accustomed to crossing paths in the local gay neighbourhood with one of these "modern nuns" of the queer community may not have understood fully what the Sisters are doing. Sisters are usually on the street raising money, are on their way to/from a fundraising event or holding a public ritual on a street corner and the sudden encounter of a group of Sisters on the street can be jarring.

I had gone to Harvey's bar on the corner of 18th and Castro streets for a relaxing Sunday afternoon drink. I settled at a corner table and ordered my usual gin and tonic drink. The bar's large glass windows had been opened to let in the cool summer air. I noticed several Sisters entering the bar and ordering drinks. The atmosphere of the bar suddenly changed from a quiet Sunday afternoon tavern into a boisterous party. Sister Constance Craving of the Holey Desire and Sister Gina Tonic the Sparkling came over to where I was sitting and said hello. I asked, "You're Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence aren't you?" Sister Gina replied, "Yes we are darling. Are you a fan?" I answered, "Yes ma'am!" The Sisters then asked if I could

watch their purses for them. I was a little nervous, but I obliged them. I asked the Sisters if they were going to do a show in the bar. Sister Constance said, "No we're here to do a penny drive in the Castro." They explained that they were going to carry large buckets and walk up and down the Castro asking for donations for various charities. After a few minutes, the Sisters took their leave and I watched as Sister Constance made her way up 18th Street towards Market Street. As she walked up and down Castro Street, Sister Constance greeted nearly everyone there. Several people crossed the street and went over to greet her. Sister Constance's presence on the street drew the attention of many people, who greeted her as if she were a dear friend. As people turned the corner of 18th Street onto Castro Street, they were met by a six-foot something queer nun, their faces lit up and they would smile ear-to-ear. Sister Constance would always greet them, and from my window perch, I could hear her joke with them and ask for donations. I was shocked to see some people open their wallets and throw in a five or a ten dollar bill; one man threw in a twenty dollar bill. Later that afternoon, I looked out the bar window to see a large double-decker red tourist bus stop in the middle of the street and about a dozen Japanese tourists emerged and surrounded Sister

Constance. She was all too happy to oblige their request for group photos and some of the tourists even throw coins in the bucket.

That one afternoon watching the "penny drive" showed me that the Sisters' presence in the public streets, announced by their habits, wimple and makeup not only create the possibility of raising money for charities; it also creates the material and outward reality of their inward vows. Sister Constance helped serve the community by making people smile, feel happy, laugh at her campy jokes, and raised money. In large cities, it can be difficult to meet a stranger and feel happy and blessed to be in their presence. Even in the Castro, the obsession over "look" and "style" among gay men can, at least for a brief moment, be overcome by a guffaw of laughter and a wry smile from a Sister. This episode of street performance transformed the experience of the Castro; the sense of that place changed from a typical outing to the gay village into a moment of joy and laughter. The Sisters' outward sign of their inward grace is manifest in their aesthetic homage to the tradition of nuns announcing their presence in the world as a people made different by their special dedication to serve their communities. Their inward grace is also outwardly manifest in the way they relate to people

on the streets. I saw no one turn away in shyness from Sister Constance and no one protested. It was, perhaps, a typical day of ministry in the Castro District for the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence but it was an atypical experience of the meaning of that place.

V. Organization—San Francisco Sisters; Sisters around the World

The Sisters are internally organised according to their Constitution (by-laws) which establishes the Order as a not-for-profit charitable organisation. The United States tax code requires that in order for these groups to have tax-free status, they must have a board of directors who act as trustees with ultimate fiduciary responsibility for the organisation. According to Sister Hellen Wheels, when the Sisters were first organised in 1979 they raised funds under the non-profit status of the Sugar Plum Fairies street theatre group until they were awarded tax-free status in 1985 (Sister Hellen Wheels, 2010). The Constitution of the San Francisco Sisters establishes several offices—similar to most other charitable organisations—which are filled by Fully Professed Sisters in direct elections. The Order is led in its administration by the *Mother Abbess* or *Chair Nun* who organises the monthly meetings of the Order and helps manage the business of the Order. The *Secretary* records the minutes of meetings while the *Treasurer* accounts for the financial transactions of the Order—including writing donation cheques for non-profit organisations.

The Order of Indulgence, as a cultural phenomenon, has diffused around the world as Members travelled throughout the United States and Europe. The Sydney, Australia chapter was founded in 1981 by gay men who had gone to visit San Francisco,

and met the Sisters there and formed the order after returning to Australia. (Sr. Soami Angels on the Head of a Pin 2008). The Couvent de Paris was formed in 1989 and the Sydney chapter sent missionaries to London who started the House of Common Sluts in 1990 (Sisters World Orders 2010). In order to form a chapter of the Order of Indulgence, there must be at least four people willing to take the vows and to form the Order (Sisters Contact, 2010). An application is made to the United Nuns Privy Council in San Francisco and the Mistress of Missions guides the group through the necessary steps. Mission houses go through a process similar to that of individual members. The Mission must achieve charitable not-for-profit status and hold at least six public events (Vancouver Mission And Then There Were Nuns, 2010). However, each chapter "is an autonomous, unique group with its own Habits, culture and rules. Just as the San Francisco House is a reflection of the culture that surrounds it, so too is each House a reflection of its own environment" (Sisters World Orders 2010).

VI. Conclusions

On the one hand, the Sisters have created their own institution with rituals that "camp" the religious rituals of the Roman Catholic Church and its orders of nuns. On the other hand, the Sisters strive to create and nurture a feeling of community where they are. In whatever manner they are seen—as provocateurs taking aim at organised religion or as a queer religious phenomenon—they are artists that create queer identities, spiritualties, and communities. The work and "ministry of presence" of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence ranges from fundraising, hosting charity events, visiting people in hospital and in hospices, acting as educators in schools and "informing the cute boy at the bar

about the risks of unsafe sex." They connect strangers together through laughter and merrymaking and perform a particular vision of community through their presence at the cultural events that are important to queer people (Sisters What it Takes 2010).

In Chapter 3, I will focus more specifically on the Sisters' role as nuns: how they construct their image of nun in relation to Roman Catholic nuns and popular images of nuns and how they construct what I call nun space. The Sisters are contemporary queer nuns whose performances of that role shift and disrupt both common perceptions of queer community as well as queer spaces.

Chapter 3
"One Nun is Funny, Four is a Force"

Pink Saturday has been organised by the Sisters since 1998 and is held on the Saturday before the annual LGBT Pride Parade. The Castro is fenced off to traffic and the crowds swell the streets and the local bars. It is hard to walk in that orgy of queerness but, squeezing past cute guys always presents the opportunity for a quick flirting glance or an "accidental" brush against a bum tight in jeans. Men in pink thongs hang out of third-storey windows, gyrating to the house music blaring from within. Even though the police coax these brazen souls away from window ledges, they re-appear as soon as the police are gone, sometimes without their jock straps. This carnival of flesh, glitter and eroticism contributes to the festive air of that oh so gay weekend, where the city of San Francisco nearly doubles in size with the influx of queer peoples from around the world to celebrate Pride in one of the queerest cities on earth.

It was the summer of 2002, and it was the first time I attended Pink Saturday. I couldn't believe how many queers there were. I turned the corner of 18th and Castro and saw a crowd of what looked like drag queens dressed as nuns. I didn't really know for sure who these people were, but

there was something that drew me to them. I saw one of them rubbing what I assumed to be holy oil on the forehead of one gay man. He bowed to the nun and went skipping away. Could he have just been anointed by that nun? Wow! How amazing. I didn't expect to see something so religious at this riotous queer street party. I sheepishly approached the nun and asked her for a blessing. She asked my name and I told her, "Jason." She replied:

"Jason. Jason of the Argonauts. The bold leader on stormy seas. You are a dreamer and a leader and you will go on a journey with many adventures. Keep strong, keep your queer faith and you will be rewarded with a golden prize."

She dipped her thumb in a vial of oily glitter and rubbed it on my forehead, making the sign of a cross, and said:

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

While she was doing this, I saw her name tag and it read "Sister Lolita Me Into Temptation" and the logo said "Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence." This was my first encounter with the Sisters. Was I really blessed? I'm not

sure. Have I gone on many adventures? Absolutely. Really, it doesn't matter if one believes that the nuns are channelling mystical powers. Something about being in their presence can make you feel very special and that encounter has intrigued me all these years. I've grown to love these moments in the streets. Watching the Sisters bless people is both so very San Francisco but it is also at the same time definitely not what one expects to see happen on any city street. When a Sister appears in public all alone, she can be amusing and harmless. Yet, when there are four Sisters in public, they are a force to be reckoned with. You simply must respond in some way to a group of queer nuns on the street.

It just screams: QUEER!!!

Nuns performing queer art!

Nuns performing queer community space wherever they go!

Nuns performing a very ancient tradition!

I. Introduction

In this chapter I explore the Order's role as nuns. More precisely, I will discuss the performances of nun by the Sisters in their particular historical and spatial contexts. The purpose of this discussion, then, is to demonstrate the variety of performances by the Sisters as nuns specifically, to reflect on the construction of what I call "nun space" and its meanings for the culture of the queer community in San Francisco. As mentioned in

Chapter 1, this focus is meant not to limit our attention to the Sisters as only nuns, but to broaden our understanding of the variety of performances of the Sisters and to focus on the performance of various kinds of cultural spaces. The Sisters are most easily recognised and identified as nuns. Yet, as this chapter will show, just how the role of nun is performed and, specifically, where it is performed, yields a more profound knowledge of the relationship between queer community spaces and the performances that both constitute and are constituted by them.

The chapter begins with an explanation of the various meanings and reasons behind the choice of "nun" as a vehicle for community service, and moves on to highlight the history of nuns as a source for cultural satire and campy humour. The chapter concludes by examining major performances by the Sisters in their "callings" as nuns. In keeping with the performance geography approach of this thesis, the chapter will focus on the performance of "nun spaces" that are inextricably linked to the construction of the feelings of queer community, the production of its queer practices of community, and the reflection of queer community values.

II. Why Nuns?

The Sisters' performances of "nun" are the most obvious characteristic of the Order of Indulgence and, given their dress and organisational structure and rituals, the easiest to describe. Yet this role involves a rather complex set of inversions, incongruities and boundary-crossings manifest through campy (un)doings and re-performances of 'nun.'

The Sisters, as nuns, not only re-work our taken-for-granted performances of nun, so that the most recognizable symbols of a nun—woman, dress, work—are put into

signifying crisis, that is, the process of re/cognizing what and who a nun is—on the street or in a bar or elsewhere—becomes complicated. Adding to this, there is as much potential for them to problematize the meaning of nun, gleefully perverting the traditional meaning of who can be a nun and what a nun does, leading to confusion, laughter and heresy. Circulating in these performances and the witnessing thereof are streams of competing rhetorics between the Sisters and the Roman Catholic institutional discourse of the place and role of women in the Church and homosexuality. The Roman Catholic Church permits women only to be nuns. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence permit anyone, regardless of their gender identity, to be a nun. Roman Catholic groups, such as the Catholic League, accuse the Sisters of "mocking" Catholic nuns. The Sisters simply reply that they *are* nuns, doing the same work as Catholic nuns. The Sisters recognise queers as worthy of service and ministry by and for other self-identified queers. As Sister Hystorectoria said in 1981, "[t]he truest religion in the world is theatre, or ritual. On a broad philosophical range, we are being religious in the truest sense, but merely by a different definition" (Thompson 1994, 221).

Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Church, with its 1976 and 1986 declarations on homosexuality, claims that it can minister to the souls of homosexuals while at the same time proclaiming that homosexual acts are themselves "intrinsically disordered" (*Persona Humana* 1975). Recognising the harm and hypocrisy in this logic, the Sisters "rob" the Roman Catholic Church of its rhetorical and material claims to being the unique and universal progenitor of ministry to any particular community. The Sisters argue that the Roman Catholic Church has been responsible for oppressive structures and attitudes in the United States that have resulted in US Government inaction on

HIV/AIDS, continued discrimination against gays and lesbians and stigma. The Sisters don their own versions of the Catholic nun habit, modifying them to look like the community. The Second Vatican Council recommended in the 1960s that Catholic nuns retire their traditional habits (Kuhns 2003, 144). However the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence carry on the tradition of wearing clothing that "dramatically announces its wearer to the world" (Kuhns 2003, 5).

In keeping with their life vows, Sisters are concerned about community activism and about giving something back to the community that had allowed them to find a place for their own personal freedom. Whenever they discuss their role of nun, Sisters repeatedly give examples of the early days of HIV/AIDS activism as an exemplary reason for the Sisters' enduring commitment to serving their community (*In the Life* 2009). The HIV/AIDS pandemic sharpened the focus of the Sister's work since it was HIV/AIDS that catalyzed the San Francisco Order's mandate to service (In the Life 2009; Sisters Sistory 2010). AIDS also illuminates the thrust behind many of the Sisters' practices because of their roots in community-based advocacy movements. HIV/AIDS is also the social-cultural-political context in which the Sisters retool the symbols, meanings and embodied-material practices of "nun."

III. Popular Nuns

Images of nuns (dressed in various kinds of habits and secular dress) appear in a variety of popular culture forms: from nun dolls who box, to mugs, buttons, cartoons and Halloween costumes, to characters in film and television and in the theatre. The representations of nun range from the sassy Sister Mary Clarence in *Sister Act* (1992) to the noble Sister Helen Préjean in *Dead Man Walking* (1995); they can be as sexy and

provocative as the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence or as meek and musical as Postulant Maria in *The Sound of Music* (1965). Theatre historian Roger Baker has written about the history of drag in the performing arts and he points out that, throughout the history of men appearing on stage dressed as nuns, the type of humour evoked by these satirical performances is "broad comedy" and is a "recurring comic motif" in European theatrical performances (1994, 141). Based on an overturning of common knowledge of what nuns are/are not supposed to do, this type of comedy, while "apparently harmless," Baker writes, harbours a "fundamental criticism, one which needles a hypocritical church and its sexual intolerance" (1994, 142).

This section will explore the queer elements of this type of "satirical nun" in relation to queer cultural histories and the construction of queer communal spaces by means of performing satire. While we might not consider the Middle Ages as a particularly "queer time and place," the overturning of taken-for-granted assumptions about nuns, the challenges thrown in the face of the Church have a long history that, if it does not queer it, at least troubles the core of the institution. For example, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* portrays a Nun-Prioress obsessed with proper table manners, who is characterised as vain and, arguably, a glutton. Chaucer describes her attention to fine dining this way: "Her table manners were admirable: she never let a morsel fall from her lips, nor wet her fingers too deeply in the sauce; daintily she carried a morsel to her lips, taking care that no drop should fall on her breast: she took much pleasure in proper etiquette" (Beidler 2006, 21). The Nun-Prioress is deeply aware of the public performance she is putting on. Chaucer's erotic description of her lips, wet fingers and breasts draws our attention to precisely those things that are to be hidden underneath a

veil. The Nun-Prioress' pleasure in proper table manners is uncharacteristic of what we might think of as typical nun behaviour. Instead of portraying the Nun-Prioress as a holy person devoted to God and serving the poor, Chaucer describes her as obsessed with fine dining. Chaucer's depiction of a nun turns our ideas of a nun upside down and is a satirical jab at the institutionalised power of the Church. This turning upside down of our taken-for-granted assumptions of nun behaviour can be ironic or satirical; it can offer a moral lesson or simply it can be "broad humour."

The Sisters queer these parodies of religious symbols, linking their parodies of the Church, as an institution of power, to queer political movements and cultural milieus. The Sisters started as a group of gay men challenging the gay culture of the late 1970s and its fetishizing of the gay male clone. Today, the Sisters challenge the Roman Church for its homophobic and AIDS-phobic doctrines and practices and, sometimes with tongue-in-cheek, they called for the institution to live up to its message of love and peace. The Sisters also reflect back the values of the gay community, celebrating itself as a community while highlighting the suffering and immediate needs of its members. While the Sisters are a specific example of queer political camp performances, at the same time, their formation of a collective with a self-imposed rule of serving a particular community reflects the model and mission of Catholic institutions of religious orders. The Sisters' queer performances of nuns is a stream of radical drag performance art, re-tooled for their own purposes, and established a precedent in the queer world for using radical drag for political satire, consciousness-raising and community building.[21] The next section will

21. Roger Baker describes radical drag as "a more playful, almost androgynous, attitude to both clothing and gender," a "genderfuck" drag politics, as it were. He traces the development of radical drag performers from the 1960s to the 1980s in *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts* (1994: 239-258).

discuss various cases of the performance of nun and the analysis will show the interrelationship between performance and space.

IV. Performing Nun Spaces

The following section is focused on three kinds of performances of nun: manifesting; memorialising; and mirroring. I will define these terms at the beginning of each section and intersperse observations and stories, providing specific examples of performances to illustrate that performances are not only connected to their spaces, but also constitutive of their spaces. In the following sections I will argue that the ways in which the Sisters appear in public space, 1) constitute a queering of the public sphere, 2) change the feel of these public spaces, and 3) heighten the meaning of queer community by reflecting on its values and responsibilities through their performances.

A. Manifesting

When Sisters appear in public wearing habits and whiteface, this is known as "manifesting" or "being out in face." Drawing on the meaning of the word manifest as display, show and appearance, the Sisters appear in public, announcing their presence through their clothing, makeup and actions. This act of "appearance" is symbolised by their particular choice of habits, embodied in their public actions and words and encountered by audiences, both as impromptu happenings and planned rituals.

I walked into the Stud bar on a Saturday evening. I had only been there a few times but I had come to enjoy the atmosphere. It was packed tightly with a lot of burly men. Although very excited and eager to be in the bar, I was still rather shy about these things so I moved to the most

remote dark corner I could find. A few drinks later, the door flew open and I could just barely make out through the crowd a group of Sisters. As some made their way to the bar for drinks, other Sisters spread out in the bar and I could feel the "mood" of the bar change. It wasn't really a drastic change but things certainly felt different with Sisters in the room. A Sister approached me and said "Good evening." I was immediately scared to death. I mean, I enjoyed seeing the Sisters out and about and I loved going to their rituals or being surprised by a Sister-sighting in and around the city. I was still very nervous about having one speak directly to me. What did she want from me? Was she cruising me? She asked me how I was doing and I volunteered a sheepish "Fine." She continued the conversation: "Are you having fun tonight?" I replied, "Sure." She went on: "Well, here's a little something that you might need." I looked down and she pulled a condom out of what looked like an Easter basket that had been bedazzled by a drag queen. She also handed me a card as she winked and said her good-bye. I looked at the card and it read: "Not trying to fuck you. Just wanted to say 'hello.'" I noticed this occurrence several more times in other bars. This ritual of hospitality reminded me that

one of the most important parts of community is to notice each other as human beings.

The Sisters' appearance in public, always officially done "in face," announces a kind of self to the public, invites a response from the public, and adds to the wide variety of human expression of self. But these appearances are also connected to their ritual performances in public places. Rituals of hospitality occur whenever Sisters greet people in public places in "penny drives" or as "gate minders" at events such as Pink Saturday where people donate money upon entering the space. Their physical appearance announces the individual as a Sister and also allows them to interact with people in a particular way. Sisters also individually choose the specific designs and accessories for their makeup and their habits, and these aesthetic choices reflect the particular nun's political and spiritual identities at the time. As the nuns appear, often individually at first, then in groups, and finally as a swarm on the streets and bars, the sense of different and differing personal identities is overwhelmed by a sea of colourful habits and veils (quite the opposite of traditional Roman Catholic nun apparel which are uniform in the colour, style and presentation of the particular order—yet not any less jolting these days when they appear as a group in the streets). This effect of appearing in public as a group with a particular style of clothing and makeup also creates the opportunity for rituals of interaction that work to create a different feel to people's experience of public places.

In many large cities, allowance is usually made for a very wide variety of displays in public—from street theatre to strange fashion decisions to buskers and solitary protestors. In fact, the more or less polite indifference (what Lofland calls *anomie*) to the spectrum of the presentations of selves partially gives the urban its character (Lofland's "the world of strangers") and is also what attracts some individuals to live in urban

spaces (Lofland 1973; 1998). However, these displays, or performances, of everyday life (Goffman 1973 [1959]) rarely invite observers into a public dialogue and are usually rendered merely as colourful urban backdrop of urban life. Public displays are not mere backdrop; the public display is the performative constitution of the public sphere (Figure 11).

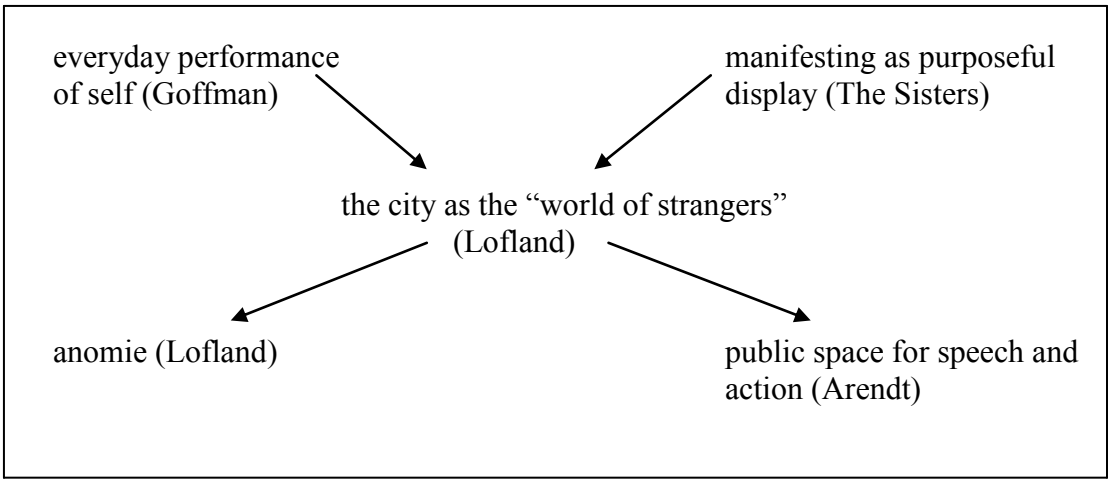

Figure 11. How the Sisters construct public space.

The Sisters' manifestation in public space illustrates the point Hannah Arendt made in her book *The Human Condition*, that the public sphere is constituted by making appearances in public (Arendt 1998 [1958]). Even though Arendt's philosophy is rooted in classical Greek notions of society and despite her own somewhat conservative social theories, her notion of "the space of appearance" is an invaluable tool for understanding the constructions of the queer public spaces. The space of appearance, in Arendt's terms, is given to those shared common spaces created between individuals by speech *and* action (Arendt 1989 [1958], 176). For quotidian display to constitute the space of appearance, in Arendtian terms, displays must invite, or at the very least point to, and engage in, a discussion of concerns about our world. Arendt called for a public space "in

the widest possible sense" not in order to make a case for diversity as such, but because the plurality of human expression is constitutive of human life in the world—in fact, for Arendt, the "world" as such is made real by means of the space of appearance (Arendt 1989 [1958], 198 and Section 7 of Chapter 2). The "space of appearance," then, is the place and the occasion for the individual disclosure of an identity in the presence of others, where a certain kind of collective affiliation (at multiple scales) is possible.[22] Don Mitchell puts this in Lefebvre's terminology and calls this kind of space, *spaces for representation*—"within which a political movement can stake out the space that allows it to be seen" (Mitchell 1995, 115). In doing so, political groups both constitute for themselves and others, as a public. This is, again in Arendtian terms, necessary for *speech* and *action* to take place (Figure 11).

Yet, these appearances in public are also the subject of social dramas—contestations about who is part of the public (see Fuoss 1995) and which issues ought to be of concern in the public sphere (see Arendt 1989 [1958]; Mitchell 1995; and Staeheli et al 2009). This is why definitive conclusions are difficult to make concerning the activities of the space of appearance and the constitution of the public sphere. The capability of a community or political movement to perform its identity for itself and for the public works, as Edward Little has noted in his essay "Towards a Poetics of Popular Theatre," along a continuum of affirmation and intervention.[23] On the one hand, locally-specific festivals and rituals allow communities to affirm for themselves and for others

22. Mitchell (1995, 129 n.11) quotes Howell (1993, 314) to emphasize that Arendt's concept of public space is particularly geographic in nature, it is about the materiality of the spaces for representations.
23. This capability is not always respected. In totalitarian regimes, for example, the agency of nearly all community groups and political movements is so severely curtailed that public display is nearly impossible. This is not to say, however, that these groups do not affirm and intervene in ways different from the ones being analyzed here (see Saba Mahmood's (2005) analysis of Islamic feminist groups in Egypt in *The Politics of Piety: Islamic Renewal and the Feminist Subject* and Bickford's (1995) discussion on the limits of this capability imposed on people by racism.

the "who" and the "what" of the community "as it is currently constituted and understood" (Little 2006, 167). On the other hand, protest demonstrations, fundraisers, rallies and public declarations work as interventions for "social change, or community advocacy in the face of a dominant or threatening other" (Little 2006, 167). Yet this continuum must be kept in balance, according to Little, for

> if the balance tips too far towards affirmation, the result can appear sentimental, nostalgic, self-indulgent or self-congratulatory, and lacking in either social or political analysis. Too far in the other direction, and the work risks the stridency of agitational propaganda and the alienation of community members. (Little 2006, 167)

Yet the continuum model need not presume that rituals cannot be interventions, and protests cannot also be affirmations, and I do not believe this is Little's point.[24] Rather, as Fuoss notes, "the relationship between social dramas and cultural performances is particularly intimate" and both contain the possibility "to transform the enactment of roles in everyday life" (Fuoss 1995, 10-11).

I have mentioned previously that cultural performances in social dramas are also spatialised in that they are concerned with the spaces of communities so that they may become public, that they be able to be seen (Mitchell 1995, 115). The *world*, constituted by the space of appearance, must be allowed to appear to all and this requires that public spaces, whether virtual or physical, operate not under a regime of private commercial interest but in the interest of publicness, as Arendt describes it: "that everything that

24. I argue that the continuum's tension is also reflected in public debate within LGBT communities—the processes of articulating the relationships between identities like sexuality, gender and ethnicity—and between LGBT communities and other publics—such as the debates over gay marriage in the United States.

appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity" (Arendt 1998 [1958], 50). What, then, is nun space? Nun space emerges whenever nuns appear "in face" in public spaces. What goes on in nun space and why it is important for queer public cultures is explored in the next sub-sections.

B. Memorializing

When the Sisters conduct rituals to remember the "nuns of the above"—Sisters who have passed away—and people who have died from AIDS, they enact a memorial to the departed. In addition, their history spans some of the most volatile moments in the history of the gay and lesbian community in San Francisco. Therefore, the institution itself carries with it the embodied memory of those historic moments. As nuns, the Sisters conduct rituals of memory, performing the archive of individual lives as participants in the social drama of AIDS within the gay and lesbian community. The spaces created by these ritual performances of memorial, because they are conducted by nuns and are constituted by the performance of the role of nun, are called nun spaces. One of the main aspects of the performance of nun space that I encountered in San Francisco was the memorial ritual.

It's June 2006 and I had heard that the Sisters were planning a memorial service to commemorate the 25th Anniversary of the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. For weeks now, the streetlights in the Castro had been decorated with large purple irises that lit up at night. I wasn't sure what the irises meant until someone came up to

me on the street and handed me a flyer. It announced the Memorial ceremony to be led by the Sisters and that irises were the ancient Greek symbol of "memory." A few days before the memorial, a fence-like structure made out of tree limbs had been temporarily erected on the south-east corner of 18th and Castro streets. The fence was attached to the corner wall of the Bank of America building. Symbols of the memorial were attached to the fence, including flowers, small pieces of paper with writing, memorabilia such as photos, journals, and a flower garland with small slips of paper on which were the names of some of the nuns of the above—nuns who had passed away. A plastic sheet had been hung over the fence to protect the items from the misty fog.

On the afternoon of the memorial ceremony, a small group of people had gathered on the street corner. I noticed a banner had been placed above the fence that read:

Promise for the Future

Marking 25 Years of HIV/AIDS

June 2006 marks 25 years since our community was first impacted by HIV/AIDS. This is a moment to remember those we have lost.

This is also the moment to make or renew our commitments to help prevent the spread of HIV. Some

of us had already made this promise. Some of us have never been asked.

The poster outlined a promise which entails learning what each of us can do to stop the spread of HIV and what the community can do to help us remember and educate ourselves about HIV. I found this to be very moving, but also a little scary. I had never known anyone who died from AIDS and I was too scared to get an HIV test. I knew that I should, but facing the reality of getting tested was too much for me to handle. And yet, looking around at the growing crowd and perusing the memorial items on the fence, I started thinking about the meaning of "community."

A few Sisters gathered and announced that they were going to read the names of people who had died from AIDS over the years. Sister Mary Peter told us that by saying the names of the departed out loud, we breathed in their spirits and their memories and they became present with us again. She asked us to take a deep breath and invite the spirits of our friends and lovers to that place. With that, Sisters took turns reading names aloud. Within moments, a gust of wind came along and lifted the plastic sheet all the way up in the air, uncovering the ritual items on the fence. The names of the nuns of the above on the garland fluttered and everyone seemed to get the

shivers in unison. I shivered. The air suddenly seemed colder.

Looking back on that event, the ceremony made me think about how a community commemorates those who it has lost. By naming those lost to AIDS and calling each of us to promise to do our part in the struggle with HIV/AIDS, I felt like the Sisters were including me in their definition of "community." I struggled for weeks after that event with this notion. Was I a member of the community? What did the meaning of community mean to me?

If the memories of those gone before became present in the midst of that memorial ceremony, I felt that I at least had to respect their memories. Perhaps that is what the Sisters meant by "community"—that being part of the community meant we each had to remember those gone before and promise to do our part.

Previously I noted that when the Sisters appear in public "in face" they announce their identities in public, they create a public, and I argued that their cultural performances within social dramas participate in the construction of the public sphere. As the Sisters appear in public, nun space emerges. The Sisters, announced by their dress, makeup, behaviour, and speech, insinuate themselves into the everyday space of areas in San Francisco that the community identifies as meaningful to them. Their memorial ceremonies and rituals affirm these locales as queer community spaces.

For the 25th Anniversary of HIV/AIDS, the Sisters changed the experience of the quotidian street corner into the site for a memorial service. Even though street corners offer the possibility of many different sorts of professions and activities, they are places where a pause in the movement of everyday life is safely expected. People pause at street corners while waiting to cross the street, people wait for buses or hail taxis and people pause to get their bearings when in a new city. Street corners serve all these purposes, but because18th and Castro Streets are in the gay neighbourhood, this particular street corner was, on that day, turned into a memorial site, a place that recognised and recalled the memories of loss, grief, anger and celebration.

The experience of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in San Francisco runs deep. It is hard to find anyone who has not been personally touched by illness, death and loss related to the pandemic. At the AIDS Memorial the Sisters read the names of people who have died from AIDS and, in doing so, the Sisters were witnesses to that loss. Those of us who participated in the ritual (by listening and being present) bore witness to their testimonies of loss. Bearing witness, as well as receiving that witness, is a central aspect of Arendt's space of appearance. For Arendt, the reality of the world (its real-ness) is conveyed through telling the stories of our lives to others (Arendt 1998 [1958], 180). It is also through narrative witness and its reception that our lives, although they may be short, have the potential to be remembered by others long after we are gone. In gathering together, we can remember people through our actions and our thoughts.

In Arendt's terms, the city—or the *polis*—is not the physical site per se, but "the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be"

(Arendt 19989 [1958]: 198). Therefore, the space of appearance, spatially and temporally conditioned, creates the possibility for people's thoughts and deeds to be remembered. Bearing witness to the lives, i.e. thoughts and actions, of those who have died from HIV/AIDS allows them to live on in memory. Bearing that witness in the space of appearance creates a memorial space, through the performance of these life-narratives, wherein an ethical relationship emerges between the one testifying and those who receive the testimony.[25] The ethics of this relationship require that both testifier and bearer of the testimony be able to recognise each other, *prima facie*, in the space of appearance, as "citizens" of the *polis*.[26]

The 25th Anniversary Memorial was possible because the public rituals of mourning that gay men and lesbians produced in the early 1980s radically transgressed and transformed the conventions of public grieving. Since queers had often been excluded from religious institutions that ritualised grief, gays and lesbians created their own memorials (candlelight vigils are but one example). In doing so, they also transgressed the spatiality of these rituals of grieving and remembering by conducting them in the places where the community gathered, the places that had meaning for gay men and lesbians. The memorial ritual, as a ritual, gathers people together into what David Román calls "the space of performance." Memorial rituals, he writes, "provide us with the space necessary to attempt to reperform [sic] the bonds of kinship that enable the

25. On the relationship between the one who bears witness and the one who receives that witness, see McAfee (2005).

26. I am not using "citizen" here in a legal manner. Rather, I am following a line in Arendt's thought, that if we appear together in the space of appearance and are concerned with public thoughts and actions, then we are to be considered as full participatory members of the *polis.* Barriers to accessing the space of appearance and participation was a central political issue for Arendt, although she took a minimalist approach (see Arendt1998 [1958]). However, the issue of full participation in the *polis* is important for queer and marginalized communities. French sociologist Didier Éribon first made the links between Arendt and queer politics in *Réflections sur la question gay* (1999)—published in English as *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (2004).

possibility of community" (Román 1998, 26). The space of performance in this case is a street corner in the heart of the Castro District. The time of the ritual notes twenty-five years of the pandemic. Together the multiple meanings of that space and the differing experiences and interpretations of the AIDS pandemic could have led to a bit of confusion as to the purpose of the ritual. The 25th Anniversay ritual, however, was extremely simple. The reading of names of people who have died from AIDS allows each of those people named to be remembered publicly and the underlying quality of pausing in public to ritually gather the community together, effectively slowing down the everyday activity of a busy street corner, changed the experience of the space.

This temporary shift of the rules of behaviour and expectations of commercial street corners and bars and other public places allows people infected with / affected by HIV/AIDS to assert themselves in the *polis*. The Sisters created a ritual that gives people the chance to perform their own embodied narratives in the space of appearance—declaring their "citizenship" while creating alternative bonds of kinship through these narrative performances. These narratives carry the potential to change the *polis*, whereas the space of appearance is potentially widened, creating opportunities for shifting the definition of what is or ought to be of public concern.[27]

This aspect of Arendt's argument parallels some of what Stanley-Niaah has written about Dancehall spaces. In her discussion of the various uses of Dancehall space, Stanley-Niaah notes that some of the Dancehall events are held to memorialise a member of the community who had died. She writes that:

27. This has been one of the effects of AIDS activism—to make health, prevention, treatment and issues of suffering, loss and dying issues of *political* concern—and is taken up in Chapter 5 (Activism).

> communal memorializing claims city space, and voices individual and collective creativity and subjectivies, in a long tradition of black performance. … Repeated participation in memorial dances stamps the deceased firmly in the minds of participants. … The landscape becomes engraved with the memory of those who have meant much to dancehall patrons. (Stanley-Niaah 2010, 99).

I argue that community memorial rituals do this work, not just in dancehall settings, but whenever communities ritualize the memory of people they have lost. Within the space of AIDS memorial rituals, the community is also, as David Román reminds us, provided with a "cathartic experience, a sanctioned space where public and communal grieving releases emotions and supplies ritualistic closure. In the process, memorial services enable the rebuilding of community despite its loss" (Román 1998, 23). It is to the role of nun space in building queer community that I now turn.

C. Mirroring

Taking care of and serving the community is one of the life vows Sisters take upon their elevation to fully-professed Black Veil status. The way the Sisters take care of and serve the community is through fundraising, sex education and other advocacy programs. They also take care of the space of the community with their keen awareness of the possibilities of performance to gather people together and to share experiences. Taking care of the community also requires taking care of the space of the community.

I had gone to the Castro on a chilly and foggy Friday night. After a drink in Daddy's Bar, I walked down Castro Street towards 18th Street when I heard shouting and saw a

crowd gathered on the corner. As I approached I heard people saying, "It's just a bunch of Christians" and "Homophobic crazies." What was going on? I moved closer and saw a man in his early 40s with bleached blond hair and stylish clothing, standing in front of a small group of men and women, yelling: "I used to be gay. I used to be a meth addict. I used to live in that apartment right over there. But Jesus found me and saved me from all that. Turn to Jesus. He will heal your homosexual afflictions." I did a bit of eye rolling at this, but I was also a little shocked that, of all places, this group of people would come to the heart of the Castro on one of the busiest nights in the neighbourhood and say such horrendous and hateful things. Suddenly, an elderly man of about 75 approached the younger man and said: "Get out of here! We don't want you here! You're full of hate. This is our neighbourhood. Go home! Shoo! Shoo! Shoo!" He waived his hands as if he was trying send away some pesky animal. People around me were laughing, well, because it was rather hilarious to see an older man saying "shoo" to Christians. Then, from around the corner came a group of Sisters wearing flowing white robes. Everything seemed to shift into slow motion. The Sisters surrounded the group of Christians. One Sister, I believe it was Mary Timothy Simplicity, spoke and said:

"Your words are killing our community." Suddenly, Sisters started to slowly fall down on the sidewalk as if dead. I realised now that the Sisters were performing the effects of hate speech. Then, when all the Sisters were on the ground at the feet of the Christians, Mary Timothy took out a vial and sprinkled what looked like glitter on the "dead" Sisters. She said, "Arise!" and one-by-one Sisters stood to their feet and raised their arms. Underneath their robes were long sticks attached to their sleeves and, as they raised their arms, their robes began to form a shield, a fence, blocking our view of the Christians. The gathered crowd applauded and cheered. The angry older man was still yelling but his voice was drowned out by the cheers. When the Sisters lowered their arms, the Christians looked terrified and they got up and left.

With this ritual of care, the Sisters serve the community by protecting the physical space of the community—a way of reasserting the territory of the Castro as queer space—as well as providing a ritual that is an alternative way to deal with the emotional pain caused by such hate speech. When Evangelical Christians began demonstrating in the Castro on weekends, starting in late summer of 2006, the Sisters responded with their own devised rituals that performed a protective barrier inside the space of the community. This shows that the Castro's long history as the centre for gay community in San Francisco has made it a target for these groups. And yet, while the boundaries of the Castro are permeable, the Sisters are there to defend the place as a space for queers. The Sisters' ritual

reminded those of us who witnessed it that there were alternative means of dealing with this type of intrusion. The angry older gentleman was, likely, acting out of his remembrance of oppression and stigma and was upset that Christians would dare come to "our" neighbourhood with hate speech. The Sisters showed us that this kind of speech kills people, that hate leads to low self-esteem and disavows our experiences of our lives. Again, the Sisters performed another tenet of their vows: "to expiate stigmatic guilt." No doubt there was some discussion as to how the Sisters would respond. They borrowed the aesthetic form from the real life "angel" displays used by people in Laramie, Wyoming (1998-1999) who challenged Fred Phelps' protest of Mathew Shepard's death and funeral by showing up in angel costumes and raising their "wings" to create a barrier around the protestors (see Kaufman et al 2001).[28] Even if we can only entertain these positive values of (literally) standing against hate speech, we can do so only as long as the discursive moment in which they are affirmed lasts.

The Sisters' affirmative intervention on behalf of and alongside the community, works as a *mirror*. Rather than thinking of a large mirror, a flat surface that reflects the larger community, I suggest we think (even belabour the metaphor) of the mirror as a disco ball. If we think of the Sisters' actions to defend the Castro as a flat surface mirror, reflecting the space of the community, then we are left with a dichotomy. This dichotomy would be one between "queer community" and "heteronormative society." Rather than reduce the complexities of these territorial and ideological battles to this dichotomy, I suggest we think of the Sisters' performances of community as complex. It

28. It should be noted that during the 2008 Election Campaign, the debate over California's Proposition 8 (repeal of gay marriage bill) led to heated and allegedly physical encounters between gay activists, Sisters and Christian demonstrators. These kinds of altercations appear to be continuing. See Hemmelgam 3 February 2011.

is very difficult to reflect clearly even a single image in a disco ball; each of the multiple tiny mirrors catches light and reflects it in different directions. The disco ball metaphor represents the different ways that the Sisters engage in the work of mirroring the queer community's values. The Sisters care for the queer community and the spaces that the queer community finds meaningful, and they do so not only by defending the space of the Castro against Evangelical Christians. The Sisters also reflect the values of dignity, respect and inclusion by responding to hatred with care and love for their community. The disco ball metaphor allows for analyses of the Sisters' performances to reflect the ability of the Sisters to respond to the needs of their community in multiple ways.

A few days after this event, an article published in the *Bay Area Reporter* revealed how the Sisters interpreted this event. In the interview for the article, Sister Mary Timothy said that "all are welcome in the community if they are really trying to bring healing and love to people." (Akers, Sisters meet fundies 2006). Sister Mary Peter, referring directly to the performance of the "die-in," said,

> [we were] taking down to the sidewalk with us all the shame and fear, guilt and secrets that hold back our community. Then you saw us all rise again, celebrating joyfully that we had survived and come back to share the joy and beauty alive in our community. We are trying to work with the energy of that space turning it back into a corner where people meet each other joyfully with hope and love. This event started as a response. Now it is an affirmation to raise joy and share love in our neighbourhood. (Akers, Sisters meet fundies 2006).

What these interviews show is that the Sisters' use a particularly complex notion of the word community. For these Sisters, community is the place of welcome for everyone where "healing and love" exist. Community is also a physical site, where "people meet each other joyfully with hope and love."

The nun space in the above episode is a space of care for the community by directly protecting it from hate speech by means of rituals of hospitality, rituals of memory and rituals of care. The Evangelical Christians transformed the space of the Castro into a space for hate. The Sisters offered a reinscription of the values of the community through their ritual, using words that the Evangelical Christians also used (love and healing). However, they used these words to reverse the discourse of the Christians, queering those terms for use within the space of the queer community. This particular ritual performance of nun space also reminded the witnesses that community spaces have meaning beyond merely the potential to gather people for entertainment purposes. This performance of nun space used a ritual to intervene in the "spatial sphere of contestation," where the Sisters and the Christians confronted one another with a opposing interpretations over the meaning of the space of the Castro (Fuoss 1997, 89). Because the both the Sisters and the Christians recognised the Castro as the centre of queer life in San Francisco, the very site of the interaction between the two symbolically and materially represents the struggles between religion and sexuality. The ritual "die-in / resurrection / angel wing protection" employed the site of the Castro as a source of both community affirmation and intervention. Site-specific performances can draw our attention to the histories of locales, "the settings in which social relations are constituted," and the "local structure of feeling" associated with place (Pearson and

Shanks 2001, 152).[29] However, these local structures of feeling are not necessarily univocal nor are they impermeable to criticism, as the Christians in the Castro demonstrate. Yet the Sisters' use of the term community is not without potential problems. The the site of the Castro District is both a place for constructing meanings of community and a place for contesting its meanings.

Interpreting the Sisters' performance that uses terms like *community* and *values* requires thinking critically about the use of these terms. On the one hand, "community" is a term that can invoke the notion of a sovereign territory with a bounded set of social relations (Anderson 1991 [1983] 19). And "values" is a term that is often used to oppress, suppress and otherwise limit self-expression.[30] Using a phrase like "community values" to refer to a queer community is jarring because of the ways that phrase has been used to oppress and marginalise queer people. What do the Sisters mean by queer community values? Finding an answer to this question requires an interpretation of the Sisters' performances of these concepts that looks at, as Edward Little notes, how a community-based art project (such as the Sisters' performances):

> presents the human condition of the community to itself in aesthetic ways that open space for new perspectives, dialogic engagement on both visceral and intellectual levels, and a demonstrated potential for social change. This is the measure of a project's relevance to its community. (Little 2006, 167)

With this in mind, the Sisters use the discourse of community values to demonstrate that they imagine the space of the Castro District as a neighbourhood, as a meeting place, as a

29. For more on the ways site-specific art practices reveal local knowledges, see Kwon 2002.
30. I am thinking, here, of the US Supreme Court guidelines on censorship that call for courts to uphold "community standards," a term that is dangerously vague.

space with energy, and as a space where love, hope, joy, healing and sharing can take place. The Sisters' idealistic use of community values, no doubt represents the intentions and values of their die-in performance. If the Sisters indeed subscribe to such an ideal of community values, then their performances in the Castro *reflect* their perspective of what a queer community is and where it is located in space. To say the least, people who live and habituate the Castro District are likely to have different perspectives of the meaning of that space. A lasting effect, however, of the Sisters' ritual performance in front of the Evangelical Christians is, potentially, a dialogue about the use, and meaning of, the Castro and the development of a structure of feeling in the space of the Castro—a feeling that the potential exists for the experience of the space as a space of love, joy, hope, sharing, meeting and healing. Analysis of the discourse of community values in relation to queer spaces should keep in mind that the term community is complex and is put into operation in discourse for different political purposes.

Cultural performances within queer communities, such as the ones discussed in this chapter, that are concerned with positive and life-affirming responses in the face of hatred and exclusion, have real material effects on queer bodies and identities, on the ways that spaces are constructed and affect the ways these spaces are given meaning. The intentions and values of the Sisters demonstrate their commitments to queer community values and motivate their interventions on the side of marginalised groups that challenge the damaging effects of hate speech and create the possibility for social change.

V. Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the Sisters' role as nuns, addressing how they constitute nun space by entering into the space of appearance by means of manifesting, or going out in public "in face" with their makeup and habits. This enunciation of the nuns' individual and collective identities creates opportunities for rituals and social interactions in public spaces and potentially changes what we might consider to be the public sphere. I also addressed their use of nun space for memorial rituals of grieving and remembrance of people who have died from AIDS. These rituals transgress traditional conventions of mourning, emphasizing the importance of publicly grieving the loss of those who are important to the community. These rituals also transgress the location of these rituals. Holding vigils on street corners, for example, disrupts expectations of behaviour in those sites while at the same time creating the possibility of community building. Finally, I looked at how in nun space, the Sisters set a moral example for the community. As mirrors of community values, the Sisters created a public ritual that protected threats to the community space posed by Evangelical Christians and created a discourse about what should be the community's values. In the cases discussed in this Chapter, the Sisters negotitate common queer experiences of hatred and discrimination, grief and mourning that can serve as rallying points around which people can gather and claim ownership of a common stories and experiences, particularly by means of ritual performances. In the next chapter I continue to show that the Sisters respond to the needs of people in the community and create a unique atmosphere of joy and merrymaking as clowns. I will focus on their adoption of ancient traditions of clowning, address the role of carnival in

queer culture and work towards an understanding of what camp means in relation to the Sisters.

Chapter 4
Clowning (Around) the City

I was quite literally shaking in my leather jack boots. Even though I was curious about leather and S&M, I was scared to death to tell anyone about, much less go to, one of the world's largest leather/S&M fairs. The Folsom Street Fair takes place every September in the SOMA (South of Market) neighbourhood, an area known as one of the most important places for leather culture in North America. The gay newspapers were predicting hundreds of thousands of attendees from all over the world, with porn stars planning to attend, and public demonstrations of whipping, and other S&M techniques. I was excited and terrified at the same time. As I rounded the corner and made my way towards the gates with all the others, to my relief I saw two Sisters on either side of the metal barriers. One was wearing a leather mini skirt and the other had on tight denim blue jeans and was carrying a leather purse studded with metal spikes. I knew the Sisters were funny clown-like characters but I was surprised to see them at an event that I presumed was a heavy-duty leather scene (read: seriously butch). What a relief! The Sisters come to Folsom Street Fair too! I knew then that I was safe and had nothing to worry about. Is this the meaning of a sacred clown for the

queer community? I guess that's what they mean when they say that each person receives a blessing just by being in their presence.

I. Introduction

This chapter explores the role of the Sisters as clowns. While the Sisters considered themselves to be nuns, they also considered themselves to be "sacred clowns" (Sennelick 2000, 467). Links between the Sisters' use of European traditions of clowning can be made by analyzing their choice of clown performance styles, their use of white clown face makeup, and the various clown spaces they construct. This chapter begins with a discussion of these historical linkages, focusing on the Sisters' role of satirical critique through clown performance. I will also discuss three examples of their clown antics: the 1981 short film *Altered Habits* (Newman, 16mm) and the Sisters' live re-staging of the film during their 30th anniversary celebrations; the Sisters' Easter Sunday Celebrations in Dolores Park; and their campy "laughing nun" logo. My intent here is to show that the Sisters, as clowns, fulfill one of their central vows—to promulgate universal joy. This is done through their careful construction of clown space, which invites audiences to perform their own personal form of clowning in public space.

II. Clowns

The Sisters' role as clowns can be linked to both mythological and European traditions. Clowning is a significant part of the Sisters' practice and the Sisters mention this aspect as one of the foundations of their activities.[31] Both the Tricksters in First Nations cultures and the European tradition of clowning offer the Sisters stock characters,

31. See Senelick 2000, 457 for the context of the claim that clowning is central to their activities.

action/plot and also makeup/presentation ideas. The Trickster, with its satirical commentary on everyday life and social structures, is similar to European clown traditions of critiquing social conventions. First Nations Tricksters and sacred clowns also display the gender-bending qualities that have historically characterized European clown and pantomime performances (Sennelick 2000, 218).

The Sisters' own version of the Trickster and the clown employs a light-hearted criticism of society through playful trouble-making. This aspect of their character links them to this long history of clown performances. The Sisters have adopted and modified these traditions by situating them within the context of gay and lesbian history, culture and politics and have made the clown/Trickster figure a source of inspiration for their performances. While not a direct historical lineage, these conventions of clown aesthetics point to the links the Sisters make—in a typical San Francisco context—finding sources of artistic creativity and adapting them for a queer context. This section explains various clown traditions with an emphasis on their aesthetic links to the Sisters.

Tricksters, in First Nations cultures, are known for their "trickery, buffoonery, and crude behavior but also as a creator culture hero and teacher" (Conner et al 1997, 325). They are also sometimes "shape shifters," at times taking on animal forms and at other times, presenting themselves in the clothing and everyday activities of the opposite gender (Conner et al 1997, 325). Tricksters are marginal figures and, through their comedic antics, show humanity its own faults, desires, passions and limitations. Tricksters are, at times, rude and offensive, hilarious and silly. As literary theorist Franchot Ballinger describes them, First Nations tricksters are similar to sacred clowns. He notes that, like the sacred clown, the

> ubiquitous, travelling Trickster breaks the rules through contrary behavior—his foolishness initially masking his power—and discloses for us the limits of perceived categories and the possibility of creative action even in a sometimes threatening world. (Ballinger 1991, 36)

In a similar manner, the Sisters challenge socially dominant norms of heterosexuality and masculinity by creating their own aesthetic style of dress, by taking on the role of clown, and by inviting the community to join them in being foolish.

The Sisters also take up the role of sacred clown in their own way. The Sisters reappropriate the First Nations culture of sacred clowns but do so respectfully. They claim to be sacred clowns within queer culture and aim their criticisms at political and religious institutions that discriminate against LGBT and other marginalized folk. The Sisters make the claim to being sacred clowns in newspaper coverage, in dictionary definitions, and in interviews, but these claims are related to what it means for the Sisters to be sacred clowns *within* the queer community. What is more, the Sisters do not merely claim to be *like* sacred clowns, they state that they perform the role of sacred clowns (Glenn 2007, 248). In First Nations cultures, sacred clowns "act as a catalyst to bring psychological and emotional balance to others," and, in difficult times when people are suffering, sacred clowns make people laugh and thus, free them to "laugh through their tears" (Purzycki 2006 173). Comparitively, the Sisters like to have fun and they work hard to create the possibility for people to enjoy themselves. Sister Soami describes their work: "[w]e produce public parties; we lampoon political and clerical party lines; and we celebrate queer diversity and community" (Evans and Healey 2008, 197). She goes on to say that "with scientific reports of global warming and a collapsing galaxy, we are

preparing the faithful for some major cosmically conscious leaps and transformations into the Multiverse, which we hope and pray is out there" (Evans and Healey 2008, 198). The Sisters, therefore, perform the cultural role of sacred clown within, and for, particular communities.[32]

The Sisters can also be compared with European clown traditions. The use of clown whiteface makeup is the most obvious link, but there is more. Theatre historian Barbara Drennan describes the European clown as the performer who "presents a dramatic 'as if' world which we cannot help but compare to the real world that we bring with us to the performance" (1991, 33). The Sisters perform a joyful celebration of life and encourage others to get in touch with their own individual creative forces and join the Sisters at public parties and festivals. The whiteface aesthetics, the social criticism and the provision of entertainment are the significant aspects of the clown form that the Sisters continue to embody. However, the relation between these clown traditions and the Sisters is not a relation of direct historical lineage, but rather one of inspiration and similarity. (In other words, the Sisters draw on the practices of clowns, but do not share the same activities nor do they share the same cultural contexts.) The Sisters' version of clowning can be linked to the histories and cultures of European clowning because the Sisters' playful antics are rooted in the making of art that aims to critique social and political conventions.

Semiotician Paul Bouissac's analysis of circus clown traditions sheds light on the nature of the political critique performed by clowns. For clowns to critique successfully

32. I am not claiming that queer people and First Nations people (not necessarily two distinct categories) have experienced discrimination and forced territorialisation in the same way, rather that these experiences (with all their differences and similarities) are the effects of discrimination, stigma and practices of "Other"-ing and that the role of sacred clown (whether within First Nations cultures or in queer cultures) plays a significant role in both cultures.

social and political norms, they have to invert and play with the concepts of the profane and the sacred. In this context, Bouissac defines the *profane* as the inappropriate person, place, and object made so by action, gesture or speech and the *sacred* as social norms that regulate identities and behaviours (1990, 196-198). To profane social norms is both to irreverently make fun of them and to unhinge our habitual thoughts about them. For Bouissac, clowns expose society's foundational rules (what he calls the sacred) by transgressing them (i.e., making them profane). He notes that what is considered "sacred" is not composed solely of religious dogmas and rituals. The sacred is the "founding principles that ground a society and are assented to by most people" (Bouissac 1990, 198). Whenever clowns transgress these founding principles they show the relative and limited authority of society's institutions, allowing us to reimagine the meaning of these norms and their place in our society. They also can inspire challenges to social norms.

Bouissac's findings parallel how Victor Turner has described the role of court jesters and jokers. Turner writes that

> [f]olk literature abounds in symbolic figures, such as "holy beggars," "third sons," "little tailors," and "simpletons," who strip off the pretensions of holders of high rank and office and reduce them to the level of common humanity and mortality. (2001, 110)

Turner draws our attention to the critical role of these "outlaws" within hierarchically-structured societies, describing them "as representatives or expressions of universal-human values" (Turner 2001, 110). Pointing to Henri Bergson's assessment of the clown/joker/jester as advocates of an "open morality," these marginal folk oppose "the

normative system of bounded, structured, particularist groups" and in doing so, create the possibility of imagining that social world differently (Turner 2001, 110). He characterizes all of these manifestations as *liminal* (Turner 2001, 125). The character of clowns/jokers/jesters is liminal because: "they are persons or principles that (1) fall in the interstices of social structure, (2) are on its margins, or (3) occupy the lowest rungs" (Turner 2001, 125).

The Sisters embody all three of these characteristics at different times and in different places. However, in general, as gay men, lesbians, trans-folk and other queer-identified people, they are situated on the edges of US culture and society. The Sisters' community-engaged queer public performances also rely on a particular discourse of queer community as well as situated practices of queer community building. In doing so, the Sisters contradict the ideologies of individualism and middle-class "family values" along with religious discourses that reinforce these ideologies. The Sisters' willful rebellion against normative US culture places the Sisters at the bottom rung of the US social ladder. The Sisters' outsider, or liminal, role is also strategic. In reference to the practices of the clown/jester/joker, Turner notes that this lowly/marginal position

> generates myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art that serve as templates or models which are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and man's [sic] relationship to society, nature and culture. But they are more than classifications, since they incite men [sic] to action as well as to thought. (Turner 2001, 128-129)

In other words, the Sisters act as disco ball mirrors (see Chapter 3) providing critical reflection on social norms. Their performances also offer new imag(e)inings of the world and our place in it and call us to do and/or think our lives differently.

This central social function of the clown/jester/joker is, therefore, the root of political and social satire. For example, although in a different context, the British troupe the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) has been using the "ancient practice of clowning" since 2003, as a way to participate in anti-war and anti-capitalist demonstrations (Clandestine Operations 2011). One of their members, Kolonel Klepto, writes that

> CIRCA aims to make clowning dangerous again, to bring it back to the street, reclaim its disobedience and give it back the social function it once had: its ability to disrupt, critique and heal society…adding disorder to the world in order to expose its lies and speak the truth. (Klepto 2004, 407)

The Rebel Clown antics, in the midst of high tension anti-war demonstrations, combine humour with artistry in order to out-maneuver riot police while also providing physical protection to demonstrators. Although very different from the CIRCA in their style and activism, the Sisters' perform the role of clown for similar purposes. Both the CIRCA and the Sisters use clowning to produce more than an inside joke or a harmless giggle, they also actively seek to create spaces for a kind of playfulness that simultaneously enacts these critiques.

John Fletcher, in his essay on the Rebel Clown Army, claims that these kinds of humorous displays of social and political critique result in "what Simon Critchley calls

'tactical frivolity'—resisting not through armed revolution but through the creation of play-zones that render authority absurd or useless" (Fletcher 2009, 230). The Sisters, as clowns, combine the social and political satire of ancient Tricksters and sacred clowns with the playfulness of clowns to create *clown spaces*. Clown space, then, is the space of performance that embodies and produces a place wherein it is possible to play with transgressive images, roles and ideas.

III. Performing Clown Spaces

A. Comedy

The film begins with the chiming of a deep sounding bell and we hear a Kyrie Eleison[33] being chanted in Gregorian style. The 1981 film is *Altered Habits* by Marjorie Newman. Images of five nuns in black dresses with white wimples and black veils appear. They are walking down a narrow staircase and then down the nave of a very small church. They pause to genuflect before sitting in the first two rows of pews near the aisle. And then, we hear a somber voice-over narrative:

> For centuries, tradition has been the very cornerstone of the Catholic Church. But as times change, so may traditions. These Sisters have devoted themselves to both tradition and change,

33. The Kyrie Eleison forms part of the Roman Catholic and Anglican liturgies, and is translated "Lord, have mercy."

> incorporating in their lives a unique blend of the old and the new. We join them now as they prepare for their morning service.

The music suddenly changes to ragtime piano and the five nuns hastily run to the altar and position themselves facing the empty church. It looks like they are going to dance. Yes, indeed, these are dancing nuns (Figure 12). However, it is now very obvious that these are not just ordinary nuns. These are men! The song is full of plays on Catholic lingo and the nuns dance along acting out some of the lyrics such as: "Get down on your knees, fiddle with your rosaries" and "genuflect, genuflect, genuflect" with the nuns making the sign of the cross very sloppily across their whole faces and chests. "Drink the wine and chew the wafer. Two, four, six, eight, time to transubstantiate" and the nuns, in single file facing the camera, fall away one by one to reveal a woman in priest's robes holding a chalice and a doughnut! Hilarious! "Ave Maria, gee it's good to see ya" and the other four nuns pop up from behind one of the nuns, looking bored, and wave to the camera.

Figure 12. *Altered Habits* (Newman 1981), film still (Source: *YouTube*, http://www.*YouTube*.com/watch?v=q0pNMNOT82M)

Finally, there is more Charleston-like dancing, twirling, jumping and the film is over in just under three minutes. The credits roll and list the performers as the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence: Sr. Missionary Position, Sr. Homo Fellatio, Reverend Mother, Sr. Hellen Damnation, Sr. Thomas Bernina and Father Mother.

The film *Altered Habits* (1981, 16mm), directed by Marjorie Newman, is a classic example of the nuns performing as clowns. The score is Tom Lehrer's song "The Vatican Rag," a satire written in light of the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council.[34] The lyrics are as follows:

34. Tom Lehrer's musical parodies embodied the rebelliousness of the counterculture of the 1960s with his songs about racism and segregation, venereal disease, the military, and drugs. His music became widely known when he performed his songs on the US version of the British television show "That Was the Week

First you get down on your knees,

Fiddle with your rosaries,

Bow your head with great respect,

And genuflect, genuflect, genuflect!

Do whatever steps you want, if

You have cleared them with the Pontiff.

Everybody say his own

Kyrie Eleison,

Doin' the Vatican Rag.

Get in line in that processional,

Step into that small confessional,

There, the guy who's got religion'll

Tell you if your sin's original.

If it is, try playin' it safer,

Drink the wine and chew the wafer,

Two, four, six, eight,

Time to transubstantiate!

That Was," a show that lampooned the political establishment of the day. The Sisters' appropriation of Lehrer's "Vatican Rag" plants them firmly within this genre of satire, where witty lyrics and a catchy tune result in a hilariously entertaining critique of the Catholic Church. Lehrer discusses his views on the Second Vatican Council on the Tom Lehrer Collection DVD/CD with selections from 1965 of Lehrer's televised performances available on *YouTube* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKWI41G8h_A (accesssed 15 February 2011).

So get down upon your knees,

Fiddle with your rosaries,

Bow your head with great respect,

And genuflect, genuflect, genuflect!

Make a cross on your abdomen,

When in Rome do like a Roman,

Ave Maria,

Gee it's good to see ya,

Gettin' ecstatic an'

Sorta dramatic an'

Doin' the Vatican Rag!

Newman's film documents one of the earliest performances of the Sisters, filmed only two years after the order was founded. The date is also significant within queer history—1981 is when HIV was first reported.[35] If we put this film of dancing nuns in that context, then the clown effect becomes even more serious. Some of the early warning signs of the pandemic were reports of Kaposi's sarcoma (a rare skin cancer) reported among young gay men. David Román reports that the Sisters held a fundraiser for the Kaposi's sarcoma Clinic at UCSF Medical Centre in 1982, only a year after the film was

35. The first report of what would become known as HIV was based on a study conducted at UCLA Medical Centre by Weismann et al, which reported dozens of unusual cases of KS and Pneumocystis Pneumonia in young gay men. It was published on 4 June 1981 in the Centers for Disease Control's *Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report* (MMWR). http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/wk/mm4534.pdf (Accessed 15 April 2011).

produced (Roman 1998, 14). Adding to this that the Roman Catholic Church's declaration in late 1975 (*Persona Humana*) that homosexuality was "intrinsically disordered," galvanized collective anger among gay men.[36] The cultural and social context of Newman's film reveals a volatile moment queer history. With official declaration of gay men's "disorderliness" and the disorder in the gay community wrought by KS and HIV, the Sisters' clowning turns the "orderliness" of the Catholic Church's hierarchy, institutions and practices, on its head. The Sisters' clowning in this film provides a moment of laughter at the Catholic Church's positions on homosexuality, specifically, as well as a much-needed moment of laughter, in the general context of the emergence of HIV/AIDS. The performance of profanation in this short film reveals the personality of the Sisters as an organization. The Sisters used parody, satire and comedic performance to challenge dogmas and ideologies that produce shame, guilt, low self-esteem and self-hatred among gay men. The fact that this short film has dropped out of general circulation means that many people have not recently seen the film.[37] However,

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36. *Persona Humana: Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics*, was issued by the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 28 December 1975. Conservative Catholic moral theologian William May writes that *Persona Humana* "clearly distinguished the homosexual orientation or inclination from homosexual acts, deeming the later absolutely immoral, but it made no effort to give arguments based on reason to show why such acts are intrinsically immoral" (May 2004, National Catholic Bioethcs Quarterly Vol. 4, No. 2 (Summer): 303-316. This Declaration spells out what has come to be known as the "love the sinner, hate the sin" approach to homosexuality. This discourse is soundly criticized by Jakobsen and Pelligrini (2004).

37. The emerging lesbian and gay film festivals in the early 1980s offered the Sisters a chance to perform their mission to a wider population. The constituency of lesbians and gay men beyond the Bay Area were able to encounter the Sisters and their campy antics beyond the borders of San Francisco. The circulation of lesbian and gay films also helped constitute a corpus of cultural material available for lesbian and gay communities. For more on the circulation of gay and lesbian films, see Waugh 2006. *Altered Habits* premiered at the 1981 San Francisco Gay film Festival. It was also shown that same year at the New York Gay Film Festival. It was also screened at international film festivals in Palo Alto, CA (1983);Montreal (1982); Melbourne (1983) where it received the Diploma of Merit; Christchurch, NZ (1983) receiving the Prize for Humour; and at the Mundial Badalona in Spain (1984). It was broadcast on television in 1983 on the US program "Frontal Exposure" (KQED). (Marjorie Newman, email correspondence, 3 May 2011).

the Sisters seem to have a high regard for the film because they chose to re-perform the choreography from this film live on stage during their 30th anniversary celebrations in San Francisco in June 2009.

It's June 2009 at the Yerba Buena Centre of the Arts (YBCA) and I've come back to San Francisco after three years in Montreal. I've come to attend "Ritual Mayhem" as part of my research. "Ritual Mayhem" was advertised as a celebration of some of the Sisters' more well-known rituals. It's all part of their 30th anniversary celebration which includes an art exhibit in the YBCA gallery displaying some of the items from the Sisters' archives. The YBC atrium is filled with Sisters and about two hundred people milling about chatting. At one end of the long atrium a stage has been erected for the ceremonies. I hear a deep bell chiming, the rear door opens and five sisters emerge in solemn procession (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Altered Habits, live performance in Yerba Buena Arts Center
(Source: *YouTube*, http://www.*YouTube*.com/watch?v=BJ0Yy20zhiY&feature=related)

As the narrator begins talking about tradition in the Church and how the Sisters blend old and new traditions, the Sisters line up in front of the raised platform, heads bowed and hands in the traditional sign of prayer. "Get down on your knees and genuflect, genuflect, genuflect," the Sisters make a silly form of the cross on their bodies and the audience erupts in laughter. This is so funny. "Time to transubstantiate." What song is this? Did they have it written for them? I'm joining the crowd laughing hysterically. "When in Rome, do like a Roman," the Sisters hold out their fists with thumb up, then thumb down…like Caesar in the Coliseum. The piece ends and the crowd whoops and applauds. What a great time. It's good to be back in San Francisco.

The re-performance of *Altered Habits* in this live version, again, is a classic clown performance of the Sisters, as mentioned above, but this time it is taking place in a public space with a live audience. The performance of clowning in this situation also creates *clown space,* clowns performing sacred acts in a profane way and, with the audience understanding that the clowns are lampooning social norms. The audience's laughter and applause show appreciation for the act which, since it is a celebration of the Sisters, affirms the Sisters' role in the community as clowns.

The space of the multidisciplinary Arts Centre is turned into both a stage for performing clown acts and a public space that reveals the discursive tensions between queer people and the Catholic Church.[38] Because of the type of venue and the event, it can be assumed that the audience will enjoy most of the Sisters' clown antics. Therefore, this re-performance of the *Altered Habits* film for the Sisters' anniversary carries with it the characteristics of a commemorative performance. The fact that Sister Homo Fellatio, one of the performing nuns in the 1981 film, was on hand to participate in the live re-performance only concretizes the commemorative feel to this particular performance. However, like the clowning practice described by Turner, the Sisters' re-performance of *Altered Habits* could elicit controversy. The use of Lehrer's song with its satirical text, the clowning of Catholic rituals and the embodied performance by the Sisters themselves, all come from a marginal social position that could upset those who do not share the critical perspective offered in the performance. It is possible that someone could have

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38. The mission of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts is to present "contemporary art from the Bay Area and around the world that reflects the profound issues and ideas of our time, expands the boundaries of artistic practice, and celebrates the diversity of human experience and expression" (YBCA Mission and Vision) http://www.ybca.org/about/mission (Accessed 15 February 2011).

been offended by the Sisters' clowning, yet still agree with the Sisters' critique of the Catholic Church's doctrines.

However, the clown space constructed in the atrium was situated within a large arts institution dedicated to the democratization of culture. The democratization of culture is an approach to arts policy that seeks to offer the arts to the general public with the intention of education the public about the "high arts" (Little 2006, 162). Baz Kershaw quotes Owen Kelly who describes this approach to arts policy as "'the popularization of an already decided cultural agenda'" (1992, 184). Even though the Yerba Buena Centre is known for its cutting-edge and often popular arts agenda, the exhibition of the Sisters' archival materials in the gallery as well as their performances in the atrium of the Centre, celebrates the Sisters as an organization and puts them on display for the public. The context of democratization of culture rendered the performance by the Sisters a spectacle to be observed by those gathered at the YBCA, rather than a community event designed to stimulate dialogue about the community itself. This particular clown space is ultimately the result of the conjunction of, as Susan Bennett puts it, the "outer frame" of the event—celebration of the Sisters' 30th anniversary—and the "inner frame" of the event itself (1997, 149-150). The event was being held in an institution dedicated to making the performing and visual arts available to the public and therefore the event was expected to draw in people as spectators, rather than as participants. The performance of clowning Catholic rituals inside the Arts Centre is likely to garner sympathy from the audience.

Situated within the queer community, however, this performance of clowning has another key effect, namely the possibility of creating a space for community, at least

within the space of performance. The experience of showing up to a performance in an atrium with hundreds of strangers and leaving with the feeling that we enjoyed ourselves, that we understood the content of the clowning was a critique of oppression, affirms a feeling of togetherness that, despite the fact that strangers were attending a performance, adds weight to the kind of performance that was observed. In the context of San Francisco's cultural history as a locale perched precariously on the fault lines of the continent of "American values," very diverse strangers huddle together around art to confirm what they already believe, and therefore needs regular public forms of confirmation. The danger here, as Edward Little reminds us, is the tendency towards a "self-indulgent or self-congratulatory" fetishizing of *the* community. Yet, because Catholic dogma and practice continue to reinforce self-denial and guilt, the Sisters' clowning, on film and in live performance, has the potential to promote cultural democracy—reflecting "the social and cultural diversity of streets, neighbourhoods, and cities"—in the face of continuing struggles to affirm the validity and dignity of queer people's lives (Little 2006, 162).

Performing the role of clowns, the Sisters overturn social norms, upset and alter people's experience of the Catholic Church's hierarchical structures, offering those who witness their rituals and attend their events, an opportunity for joyful play rooted within the space of performance. The Sisters' criticism of the Catholic Church's discrimination against women and queers provides the potential for imagination and play together. New imag(e)inings of the world can affirm for oppressed people that their lives do matter. These clown performances thus carry the potential for social change.

B. Carnival

The practice of clowning, when situated in its space of performance, constitutes a particular kind of space—*clown space.* However, noting that such a space is constituted does not, in itself, reveal the dynamics of how that space is constituted through performance. In order to demonstrate the effects of clown performances in and on space, it is necessary to analyse the events where clowning takes an organising role in the space of performance. The following section will look briefly at the space of carnival and its role in society, paying attention to carnival's ability to "turn upside down" social roles and norms. This is followed by an analysis of the Sisters' Easter Day carnival celebrations as an example of how clowning constitutes clown space. I demonstrate that this kind of space overturns religious hierarchies and institutionalized liturgies while at the same time building up a diverse and wide-open feeling of belonging.

It's a sunny day in Dolores Park. I've just arrived for the Sisters' Easter Sunday Celebration and there are thousands in the park. Easter Sunday is the anniversary of the founding of the Order of Indulgence, and Sisters from houses in L.A. and the Russian River and other areas are present—wearing the unique veils of their houses. The park is a large rectangular section of grass that rises sharply to the southwest where there is a large hill overlooking the whole of downtown San Francisco and across the Bay to Oakland (Figure 14). Dolores Park is named for the Catholic parish across the street—Mission Dolores, Our Lady of Sorrows but there are no sorrowful tears in this park.

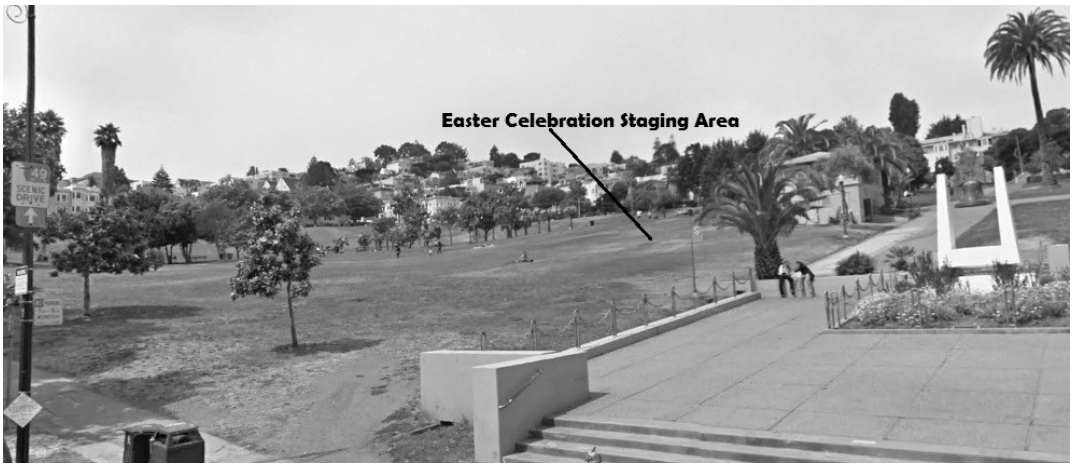

Figure 14. Dolores Park.

Near the northwest corner of the park there is a baseball field. Today a stage has been erected in one section of the park and friends and families of all types are picnicking on the grass. I spread out my blanket next to a young man dressed as Krishna or Vishnu, he's covered in blue body paint and, except for a garland of flowers, he is wearing nothing else. I'm not sure what Krishna or Vishnu have to do with Easter, or even if he was dressed as a Hindu deity (he could just as well have been performing a manifestation of Śiva) but he doesn't seem to be out of place among the people wearing giant pink rabbit costumes, white furry rabbit ears or gaudy Easter bonnets trailing long colourful feather boas. I look out over the immense sea of pastel colours and feel that now-familiar feeling of "wow I'm in San Francisco." I'm perpetually overjoyed with

people's desire and willingness to be outdoors, in public, with friends and strangers, dressed in silly clothes.

There is a Sister on stage now and she addresses the crowd. There is going to be an Easter egg race for the children soon. Sisters invite all the children to join in the race. They line the kids up, large plastic spoons in each one of their little hands. The Sisters gently place a decorated Easter egg in the spoon and hand them to the children. A Sister counts down from 10 and the little ones are off, racing down the course towards another group of Sisters at the finish line. Each of the children gets hugs and candies at the end of the race. Laughing and smiling children hugging Sisters. Who said all kids are afraid of clowns?

A while later it's time for the "Hunky Jesus" contest. Oh, my favourite event! The Sisters invite anyone who wishes to be in the contest up to the stage and the crowd starts cat calling and whistling at the sight of scantily clad men, mostly with long hair, lining up. A couple of women have joined the contest; one has strategically placed flowers to cover her breasts. After the Sisters introduce the contestants, the motley "Jesus" characters line up at the front of the stage for a vote-by-applause. I want the skinny guy attached to a large pink cross to win, or maybe

the “cowboy Jesus” with fringe vest and chaps and black leather thong should win. Who would have thought “Jesus” could look so sexy? My favourites don’t win. The winner is a skinny guy with long hair and a microscopic loin cloth. This “skinny Jesus” wins over the crowd with a burlesque-type performance and ends with striking a pose. Lots of photos are taken.

People have brought picnic lunches and the loudspeakers blast House music. There is the distinct aroma of pot. I’m having another “this is San Francisco” moment. Sisters are walking among the crowd, some offering blessings and anointing people with holy glitter. Now it’s time for the Easter Bonnet contest.

I can’t believe my eyes. People really worked hard on these bonnets. Some of them are wide-brimmed beauties with dangling Easter eggs; some have San Francisco landmarks carved out of Styrofoam on them. Sisters walk around the crowds with donation buckets and a while the Sister-judges deliberate on best Easter Bonnet, another Sister announces that today’s donations will be going to several community organisations, including one that is a shelter for queer youth many of whom have run away from abusive homes. The crowd erupts in cheers and applause for this organisation. The deliberations are over, and the best Easter bonnet goes

to the one with city landmarks on it. The event continues with several live bands. The fog is starting to roll in so I pack up and join the milling throng, walking towards the Castro. It's been a blessed day.

Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of carnival helps to describe the form and content of Sisterly performances. Bakhtin emphasizes that the "laughter" of the people at events like the Sisters' Easter Celebration represents the people's release, temporarily, from hierarchical strictures of bodily contact and everyday performance of status. Carnival, as opposed to the rites and ceremonies of Church and State, Bakhtin writes, "celebrated the temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order...all were considered equal during carnival" (Bakhtin, 1984 [1968], 10).

This celebration-as-social-criticism is similar to the performance of clown space in the Yerba Buena Arts Centre. The momentary free space, produced in clown space, creates a form of humour that critiques political and religious norms of the day. What is different from the clown space of the Arts Centre is that in the clown space produced at a carnival, a collective sense of the people *as a* people is made possible. The satirical performance of "Jesus" overturns the notion of what is "sacred." The clown space created by carnival creates the possibility for merriment, freedom, joy, and laughter. Because carnival was for and by the people, the collective sense of belonging is developed through people's active participation in the events. This also sets the Sisters' Easter Celebration apart from their performance of rituals in the Arts Centre. In the Arts Centre, the people were relatively passive spectators of the rituals. Here, in Dolores Park, the people were active participants in the festivities.

During carnival, Bakhtin notes, the masses were "the hosts and [they] are [the] only hosts, for there are no guests, no spectators, only participants" (Bakhtin 1984 [1968], 249). The Easter Celebration, although officially hosted by the Sisters, is an event where the masses help make the celebration successful. If the people who attended the festival were mere spectators, there could be no "hunky Jesus" or Easter Egg Roll or Easter Bonnet Contest. In addition to the temporary suspension of social hierarchies, Bakhtin argues that this collective sense of belonging also comes about through the close physical contact of the crowds where people are made "aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community" (Bakhtin 1984 [1968], 255). He argues that this perception of a "mass body" creates a sense of the community's continuous emergence in history that, participating in carnival, one was made to feel part of an historic community, despite the rigorous rules of social status.

Among the most vigorous critiques of Bakhtin's concept of carnival, Terry Eagleton claims that the temporary liberation moment serves primarily to support the current hierarchical structures. Acting as a "pressure valve," carnival allows the masses to release the frustrations caused by social oppression, only to return to their everyday routines once the carnival has ended; basically carnival, for Eagleton, is a counter-revolutionary practice that supports the system of oppression rather than dismantles it (Eagleton as quoted in Kershaw, 1992, 73). Baz Kershaw challenges this interpretation, claiming, along with Stallybrass and White, that carnival restores a sense of social belonging and is an example of community self-organizing. When linked to other progressive movements, carnival can work as a catalyst for social change (Kershaw 1992, 73). While carnival is linked to the Christian liturgical calendar, the overturning of social

norms that occur during the Sisters' Easter Celebration point to those areas of the social and corporeal body that are constantly under surveillance by the Church—sexuality, gender, diet, social hierarchies, the power of religious and secular institutions.

For this thesis, carnival is used as a device to interpret the Sisters' festivals—as a "mobile set of symbolic practices, images and discourses" that is useful for unpacking the complex of elements at work in their public celebrations (Stallybrass and White 1986, 15). Stallybrass and White note that the carnivalesque was not only the pre-Lenten celebration, but was also a source of aesthetic conventions (images and symbols) and practices that were put into use during times of "social revolt and conflicts before the nineteenth century," including during the Protestant Reformation when people would use carnival's aesthetic and festival characteristics for the "ritual defilement of the Pope" (Stallybrass and White 1986, 15)—similar to burning effigies and flags at contemporary political protests. They write:

> From the perspective of cultural studies, folklore and social history, the fair has been predominantly thought of in terms of popular revelry and political subversion. From the perspective of economic history, on the other hand, fairs have been seen above all as the sites of commercial distribution whose rise and fall depended on national and international market forces. This conceptual separation was not without its material effects, as magistrates increasingly attempted to distinguish between the fair which was economically useful and the pleasure fair. (Stallybrass and White 1986, 30)

Stallybrass and White, therefore, argue for a broader use of the carnivalesque than Bakhtin's temporary moment of release. They extend Bakhtin's analysis of the carnival as a moment to overturn norms. They argue that we should focus on carnival as a "resource of actions, images and roles which may be invoked both to model and legitimate desire and to degrade all that is spiritual and abstract" (Stallybrass and White 1986, 18). What is problematic about the latter part of their definition is that not all contemporary aspects of carnival are used to "degrade all that is spiritual and abstract."

There are several performance groups that use religious and spiritual satire in their social critiques while not necessarily critiquing religion and spirituality per se. The Sisters' cultural performances are similar to other performance groups in the United States that challenge religious intolerance through clown performances. The Church Ladies for Choice and the Reverend Billy and the Church of Life After Shopping (formerly the Church of Stop Shopping) also challenge Christian dogma and neoliberal politics and economics, but do not seek to "degrade" all spiritualities (Cohen-Cruz 1998; Kalb 2002). The Sisters, along with the Church Ladies and the Reverend Billy, use a selective and highly focused discourse of transgression and resistance to particular aspects of religious beliefs and practices, but not all spirituality. The focus of groups like the Sisters, the Church Ladies for Choice and Reverend Billy is on critiquing institutionalized religion and the effects of these institutions on people's lives. Perhaps this hesitancy to critique all aspects of religiosity and spirituality is unique to the context of the United States, where religion and spirituality undergird so much of the political and social life and identity of that country (Luckmann 1967; Bellah, et al 1996 [1985]).

Stallybrass and White's notion that carnival can also be a resource for challenging political and economic structures of power is a useful addition to understanding carnival and the interventions of performers like the Sisters. If the experiences of carnival time can be resources for critique at later times, then the momentary "pressure-valve" can be put into operation at other times and in other places. It is important to remind ourselves that carnivals and the carnivalesque are also performances within space. Holloway and Kneale argue for spatial readings of Bakhtin's theory of carnival in order to understand carnival as practices "located in specific contexts" and as "the performance of spatialised social relations" (2000, 81). A spatialised interpretation of carnival, then, analyses the reworkings of social structures *and* social spaces within the temporal "inversions of hierarchies" (Holloway and Kneale 2000, 81). They point to Bakhtin's understanding of carnival that is not so much an episodic event as a lived experience: "'Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because the very idea embraces all of the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it'" (quoted in Holloway and Kneale 2000, 81). The implications for a spatialised reading of Bakhtin's carnival move us beyond debates over the efficacy of a temporary letting off of steam, to the lived experiences in the spaces of carnival and its potential to emerge in other places.

Kath Browne uses a spatialised reading of carnival in her analysis of LGBTQ Pride events in Dublin and Brighton. She focuses on "non-heterosexual women's/lesbians'" experiences of these Pride Events because "[c]urrent interpretations of Pride often exclude" these women's voices (2007, 65). Her focus on "non-heterosexual women's" experiences of Pride events sheds light on the nuances and

incongruities of these women's experience. She notes that the normative reading of Pride as overturning, at least for a moment, the hegemony of heteronormative social values and rules is not necessarily the primary reason non-heterosexual women/lesbians attend these events. Rather, Browne argues, non-heterosexual women/lesbians value the pleasure of the party as well as the politics of the event itself. The fact that a hedonistic enjoyment of life is, according to her research findings, the reason most people reported as their motivation for attending the Dublin and Brighton Pride events requires us to attend to the shifting meanings of Pride, especially within liberally accepting nations. The carnivalesque overturning of norms that are central to Pride events, as well as the desire to "have a good time," leads Browne to describe Pride events as a "party with politics" (2007, 73). Browne's spatialisation of Pride events, focuses on the "performance of the party" that unifies diverse people across the divisive politics of identity: "In other words, partying and fun, rather than politically motivated 'rallies,' appear to characterize Pride for the majority of this sample of lesbians" (2007, 74). There is, however, something unique about that moment and space of fun at Pride parties. According to her interviews, the non-heterosexual women/lesbians, still enjoyed acting out their lesbian desires in public places (2007, 75). Browne's point is a crucial nuance to our interpretation of queer festivals and Pride events. If we focus on the performance of the party, it is possible to think of ways in which the celebration works in complex and multiple ways, helping people to "(re)create the idea(l?) of 'community'" (2007, 75).

Extending Browne's research on Pride to other queer festival events is an important step, because, as Pride events around the world shift themselves toward a commercial and tourist model, alternatives to Pride parades and/or newly-formed

festivals will shift people's experiences of queer visibility. The Sisters' Easter Sunday Celebration is the "other" of San Francisco Pride. It is not primarily focused on a celebration of gay and lesbian history or an overt political statement about queerness. It is a carnivalesque party offering people amusement and hedonistic celebration together in public spaces, rendering it possible to potentially enact new imag(e)ings of community. While the event is open to the public, the event, like most of the other Sister events, is generally governed by the idea of respect and diversity, signalled by their continuous of speech such as, "we are all here to celebrate the diversity of our community." However it could be argued that not all identities and ways of expressing one's self in public would be welcomed at the Sisters' events (note my previous discussion of Evangelical Christians in the Castro).

The Sisters' Easter Celebration also contrasts with their performance of their rituals in the Arts Centre. While the ritual performance of "The Vatican Rag" satirizes Catholic culture, the audience was invited to watch the Sisters perform as living testimonies of their own history. Akin to looking at the US Constitution under glass, the Sisters were enshrined in the hallowed halls of an arts institution and the public were invited to watch the display, an example of the democratization of culture at work. The Sisters' Easter Celebration is more akin to a carnival as I have already noted. However, the Sisters' carnival festival is also an example of cultural democracy. Edward Little describes cultural democracy as that which "represents and reflects the social and cultural diversity of streets, neighbourhoods, and cities" that includes "audience participation in ritualistic gathering and dispersal activities" that "create an extended theatrical event in which art and daily life are not regarded as mutually exclusive" (2006, 162). The Sisters'

Easter event unites their political and social critique of Catholic institutions and of institutionalized homophobia in US society with participatory activities. The mix of social criticism and audience participation also constructs a visibly diverse gathering where elements of artistic creation and a wide-open definition of the meaning of community are experienced by the participants in the event.

The Sisters' Easter Celebration is connected to, yet outside of, the Christian festival of Easter; the festival celebration of Easter Sunday hosted by the Sisters carries out certain conventions of European carnival. The clown space they produce allows for sacred objects to be profaned as well as for the enjoyment of bodily pleasures: "hunky Jesus," nudity, and the celebration of bodily pleasures. We can see aspects of carnival in the Sisters' choice of dress, vocation and performances. Their religious satire is less the focus of their Easter Sunday Celebration, but the fact that queer-nun-clowns are leading the celebrations is testimony to their criticism of religiously-motivated domination of bodies and ideas. This is similar to how carnivals tend to emphasise the relativity of power and hierarchy. The Sisters' festive tradition on Easter Sunday creates participatory events whereby the body (decorated and denuded) is affirmed and put on display and the Church's liturgy and language is reinvented for the purpose of ritualising a hedonistic celebration of community.

What is more, the site of the Sisters' Easter Celebration significantly nuances how we extend our understanding of the meaning of Carnival. Dolores Park is a well-known locale for gay men to cruise for sex. The hilly and wooded area on the western side of the park, along the tracks of the city's MUNI subway system, is a "sex zone" once night has fallen. Dolores Park also hosts performances by the San Francisco Mime Troupe, a

theatrical group specializing in live musical theatre that satirizes contemporary political issues. The southern sections of the park also host numerous sun-bathers (and their watchers) who, more often than not, are wearing little to no clothing. These different uses of the space of Dolores Park layer the meaning of that space that can lead us to interpret the park as a liminal space. In other words, Dolores Park can be thought of as a "legitimate backstage where 'playful deviance' can be presented in ways that do not offer sustained challenge to the established order" (Ravenscroft and Gilchrist 2009, 43-44). Although the situated practices taking place in Dolores Park cannot overturn hegemonic norms of social behaviour, "the process of raising and lowering the moral curtain offers the potential for people to attempt to shift the boundaries of the order (Ravenscroft and Gilchrist 2009, 45).

Do the Sisters' events temporarily release people from the norms of social status in a city like San Francisco, which is one of the freest cities for queer people? Do queers in San Francisco still need that momentary release from social pressures? Stallybrass and White ask us to think of carnival as a resource for transgressing social norms and affirming the body and desire (1998, 18). From my experience, the Sisters' performances offer not so much a release from everyday social pressures, as they offer a sense of collective affirmation through clowning and offering others the opportunity to clown as well in festival spaces. While the events themselves continue to emphasize the need to challenge hatred and oppression of queer people, the Sisters' Easter Sunday Celebration primarily take on the aspect of "performing community."

This celebration, unlike San Francisco Pride, is not focused on queer identities, nor is it connected to corporate sponsorships. Rather the joyful spirit of community is the

main emphasis on Easter Sunday. With the Sisters' request for funds for local community organisations, the construction of a general air of hedonism and the close proximity of people in the park performing their own "Easter" interpretations, the Sisters construct a carnival space of interactive clowning that reminds attendees that the goal of liberation and freedom is not isolation but connection to one another and assurance that all have their basic needs met. The inclusion of children's games also complicates what could be interpreted as an adults-only party and demonstrates just how "wide-open" San Francisco can be.

This "party with politics" is an affirmation of the need for social change, a key aspect of imagining the world a better place. Sister Dana Van Iquity describes the purpose of these public parties in a documentary on the Sisters: "There are three things the Sisters do in my opinion, fund-raising, fun-raising and consciousness raising." Followed quickly by Sister Roma who adds: "And occasionally, a good old-fashioned barn raising, if we have time." (Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, *In the Life* 2009). The Sisters' clowning and performance of their vows of promulgating universal joy and service to the community reminds attendees at Easter Sunday that freedom is about joyful celebration, giving to the local community and guilt-free living. It is possible that the Sisters' Easter Celebration can create the opportunity to motivate people to work for social change, especially if they come away from the Celebration with a sense of community. One of the primary vehicles for getting these messages across and for creating clown spaces is the Sisters' use of camp. The next section will discuss the aspects of camp that undergird the Sisters' clown performances.

C. Camp

Camp, as a style of cultural performance not only has a particular history of struggle against discrimination and a legacy of aesthetic practice, but also takes place in specific places that have significant meaning for marginalized groups. The clowning that the Sisters perform is certainly linked to "camp" as cultural form. However, standard definitions of camp do not fully address to the ways in which the Sisters perform camp. The Sisters' campy performances are complex, at times fluid and are deeply rooted in the queer community of San Francisco. This means that analysis of the Sisters' campy performances has to attend to this context and therefore certain well-rehearsed definitions of camp cannot be easily mapped onto the Sisters' clown performances.

Susan Sontag emphasizes, in her 1964 essay, "Notes on Camp," that camp is a sensibility that is, at best, depoliticized (2002, 54). This definition of camp is unable to attend to the crucial use of the Sisters' camp for political purposes. Moe Meyer criticizes Sontag for downplaying the politics of camp. He writes that "the arguments that defuse Camp, that deny it power as a cultural critique are based, then, on a denial of agency" (Meyer 2010 44). The Sisters' camp is not depoliticized, but politicizes everyday behaviours through camp practices. In other words, their political criticism is done through the camping of Catholic imagery and institutions, while retooling these images for their own queer purposes. Christopher Isherwood defines camp as a way of "making fun out of serious matters (2002, 51). This understanding resonates with the Sisters since their performances are often meant to bring joy and humour to everyday situations. However this attends to only one aspect of the Sisters' performances. The Sisters' ministry in gay bars and rituals of memorialisation, while having some aspects of

humour, are primarily serious performances. In this regard, Mark Booth's historical and etymological approach to camp is certainly helpful. He traces the roots of the word camp to the court antics of Louis XIV where it was used to describe the way the parties and revelry of the Court were used to "distract the nobility from politics" (2002, 76). However, he emphasizes camp as "a matter of self-presentation rather than of sensibility" (Booth 2002, 69).[39] We must be careful not to interpret the Sisters' camp in a way that reduces their performances to superficial behaviour. To do so fails to attend to the ways that their campiness is also an effective tool for raising charitable funds as well as collective consciousness-raising.

Camp performances have played a significant role in the construction of queer community spaces (Chauncey 1994, 291). Even though the Sisters count gay men, lesbians, transsexuals and other queer-identified people as members, the Sisters' camp is not necessarily meant solely *for* gay and lesbian people. The Sisters' camp performances start from an experience of marginalisation and the need to find healing and liberation from homophobia and transphobia. I suggest that we think of the Sisters' camp performances as a key element of queer cultural performances that help construct queer cultural spaces and potentially a feeling of belonging. As José Esteban Munoz describes it, camp occurs when

> [t]he larger than life (i.e., the Hollywood icon) takes on aspects of the everyday; the exotic is "de-exoticized" and brought into the subject's sphere of the ordinary; artifacts from the past that have been discarded as

39. This is reflected in the contemporary French usage of *camper*, i.e. to portray (as in the performance of a theatrical or cinematic role).

> "trashy"…are recuperated and become a different "new" thing. (1998, 128)

The Sisters bring the nun out of the Roman Catholic institution and perform her in the everyday world, bringing the nun-clown into the everyday world of queer cultural spaces. These campy performances create a new thing—a contemporary queer nun who clowns her way around the city.

However sophisticated our theories of camp, we should be careful to always understand camp in its own context, wherever it appears. Moe Meyer suggests,

> we need to develop a performance-centered methodology that takes into account and can accommodate the particular experience of the individual social actors under study, one which privileges process, the agency of knowedge-able performers, and the constructed nature of human realities." (1994, 9)

Furthermore, Fabio Cleto proposes that definitions of camp make "the ephemeral not part of a cultural connotation…but ingrained in its ontological horizon of possibility, which—*literally*—can't be *settled down* (2002, 9; emphasis in the original).

Rather than define camp at the outset and then go searching for proof of that definition, Cathy B. Glenn suggests "it makes more sense to read how SPI [the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence] embodies and practices its own sense of camp" (2007, 251). A performance geography approach to analysing the Sisters' camp requires analysis of their religious and spiritual campy performances *in situ.* This means that analysis of the Sisters' camp has to be understood as a versatile and complex set of corpo-really situated practices that contribute to, and reshape, discourses of gender, sexuality and religion.

And, the Sisters' camp performances rework the meaning of everyday lived spaces. Since the Sisters' camp broadly undergirds all their performances, focusing on their unique form of spiritual clown camp can offer new interpretations of camp.

A friend and I were walking down Market Street after watching the long Pride Parade in San Francisco. We were headed towards the Castro and, since it was such a nice warm sunny June day, we decided to walk the entire way. There were still a lot of people in costumes from the parade wandering around. As we walked we talked about the meaning of Pride in San Francisco. We agreed that, although this city was so queer in so many ways on a daily basis, that the political situation in the US made the visibility of Pride a much-needed political statement. As we neared the Castro, I noticed a round pink sticker on the sidewalk. As I looked closer, it had the Sister's "laughing nun" logo on it. My friend asked me what that was. I told her that it was the Sisters' logo. They give them out at the Pink Saturday party in the Castro. When you arrive at the gates—the streets are closed to traffic—and donate some money, a Sister plants one of these stickers on you.

The laughing nun is rather garish but also so campy. I mean, a nun wearing sunglasses? It's hilarious and so

satirical. The nun looks a bit like Batman's nemesis, The Joker. Rather appropriate for the Sisters, I think.

Figure 14. Laughing Nun logo.
(Source: Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Website, www.thesisters.org)

The Gothic lettering conjures images of Gutenberg bibles and German manuscripts. It connects the Sisters to both the ancient art of calligraphy and all that we think of when we see Gothic lettering: newspapers, beer labels, and Disneyland. The logo is also a corporate logo, I mean, the symbol and the name are trademarked after all, note the "Inc."

The sticker stuck to the sidewalk was a territorial marker as well. It symbolized that Pride weekend in San Francisco was, among many things, a celebration of San Francisco as a queer city. The sticker marked the sidewalk as queer too. Compared to the rainbow flags on every light pole lining the way down Market Street, the sticker was rather inconspicuous. It seemed to be also marking the city as Sisters' territory as well. The Sisters could emerge anywhere in the city because they had marked their territory in so many locations, not just the Castro. Even

though we were sure it fell off the t-shirt of some reveller from the Saturday night prior, it symbolised for us how the Sisters pervade the city space and how they mark their territory in many ways. The campy logo on the sticker announces a party, a festival time, and marks the city as a place where campy humour reigns.

Esther Newton's *Mother Camp* is a standard work in the study of drag and camp cultures. Newton's study of drag queen culture in the United States was done in the late 1960s and has influenced many theories of camp and drag. As a ground- breaking analysis of drag queens, Newton offers a trio of descriptors about camp that remains pertinent to any in-depth analysis of camp. For Newton, camp has three characteristics: *incongruity*, *theatricality* and *humour* (1979, 106). She asserts that "camp humour ultimately grows out of the incongruities and absurdities of the patriarchal nuclear family; for example, the incongruity between the sacred, idealized Mother, and the profane, obscene Woman" (1979, xix). I would push her assertion further and claim that these incongruities extend to the Catholic Church's "patriarchal family" of celibate priests and nuns. The Church, as an institution, espouses in its doctrines and practices a gendered division of labour between the priesthood (exclusively male) and nuns (exclusively female). However, these gendered roles turn in on themselves in the popular imag(e)ination. Priests are often "feminized" in their roles as men in frocks presiding over the "meal" of the Eucharist while nuns take up the grunt work of community service. Religious studies scholar Mark D. Jordan writes that the campy incongruities of Catholic clergy and iconography are rich fodder for popular appropriations:

> Historically these borrowings might derive from the inversions of Catholicism associated with the occult. But by now they are not so much desecrations as imitations or quotations. They borrow, with not a little respect, an old and intricate language of symbols, objects and gestures that are already exaggerated, melodramatic, even grotesque. Images of Catholic devotion pass so easily into secular camp because they are already camp. (Jordan 2000, 184)

So the Sisters' campy clown-nun could also be interpreted as performances of this form of incongruity: that men cannot be nuns / nuns are celibate (and thus not sexy). The "laughing nun" logo is clown-like and creates its camp by showing these incongruities (Newton 1979, 106). If someone has had numerous encounters with the Sisters in San Francisco, they would likely recognize the camping of the incongruity of a gay male nun.

Newton further adds that the *theatricality* of camp is structured around three characteristics: style, drama and role (1979, 107). The Sisters' camp *style* or "adornment" is "exaggerated, consciously 'stagey'" and the pink sticker logo—indeed wherever the logo appears—announces the Sisters' exaggerated sense of campy clowning (Newton 1979, 107). The Sisters' clown camp is also situated in the *dramaturgical* relationship between performer and audience. The Easter Sunday celebrations provide a scene for observing how the Sisters camp nuns through practices of clowning. The pink sticker on the sidewalk, or worn on a t-shirt, creates a wearer / observer relation which continues the performance of the Sisters' clown camp as long as the person wears the sticker. The *role* the Sisters play as clowns, not only constructs a festival or carnivalesque environment, it also provides a "'life is theater'" moment (Newton 1979,

107). Anyone wearing the pink sticker logo also wears a costume of sorts, a costume that is identified with particular celebrations. They also announce that they have presumably been in contact with the Sisters, and the Sisters' events always have the characteristic of staging life, of showing life to their audiences.

Finally, the "laughing nun" logo, while obviously invoking *humour*, also relates to the Sisters' campiness as a "*system* of humour" (Newton 1979, 109—emphasis in the original). The Sisters' vow to spread universal joy is invoked in the logo of the laughing nun. And the logo is testimony to the ways in which the Sisters' campy humour is about laughing "at one's incongruous position" rather than crying about it: "it does not cover up, it transforms" (Newton 1979, 109). Newton points out that marginalised people have found ways to laugh at their social situation as stigmatised individuals. She goes on to say that the campy performer "is a homosexual wit and *clown*; his campy productions and performances are a continuous creative strategy for dealing with the homosexual situation, and, in the process, defining a positive homosexual identity" (Newton 1979, 110; my emphasis). The Sisters queer this definition by creating humour that transcends not only one's incongruous situation of sexuality and gender. The Sisters' gendered icon/logo of the gay-man-as-laughing-nun does more than create a strategy for dealing with the homosexual situation. It also queers our perceptions of nun. The Sisters are sometimes male-nuns, female-nuns, and trans-nuns. Furthermore, the humour that is conjured by this kind of campy-clown-nun-queerness is used to raise consciousness about discrimination and the need to be part of a community that is open and accepting of difference. The Sisters not only call for this kind of utopic sense of community, they also

perform it[40] through their clown camp of nuns in ways that allow people to imagine what this kind of community might look and feel like; and this is done in specific places—at Easter Sunday Celebration, at Pride Parades, in the Castro District, in bars and in other San Francisco locales.

IV. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the Sisters' roles as clowns, focusing on how they draw on First Nations trickster and sacred clown traditions as well as European clown histories. I contrasted the Sisters' performances of clown camp in an institutional Arts Centre with the ways that the Sisters go about constituting Carnival space at their Easter Sunday Celebration. I concluded that, while both examples use humour, satire and comedy to create clown space, the Arts Centre venue renders the Sisters' performances an example of democratization of culture—bringing the arts to the masses—while the *Altered Habits* film, along with the Sisters' Easter Sunday Celebration in Dolores Park, were examples of the Sisters' using clown camp to create spaces of and for cultural democracy—a participatory, wide-open and diverse space that creates the opportunity for a sense of communal belonging. Little reminds us that the creative work of integrating art and life "is less about a specific performance event" and "unfolds over a substantial amount of time" (2006, 162). While the Sisters' Easter Celebration is an annual day-long event, it is one of many signature events in a series of public performances (both large and small) associated with the Sisters. If we think of the Sisters' events as a kind of liturgical calendar of rituals, then we can begin to understand that the Sisters' Easter Celebration is

40. Here I am thinking of specific rituals such as offering blessings to people, performing rituals that memorialise "saints of the above" as well as their beatification of "living saints"—people who have served the community in outstanding and memorable ways.

a large-scale public event that is part of a series of on-going public performance designed to be inclusive of, and to gather a diverse public into their vision "of art and life" (Little 2006, 162).

The clown spaces that the Sisters create allow people to explore ways to perform their own meanings of clown in public, adding to the colourful array of possibilities of expressing difference beyond sexuality and gender. The Easter Sunday Celebrations also overturn the institutional hierarchies and liturgies of the Roman Catholic Church by creating an alternate form of Easter celebration, an event that has successfully gathered large crowds of people for over thirty years. I also linked these carnivalesque celebrations to their particular form of clown camp. Thinking of campiness and camping as "clown work" draws attention to the incongruities, theatricality and humour of the situated performance of camp. Clown camp performances invoke humour and joy within the space of performance, allowing the Sisters to reiterate their call for a world free from guilt and shame. If we think of making community spaces through campy clown work, then we have entered a different kind of carnival—a carnival of and for life. Life in San Francisco can be like living in a carnival or a circus, so there must be some kind of clowns around to help us laugh but also to help keep us aware of the power structures that create the culture and social world of San Francisco..

The next chapter will address the Sisters' roles as community activists, drawing attention to the ways in which their performances point to and embody an effect/affect of belonging. I will focus on how the Sisters perform activist spaces through their HIV/AIDS activism, their campaigns against homophobic violence and their approach to an ethics of care.

Chapter 5
Activists, Community and Spaces of Affection

The *In the Life* documentary on the Sisters introduces us to Sister Mary Juanita High, Higher Power, the Mistress of Archives. As a Person with AIDS, she tells us what happened when she fell ill on the very day she was to be elevated to the level of Novice:

> I've had HIV since 1993, I've had AIDS since 1995. Over the winter of 2004 and spring of 2005, I was in and out of the hospital, I lost 80 pounds of weight, went from 220 to 140. And I thought, I wasn't really going to live and so I threw myself into really becoming a Sister. In my mind I couldn't think of anything more honourable for me to do, for my own sense of self-respect. Back in April of 2006, I became allergic to one of the medications I took and ended up in the hospital. I was scheduled to be advanced in my training as a nun and [I] really [worried] that that [her elevation to Novice] wasn't really going to be able to happen because I was in the hospital. So the Order, being the loving group of people they are, made a special accommodation for me. Sister Jane, who was visiting me, improvised a wimple,

which is the head covering we wear, and a veil (Figure 15), which we always wear, and improvised these out of a couple of oxygen masks and a pillow case,

Figure 15. Sister Mary Juanita High in hospital (*In the Life*), video still
(Source: *YouTube*, http://www.*YouTube*.com/user/itlmedia?blend=23&ob=5#p/search/1/XL69E8H55q8

over speaker phone, they [the Sisters] interviewed me, voted to advance me to the next level. And just having the love, the love and the support of the Order was another huge boost. To realize: here I am, coming to this organisation, in a sense, sick and dying, and they're willing to make a place for me and embrace me. And I want to do that for other people.

I. Introduction

For the Sisters, the nun, clown and activist roles all overlap and intertwine and are inseparable from their identities as Sisters. Indeed 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 in Chapter 2, the Sisters' role as nuns queers the doctrinal and institutional power relations that constitute a particular understanding of nun. The 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 Chapter 3, I discussed their clown performances as allowing for social critique as well as creating places for "parties with politics." 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 a social and cultural force. As Cathy B. Glenn 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" (2006: 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.[41]

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*:

41. 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.

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 (already a term fraught with emotion) 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. The following section offers my analyses of the Sisters' 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.

II. Positions: Politics, Affirmation, Affection and Ethics

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

(supporting queer groups and non-profit organisations), and *affection* (advocating for safer sex and creating anti-violence campaigns). 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 has been a variety of theories of queer politics—its meanings, practices and efficacy—yet none of the most influential writers has mentioned the queer activist work of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (Warner, ed. 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 thirty US communities) 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" (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.[42]

42. 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).

If we think of the Sisters as activists we ought to 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. The Sisters as activists, as will become evident later in this chapter, respond to immediate needs 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 Sister's fundraising efforts as evidence of their activism as *affirmation*. Affirmation, as advocacy and support (material and emotional), continues to be a necessary function, especially for non-profit charities. For tax purposes, the Sisters incorporated as a registered non-profit charity, which allows them to raise money for other charities. For the analysis in this chapter, it is important to understand that US tax law forbids charities from directly supporting political campaigns with money. 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.[43] This chapter focuses on the Sisters' roles as activists from the perspective of the performance geography of their advocacy work, and in no way is meant to be construed as a violation of US tax law.[44] This means that the specific political actions discussed in

43. In keeping with US tax law, the Sisters distribute funds to registered non-profit organisations and they give details as to what funds are ineligible for donations. The Sisters specifically work to help small and underfunded groups. See: http://www.thesisters.org/content/grants

44. US Code, Title 26, Subtitle A, Chapter 1, Subchapter F, Part I, Section 501 (c) 3 reads as follows: "Corporations, and any community chest, fund, or foundation, organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, testing for public safety, literary, or educational purposes, or to foster national or international amateur sports competition (but only if no part of its activities involve the provision of athletic facilities or equipment), or for the prevention of cruelty to children or animals, no part

this chapter will be analysed and interpreted within their sociocultural and geographic contexts with 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 calls "geography of refuge" (Stanley-Niaah 2010, 48).

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 writes in reference to Dancehall in Jamaica, the participants negotiate "contested and unreconciled issues of space while they create spaces of celebration and valorized identities as key survival strategies" (2010, 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 the US as a place where people can be free to live their lives in whatever way they choose. The Sisters have recently advocated for queer street-affected youth by raising funds for a queer youth shelter and persuading local business owners who

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of the net earnings of which inures to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual, no substantial part of the activities of which is carrying on propaganda, or otherwise attempting, to influence legislation (except as otherwise provided in subsection (h)), and which does not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office."
<http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/26/usc_sec_26_00000501----000-.html > Accessed: 8 March 2011

opposed the shelter that queers have a responsibility to help the younger generation succeed in life.[45]

Since the Sisters' activism is motivated by personal and communal experiences of marginalisation and oppression, we are required to also think about the ways that emotions instigate, and are produced by, the Sisters' activism. As I have said earlier, social injustice causes emotions, 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.[46]

Contemporary theories on 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 Deleuzean sense, are the actualisation of those potentials in the world. Queer geographer Jason Lim describes Deleuzean affect as "allow[ing] one to think about what might take place beyond the limits of normative modes of regulating life and relationships" (2009, 55). This conceptual division between

45. See *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 12 January 2006; 25 January 2006; 21 June 2007..
46. 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.

affect and emotion splits the concept of affect from the bodily experience of emotion and these theories need to reconnect affect with corpo-real experiences of emotions. However, I have presumed throughout this thesis that 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 ways in which they are experienced. Lim translates Deleuze's 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 contexts (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 everyday life., rather than being too ready to dismiss the multiple ways that different people live and feel their everyday lives in relation to structures of power. We should also, as Didier Éribon has noted, not be too quick to make a fetish out of the meaning and practice of "the radical."[47]

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 have shown, open up the possibilities for political action and may offer new ways of thinking about social organising (*Anti-Oedipus* 1977; *A Thousand Plateaus* 1987). Yet, these theories are rather far removed from the really lived feelings of injustice.[48]

47. For a poignant and timely portrayal of the dangers of the fetish of the "radical" within queer politics see Didier Éribon's recent speech at the Sexual Nationalisms Conference in Amsterdam in January 2011. "Borders, Politics, Temporality"< http://didiereribon.blogspot.com/ > (accessed 20 February 2011).

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 strays too far from the emotional needs of people in those dramas and the Sisters' performances solicit 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 ongoing dilemmas such as the lack of access to adequate healthcare. The Sisters' affirmative 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 (*Persona Humana: Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics* 1976; Ratzinger, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Concerning the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* 1986).

Recent work on the sociology 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

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48. 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" (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.

useful for building an interpretive framework for the Sisters' activism. These approaches to emotions and politics acknowledge the messiness of feeling in relation to political activism in ways that Deleuze, and queer theorists such as Warner and Halberstam, avoid (Deleuze 1990; Warner 1999; Halberstam 2005). In the edited volume, *Passionate Politics* (2001), Mabel Berezin describes the ways public rituals in World War II fascist Italy mixed cultural identities of Italians with political acts to galvanize the military state-control over everyday life. In her article, "Emotions and Political Identity: Mobilizing Affection for the Polity," Berezin 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 (2001: 89-90). Berezin 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. (2001: 90)

The emotionally-charged moment of the elevation of the Host, was, according to Berezin, such a well-known act in 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 2001, 89). Berezin's example of political ritual raises the point that emotions are not always necessarily solicited for progressive political causes. "Emotion," she writes, "is the pivot upon which political ritual turns" (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'" (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?

Deborah Gould's article, "Rock the Boat, Don't Rock the Boat, Baby: Ambivalence and the Emergence of Militant AIDS Activism," discusses the impact of the emotions of gay men and lesbians on the early days of AIDS activism (2001). She shows that in the early days of HIV/AIDS, many of the emotional responses to the crisis were channelled into community service provision. The militant forms of activism (such as ACT UP) came only after the buildup of rage and anger over continued government inaction and, at least in the context of the US, the feeling of rejection by US society in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision to uphold sodomy laws in the case of *Bowers v.*

Hardwick (1986).[49] The reason for this rather "quiet" response to AIDS in the early 1980s was, Gould claims, due to gay men's and lesbians' ambivalence about their sexuality.

Gould argues that "lesbians and gay men have demonstrated a persistent ambivalence about their own homosexuality and about dominant, heterosexual US society; sometimes consciously experienced but also occurring on a less than fully conscious level, this ambivalence, and efforts to navigate it, significantly affected lesbians' and gay men's organized political responses to the AIDS epidemic" (Gould 2001, 136-137). For ACT UP members, simultaneously working with and against emotions of shame and pride as well as the relative ambivalence towards the state, "introduced uncertainty into any political course of gay action" (Gould 2001, 141). This ambivalence, coupled with an ambivalence toward state action regarding HIV/AIDS, had to be managed and, in the early days, was channelled into "volunteerism, community-based service provision and lobbying" (Gould 2001, 143). Gould notes that the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision was seen as a "declaration of war" that led to a "collective effervescence" that catapulted many of those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS into militant activism. However, Gould advises that we not see the *Hardwick* decision as the only reason for the emergence of militant activism:

> …the Court's decision was announced at a moment when the prevailing lesbian and gay emotion culture was shifting as a result of other, more gradual processes and occurrences—a steady (although of course

49. In 1986, the US Supreme Court case upheld the constitutionality of a Georgia state law that banned oral and anal sex between consenting male adults. This court case validated similar "sodomy" laws in other states, effectively criminalizing homosexuality. This decision was overturned by the US Supreme Court in the case of *Lawrence vs. Texas* in 2003.

> alarming) increase in cases of deaths, government inaction, and repressive legislation—that had by then spanned five years. (2001, 151)

What Gould demonstrates is a way of interpreting the role of emotions as embodied experiences of, and in, social dramas in a way that stays close to the ways people negotiate those emotions in their political and social contexts. Gould's article points us toward the Sisters' activism as political performances in social dramas that emerge from and respond to, different ways of negotiating the emotions of marginalised and oppressed groups. In particular, Gould's concept of "ambivalence" allows us to attend to the ways in which people negotiate ambivalence about their sexuality and their nation-state in ways that do not guarantee a coherent communal response or plan of action.

Berezin and Gould address the importance of bringing emotions into the analysis of social dramas in a way that does not disconnect emotions or remove them from the corpo-really situated experiences of everyday life or from political strategies. I argue that, in the case of the Sisters' activism, 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. Rather than using Deleuze's rather curiously disembodied concept of affect, I suggest 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 the queer self (physical and mental health) and is also a way of taking care of the community. If the targets of safer sex campaigns are sexually active queer men, 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 in which they perform activist spaces in San Francisco.

III. Performing Activist Spaces

A. Agitation

The Sisters have been at the forefront of HIV/AIDS since it emerged in the 1980s. In 1982, they produced the first safer sex pamphlet written in everyday sex-positive language and, in 1983, they organised the first candlelight vigil for AIDS in the US in 1983 (Sisters Website, Sistory).[50] Heading up 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

50. For more see *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence have history of charity, activism." 17 October 2007.

information about HIV/AIDS and with more gender-inclusive language, also exists as a documentary artefact of the period in time (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Cover of the *Play Fair!* pamphlet. Revised edition 1999.
(Source: Thirtieth Anniversary Exhibit, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts)

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."[51] Although he did not always engage in performances of public activism "in face" as Sister Florence Nightmare, his dedication to the struggle for People With AIDS (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.

51. His 1983-1984 diary is held in the Archives of the Library of the University of California, San Francisco <http://cdn.calisphere.org/data/13030/fw/kt2w1024fw/files/kt2w1024fw.pdf >

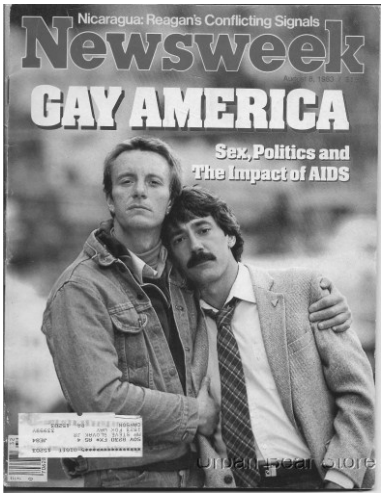

Figure 18. Bobbi Campbell (left) on the cover of Newsweek (8 August 1983). (Source: Urban Bear Store.com)

The *YouTube* video clip 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 (See Figure 18). 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.

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 outside of the proceedings going on inside the convention. Campbell's audience, including numerous shirtless gay men attending the rally, 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*, "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" (2005, 2). Dolan 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. (2005, 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 members 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 (NAPWA Website, Who We Are).[52] 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. His 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.[53] 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

52. See the article, "Your Brighter Future Begins Here" *POZ* Magazine, May 2009 for more information on the group of activists, including Campbell, who coordinated the writing of the Denver Principles. <http://www.poz.com/articles/denver_principles_future_hiv_2326_16506_2_of_3.shtml > (accessed 20 March 2011)

53. Harvey'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).

with the banner "Fighting For Our Lives" or helping to create the *Play Fair!* pamphlet, is an illustration of the Sisters' *agitational* activism.

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 without his habit or whiteface makeuip, it serves as an example of the strategic decision 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 (Sisters Sistory, 2010).

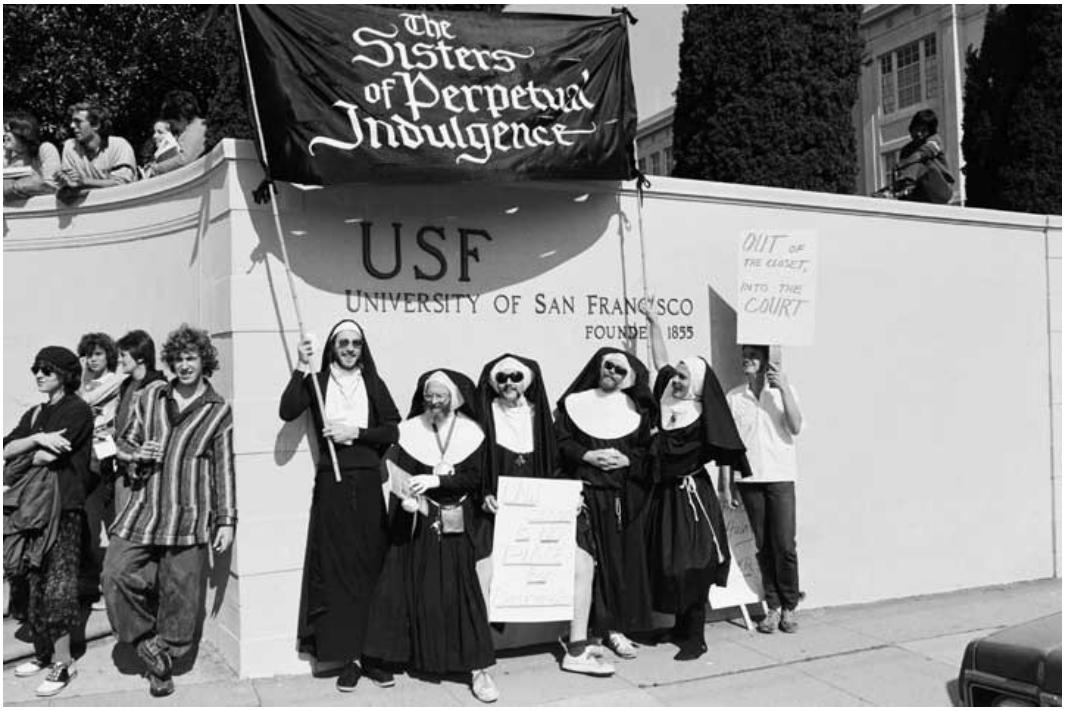

Figure 19. The Sisters protesting outside the University of San Francisco, 1980.
(Source : Leslie Lohman, http://www.leslielohman.org/Exhibitions09/QueerMecca/33sisters-at-USF.jpg

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 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.

B. 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:

> **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. (*Play Fair!* 1999)

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.

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 Archbisop 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 Parish located at 100 Diamond Street (at 18th Street) in the heart of the city's Castro District. Most Holy Redeemer parish counts among its members many gay, lesbian and transsexual Catholics.

> Sister Delta Goodhand and Sister maeJoy B. withU [sic] attended the 10:00am Mass at Most Holy Redeemer Parish. 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 (MHR Website). 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" (MHR Website, About MHR). 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 his or her cell phone to videotape the moment of individual devotion when the Sisters received the consecrated Body of Jesus. The video goes viral on the internet and right wing Catholic groups are outraged.

Figure 20. Sisters at the Mass at MHR parish, 7 October 2007, Video stills.
(Source: *YouTube*, http://www.*YouTube*.com/watch?v=MrDbgjLKoxU)

The extremist Catholic group Quamdiu Domine posts the video and it is picked up by US television host Bill O'Reilly who states on his Fox Network program: "Certainly the 65 million American Catholics should be deeply offended by the city's behaviour" (*Bay Area Reporter* 18 October 2007). O'Reilly doesn't blame the Archbishop. Instead, he blames the city of San Francisco as a city run by "far-left secular progressives who despise the military, traditional values and religion" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 October 2007). On 19 October, the Archbishop publishes 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. (*Catholic San Francisco* 19 October 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! (*Bay Area Reporter*, 18 October 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 nuns). 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 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 out 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 Catholic groups. Their campy makeup and dress, even though it was relatively understated, signifies queer parody 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, About US). 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 but stood out from the parishioners because they were dressed in their formal habits, something that reads as a parody of the Roman Catholic Church. 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 Catholic Church's teachings on condom use and homosexuality. Second, it does not reflect a warming of relations between the Sisters and the Catholic Church. What it shows is the Sister's 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 Communion to the

Sisters symbolizes an intransigent Catholic Church. The Sisters' email response to the parishioners of MHR conveys their gratitude for the hospitality they received at the parish. The 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 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 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" (Giesen 2006, 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 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 recent work in queer religious studies and queer theology, see Althaus-

Reid 2001, 2003; Boisvert 2000, 2004; Jordan 1997, 2000; and Wilcox 2003, 2009). However, the queering of the sacred affirms that queer people's spirituality matters and the Sisters recognise and honour the sacredness of all life (their vows to expiate stigmatic guilt) as the reason and purpose for performing affirmation.[54]

C. 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 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.

54. 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 that offer new horizons. See: Carrette 1999; Boyarin, Itzkovitz and Pellegrini 2003; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004.

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 Xpolosion, Sister Vicious and Sister Psychedelia attended the inauguration of the Couvent de Paris of the Soeurs de la Perpetuelle Indulgence (Sisters Sistory 2010). 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, published in 1991, demonstrated that 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 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 (1994, 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 supporting of sex, life, and love. These were not, and are not, the most popular images of condoms, demonstrating the continued potential impact of the Sister's Condom vow on AIDS discourse.

Another example of the ways that the Sisters perform affectionate politics is their recent participation in the *It Gets Better* Campaign, an online video testimonial project designed to encourage queer youth not to commit suicide due to bullying. The rise in gay and lesbian youth suicides in 2010-2011 suggests the sharpening of divisions over the acceptance of different sexualities in US society.[55] The collective efforts to draw attention to bullying in schools and create responses to this social drama have involved a wide spectrum of popular and political figures in US society, including the Sisters. Motivated by their vows to serve the community, the San Francisco Sisters enlisted social media, like *YouTube* and *Facebook*, to extend their message of love and affection for marginalised and oppressed groups beyond the territory of the Castro. The reach of these media allows queer and questioning youth to access these messages wherever and whenever they can access the internet. The "It Gets Better" campaigns, allied with the Trevor Project, seek to provide messages of solidarity, support and advice motivated by love and affection for the young queer lives that are struggling to live every day in a context of physical and emotional violence. The Trevor Project was created in 1998 as a response to the increased attention on bullying of queer youth in schools. The project was inspired by the Oscar-winning short-film *Trevor* (1994, 24 min.) that documented the

55. Although queer youth suicides are not new, the recent upsurge in attention is the effect of years of activism on the part of youth advocates as well as the use of new technologies of popular social media to advocate for social and political causes. See, Suicide Prevention Resource Center Publication 2008.

struggles of a queer youth who attempt suicide (The Trevor Project Website, Who We Are).

The Sisters joined the "It Gets Better" online video testimony campaign. Five Sisters recently posted their messages: Sr. Risqué, Sr. Roma, Sr. Jezebel, Sr. Mary Ralph and Sr. Zsa Zsa. Sister Roma's message is particularly moving. She is wearing her typical bejewelled and purple and green feather boa-lined wimple and high colourful silvery green eybrows:

> This is a message for all of you out there right now who are maybe being bullied, feeling alone or unworthy or maybe even at the end of your rope: DON'T DO IT! We love you!
>
> You know what you're not alone. People get bullied for a lot of different reasons. People get bullied because they're too fat, they're too skinny, they're too tall, they're too short, the colour of their skin. There's all kinds of reasons. So find people who are, like, maybe on your side or understand what you're going through and team up with them and beat the shit out of a bully!

Figure 21. Sister Roma There's No Place Like Rome! 16 October 2010 (Source: *YouTube*, http://www.*YouTube*.com/watch?v=BEB2Ab0qe-M&feature=player_embedded#at=15

I know you're going through some hard times right now but I want you to stick with it and continue to get your education and grow and get the most you can out of it, because it gets so much better, it gets a lot better, let me tell you that. When you get a little bit older and you start college…wow! The whole world opens up to you. You learn about new kinds of people, new religions, new ideas, new beliefs, things you didn't even know existed. And then from there, you learn that there's a whole bunch of

> communities that you can join, people with interests similar to yours.
>
> And you can do anything you want to do. Because, when you grow up and you're gay, you're generally more creative, smarter, funnier, better looking, more successful and richer than your straight counterparts. Mm-hm. That's something they won't tell ya.
>
> Because there really is strength in numbers. Team up, start a group, start a gang, start your own group of friends who like doing the things you like doing. And don't worry about those bullies, they're not going to be around forever; because you're going to grow up and get on with your life and you're going to find out that it gets better!

To date, thousands of similar online testimonials have been posted to *YouTube* and the *It Gets Better* Website.[56] What Sister Roma's testimony (and the testimony of the other Sisters) performs is an activism of affection. The emotional context of the social drama of queer youth suicide calls forth feelings of despair, hopelessness, isolation and insignificance. The Sisters, by participating in the online activist campaign, lend their

56. A recent survey of the *It Gets Better* site on *YouTube* reveals a total over 2,100,000 views of the testimonials. http://www.youtube.com/user/itgetsbetterproject. accessed 16 April 2011.

unique visual images of queer nuns to these online activist interventions. The message of hope-filled futurity that is woven into the personal testimonials, queers political and moral rhetorics that narrate queer lives as endlessly tragic, sad and meaningless. Sister Roma's visually stunning appearance coupled with her campy summons to "beat the shit out of a bully"—campy because it is incongruous to the values of non-violence of both the Trevor Project and the Sisters—offers her audiences a whimsically serious message inserting values of love, happiness and hope into public debate.

Jill Dolan writes that utopian performatives "invite citizen-spectators into a critical conversation about politics and oppression, about love and hope" (2005, 92). Since the *It Gets Better* political affirmations occur in cyber- and extraterritorial space, their publics are more multiple than at cultural performances and their gathered physical audiences. The *YouTube* clip of the Sisters partaking in Holy Communion at MHR was taken by someone in the audience, from a distance. The *YouTube* clip preserves the "real space" of the parish church where we can see parishioners lining up to receive the Host. What we see, in this clip, is the community of the parish, gathered to participate in the sacred ritual. The Sisters, even as their dress announces their presence as Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, are participating with the community in this ritual.

In the *It Gets Better* Campaign, Sister Roma directly addresses the camera and the viewers. Sister Roma's "in your face" comments are accompanied by animated facial features and body movement that evoke both serious and comedic aspects. We can infer from Sisters Roma's gestural reference to drag queen humour that she does not necessarily advocate violence against bullies. Although we cannot be certain of this, the humorous way she delivers her words renders some of her message tongue-in-cheek.

Furthermore, the *YouTube* clip of the Mass at MHR has become "viral"—spreading around the internet and being used by right wing Catholic groups to condemn the Sisters. One the one hand, the clip in itself does not explicitly incite a critical dialogue about homosexuality. On the other hand, the *It Gets Better* video testimony participates in the public dialogue on homosexuality that connects people in distance places to a non-territorial community (see Dodge and Kitchin 2005). It should be noted that Dolan's concept of the utopian performative is a performative that invites people into dialogue about a hopeful future, it does not necessarily constitute that future. The Sisters' participation in the *It Gets Better* Campaign invites a critical dialogue about love and hope, enacting a utopian performative that presents images of queer life full of hope, creativity, and the promise of finding one's place in new and loving communities.

IV. Conclusion

This chapter on the activist role of the Sisters has explored three modes of this role as it is performed 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 *It Gets Better* video testimonial and the Condom Saviour Vow, show the motivation behind so many of their public performances—that the Sisters have a deep love for queer community.

Bobbi Campbell's speech, the Sisters participation in Holy Communion at MHR parish, Sister Roma's video testimonial and the Condom Saviour Vow are invocations and embodiments of utopian performances. Each of these performances enact visions 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 queer youth suicides—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 fights to identify and keep queer community spaces and have accompanied queer people along the historical journey toward visibility and freedom. The Sisters have contributed to the altering of the discourse that HIV Equals Death, that Homosexuality is a Sin, that Queers are Unhappy. Along this journey, the Sisters have rendered public homage to 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 people 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 activism draws on the secular, the spiritual, the clownish and uses a campy brand of US political activism to live out their sacred vows

Chapter 6
[Closures] and Continuations……

I. (Re)Viewing the Sisters

Throughout this thesis, I have been concerned with expanding our understanding of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence by discussing their roles as nuns, clowns and activists. I have also relayed my experiences of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, through narrative and theoretical strategies that weave my own experiences of their performance history with theories of queer community and geography. I have spun personal narratives that have borne witness to what I saw, felt and experienced while participating as an audience member at their events. I have braided these narratives into text that enriches the conversation about the Sisters. I have discussed their historical links to European clowning, Native American tricksters, the Radical Faerie spiritual movement, and gay and lesbian political activism. I have cultivated conversations about performance, queer history and cultural geography by offering a case study of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. I have woven these personal histories and academic analyses into a web of performance geographical analysis inspired by Sonjah Stanley-Niaah's pioneering work on Dancehall culture in Jamaica. Stanley-Niaah developed performance geography as a response to her experiences and studies of Dancehall, but this framework for analysis need not be relegated only to the study of that cultural phenomenon. I have extended her approach to analyse the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in San Francisco because this approach addresses all the key factors necessary for understanding the Sisters as a complex organization, as agents in the culture and politics of San Francisco, as producers of queer culture.

The thesis, perhaps more than anything, is an attempt to think about and write a geography of the cultural performances of a specific queer community. To write that geography, I developed a specific style of research and writing that extended Stanley-Niaah's performance geography approach to study the cultural performances of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. The following sections offer my summary reflections on these three primary subjects of the thesis.

II. Style—Auto/ethnography and Performative Writing

The presentation of the research posed numerous problems, since, as stated in the Introduction (Chapter 1), there is no single way to represent the history, culture, performance practices and rituals of the Sisters. My observer status was as an audience member, bearing witness to these events and, therefore subject to my particular set of interpretive lenses. The textual and tonal strategies adopted in this thesis reflect an attempt to do justice to what I experienced, while contextualising those experiences within the literatures of performance studies, community-engaged theatre, queer geographies and queer studies.

Struggling with the first-person eye-witness narrative accounts and the desire to contextualise the Sisters' cultural performances within a body of relevant literature, I developed an auto/ethnographic and performative writing textual strategy. Throughout the thesis, I have approached the writing with some of Pred's aphorisms in mind:

> Through assembling (choice) bits
> and (otherwise neglected or discarded) scraps,
> through the cut-and-paste reconstructions of montage,
> one may bring alive,
> open the text to multiple ways of knowing
> and multiple sets of meanings,
> allow multiple voices to be heard,
> to speak to (or past) each other

> as well as to the contexts from which they emerge
> and to which they contribute. (Pred 1997, 135)

I have also chosen a performative writing strategy as a creative response to let the Sisters' characteristics and personalities shine through the text, sometimes as ventriloquism—their voices and emotions speak through my own narratives—and sometimes as documentary—their actions and biographies are given voice through my re-presentation of events and stories.

III. Approach—Performance Geography

My approach to studying the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence has been to adopt and extend Stanley-Niaah's innovative performance geography as a way of suggesting a more dynamic and embodied method of cultural analysis. As I noted at the beginning of the thesis, I found performance geography suitable as a method that "animates" some of the rather static analytic categories which contemporary geographers, such as Edward Soja, employ. Starting with Henri Lefebvre's triad of *representations of space* (physical space), *spatial practice* (ideological space) and *spaces of representation* (lived space), Soja posed a trialectics of spatiality wherein "Thirdspace" deconstructs the binary of physical and ideological space, opening up the possibilities of challenging the binary opposition between dominant forms of uses of spaces and their attendant ideologies. For Soja, Thirdspace is a way of thinking and analyzing the complex ways in which people live out their everyday lives, negotiating both dominant and resistant norms of physical (Firstspace) and ideological spaces (Secondspace) within their spatial and historical contexts (Soja 1996, 81-82). Earlier than Soja, geographer Allan Pred suggested, although not systematically, a "trialectics of everyday life" methodology, wherein spatial

analysis would include attention to *relations of power*, *discourses* and *situated practices* (Pred 1986; 1995). Pred's trialectics offers social science a fluid approach to studying culture that focuses on the ways that institutions, ideologies, texts, representations, and behaviours in space constitute the world we live in, resisting the temptation to separate culture from the historical, political or the spatial (Pred 1995, 1066). This is rooted in Pred's understanding that geography is primarily ontological: "Everybody has a body, nobody can escape from their body, and consequently all human activity—every form of individual and collective practice—is a situated practice and thereby geographical" (UC Berkeley Geography Department 2011).

I found performance geography to be an approach that attends to the messiness of embodied performance simultaneously within spatial and historical contexts. I found that performance geography's concern for the embodied performance of self and space helped my analysis of the Sisters' focus on affect, desire, bodies, sexualities, performances, rituals and spaces—aspects that emerged from critical reflections on my experiences of their performance events, as performances by and for and emerging out of queer cultural history. Stanley-Niaah writes:

> How do performances imprint themselves on space? What spatial identities do performances bear? How is the performative self to be defined in any given space? Are there distinctions to be made between the local and global self in performance? An understanding of the performance of self and the collective in space is an important dimension of performance geography. Performance geography is built on an understanding that acts of performance are linked across space through

> ritual, dance movement, production and consumption practices, as well as the movement of aural and visual images. There are spatial texts that can be read at various levels in and around performance. (Stanley-Niaah 2010, 33)

Rather than applying analytic categories, I deduced the characterization of the Sisters' roles from their performance histories. A performance geography approach, then, analyses how performances give meaning to places, not simply mapping where performance events take place. Specifically, I extend Stanley-Niaah's initial development of performance geography to centre on the historical contexts in which gay and lesbian people have created places where they have a sense of belonging, what Berezin called *communities of feeling*. These affective spaces are constituted through different kinds of cultural performances, and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are illustrative of the numerous ways in which a feeling of belonging is created, contested and formed.

Performance geography's potential for studying culture rests on its ability to analyze the relatively mobile, emotionally-capable bodies and collectivities in performance, situated within locales that become meaningful through performance.[57] What performance geography has shown regarding the space of performance is that there are multiple ways in which people experience places and how places achieve meaning through performances. In this thesis I analyzed video performances for their potential to

57. I have written *relatively mobile,* because HIV/AIDS and critical disability studies have taught us that we are all temporarily able-bodied . Recent queer disability performance art is an example that queer community need not only be the result of able-bodied performance events. For example: Toronto's Buddies in Bad Times theatre held a queer disability performance cabaret night as a part of 2010 Pride Events (see: http://www.buddiesinbadtimes.com/show.cfm?id=620#description). Also the performance group *Sins Invalid* , in San Francisco, focuses on issues of disability, sexuality and gender with a particular interest in the stories of queers of colour (see: http://www.sinsinvalid.org/).

create (virtual) spaces of collective feelings of belonging. I focused on the venues of these artistic performances, illuminating their historical contexts (how they came to be), their spatial arrangements (mapping), and their use (what people do there).

In relation to queer theories, the performance geography approach relied on Rose's appropriation of Butler's concept of performativity. Rose argued that space, like gender, is performative and that the performance of space is what constitutes space. Rose also challenged Butler's theory of performativity, articulating that there are aspects of desire and fantasies that, while felt within the body, lie beyond discourse. This way of thinking about discourse and performativity allows us to analyse performances that evoke emotions and affects, but cannot fully be put into discourse. The extra-discursive aspects of the Sisters performances, then, are those emotions—feelings of injustice and feelings for community—that they represent in their activist interventions.

Regarding contemporary research on emotions and social movements, the performance geography approach relied on sociological studies of political movements. The performance geography approach is concerned with the dynamic qualities of performance—those elements of emotions, feelings and sensibilities that converge within the space of performance. Moreover, these emotions that ground so many of the Sisters' performances are potential catalysts for social change. The Sisters' satirical performances as nuns acknowledge the material effects of Roman Catholic institutions on queer people and work to "take the sting" out the Catholic Church's icons and rituals.

The development of the performance geography approach also relied on a notion of "community" that is, at once, site-specific and territorial, and also boundary-less. Ahmed's notion of the skin of the community—expanding and shrinking to encompass

specific individuals or large groups—provided a way of thinking about community that allows for analysis of the ways that the word "community" is performed by the Sisters. Their Easter Celebration created a wide-open space for a diverse gathering of people. The Sisters' confrontation with Evangelical Christians in the Castro reminded both the Christians and those who witnessed their interventions that the space of the Castro was a space for people to meet, a space for love, hope and healing, i.e. as a space where more than mere entertainment can happen.

The performance geography approach was also used to analyse historical performances. My analysis of the *Altered Habits* film (1981) and some of the central examples taken from the Sisters' performance history, resurrects and investigates these events as archival documents. A performance geography approach to historical performance events, then, focuses on discovering the kinds of performances that took place in certain locales, relying on archival documentation of where these events took place, and analysing the role these places and the events that took place in them. The performance geography analysis of historical performances constructs a sense of belonging, a sense of place-ness for the communities and people who used those spaces. Analyzing historical performance events necessitates re-presentations of those events and their affective-experiential aspects. A performance geography approach has to creatively engage with past emotions and translate them in light of their contexts, creating dialogue between the other-wheres and other-whens of historical performances.

IV. Subject—the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

The thesis has been a story about the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. From my experiences of the Sisters' performance events in dialogue with performance studies,

performance geography and queer cultural studies, I formulated a "role-centric" characterisation of the Sisters as nuns, clowns and activists in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. Using a "role-centric" framework helps us consider the complexities of the Sisters' performance practices. The Sisters' roles overlap with each other. Shedding light on the ways that the Sisters perform each of these roles allows for a discussion about their collective identity, allowing their story to unfold in a way that also tells the story of the community of which they are a central part.

In Chapter 3, I showed that, as nuns, the Sisters embody and enact a gleeful perversion of traditional representations of Roman Catholic nuns. Their performance as sexy, queer nuns, probably the most obvious public perception of the Sisters, yields laughter and confusion, satire and heresy. I asserted that the Sisters do not mock Catholic nuns, but, rather, through their committments to serving queer communities, actual pay homage to the dedication to service and community that Catholic nuns embody. I also noted that the Sisters, as nuns, perform "nun-spaces" whenever and wherever they appear in public—their presence is announced by their whiteface makeup and habits and veils. To analyze their role as nuns I developed a characterization of nun-space as: *manifesting, memorializing, and mirroring*.

The Sisters describe their public appearances as "manifesting," or "going out in face," and this practice announces their identities in public space, creates a public event through ritual and community service and constitutes an alternative (or subaltern) queer public sphere. Their manifestations are exemplified by their "bar ministry," where they reach out to people inside gay bars to say "hello" to them, offering words of welcome and kindness in what can sometimes be, rather hostile and sometimes unwelcoming places. I

extended Hannah Arendt's conception of the public sphere to demonstrate that the Sisters' manifestations in public affirmed the presence of queer people in community space and potentially altered the experiences of being in public places.

The Sisters also perform nun-space through their memorials to people who have died from AIDS. I described how their memorial rituals create the possibility for remembering people's thoughts, words and deeds, bearing witness to their lives and creating memorial spaces. These memorial rituals work as performative archives of the memories of people's experiences of HIV/AIDS, keeping HIV/AIDS in public discourse. They also offer the community opportunities to mourn, grieve, and imagine new ways of dealing with HIV/AIDS. I drew on Hannah Arendt's notion of the *polis*—the space where people act together for common purposes—to show that when the Sisters bear witness to AIDS, it allows for collective grief in the streets which can alter how communities imag(e)ine themselves in public.

I also discussed how the Sisters, as nuns, act as "mirrors" for the queer community. They mirror, or reflect, the values of queer community back to the queer community. The Sisters stand up against fundamentalist Christian hate speech by responding with performances that affirm life and love and community. The Sisters perform nun-space when they act to intervene in US political debates on the side of marginalized communities, reflecting again the values of queer communities and the respect for oppressed people.

In Chapter 4, I showed that the Sisters, as clowns, infuse European clowning traditions with an explicit contemporary queerness. I discussed how their whiteface makeup harkens back to the whiteface clown traditions in Europe but their choice of

clothing (often dresses and skirts) as well as their names, come from drag culture. I also demonstrated that the Sisters' clown aesthetics and practices are rooted in the tradition of the satirical clown as Tricksters who disrupts the boundary between the sacred and the profane, satirizing and critiquing social norms of sexuality and gender. Their erotic and sexy merrymaking reflects their sacred vows to expiate stigmatic guilt and to spread universal joy, challenging dominant social norms that oppress (and repress) erotic freedom and stigmatize groups of people.

The Sisters perform clown space in three ways: through *parody*, by performing the *carnivalesque* and through *camp*. I showed how the Sisters parody religious institutions and rituals through their tongue-in-cheek portrayals of dancing and prancing nuns in their film *Altered Habits* (Newman 1981), and discussed the differences between the film and their live re-performance of the same at their 30th anniversary celebration in the Yerba Buena Arts Centre. While the film recalls the New Left politics of the 1960s and documents one of the earliest appearances of the Sisters, their 30th anniversary celebration was less rooted in politics and thus produced a gallery spectacle. Although the spectacle still had the potential to critique religious dogma, its setting, bound up in situated practices of the democratization of culture, brought the "comedic" aspect of the Sisters' clowning antics to the foreground, eclipsing the radicality of their earlier film project.

In comparison to their performance in the Arts Centre, during community festivals, the Sisters use their clowning in a way that constitutes a pleasurable party. This party performs cultural democracy. This politics is wrapped up in the Sisters' desire to use the festival space to create a wide-open space for diverse (artistic) expressions of self

and to construct their own "integrated vision of art and life" (Little 2006, 162). I noted that this is the effect of the Sisters' performance of clown space, wherein the loosening of social norms, even in liberal San Francisco, creates the opportunity for free expression and the creative and artful expression of the values of the queer community (i.e., cultural democracy). Clown space allows these different expressions of self to bump into one another in public spaces, allowing for a collective affirmation of clowning that celebrates the erotic body in public and ritualizes the celebration of queer-ed community.

Lastly, I discussed the performance of clown space through camp. I noted that campy performances display the incongruities of queer life. To illustrate this, I analysed the "laughing nun" logo as a campy, jokester image that appears in different places, marking territories of pleasure and joy in everyday spaces. Such queer cultural performances ask that we laugh in the face of the seriousness of marginalized social positions—a central aspect of the humour of camp. I argued that describing camp in its locally-specific contexts rectifies the inadequacy of defining camp in general terms and keeps "camp," as a concept, open to its variety of situated practices. The Sisters' campy clown logo, found on t-shirts, banners and stickers stuck to sidewalks, mark the Sisters' territory wherever the logo appears, and announces their unique form of campy humour that challenges Catholic doctrines of the "appropriate" woman. The logo camps the incongruity of sexuality/gender and nuns. This campiness rehearses the sexiness of the Sisters as queer nuns and does this through stylized humour and fun.

In Chapter 5, I characterized the Sisters as activists, analyzing their activist work as the practice of community in a way that constitutes spaces of affection, emerging from their commitment to HIV/AIDS activism and evolving into an ethic of care of self and

community. The Sisters' political interventions could be characterized in three modes: *agitation, affirmation and affection*. In their agitational mode, the Sisters have been at the forefront of HIV/AIDS activism, demonstrating against government inaction and serving the needs of the sick, dying and alone. Their agitational politics were also exemplified by the development of the first safer-sex pamphlet aimed at gay men and that, importantly, used everyday language and terms to inform gay men about their options for safer sex practices. This was one of the first interventions within the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Rather than promoting the fear of sex, the Sisters appeal to the desire for sex, putting health (specifically, the health of gay men) into public discourse as an issue of social justice. Bobbi Campbell's speech before the 1984 Democratic National Convention served to illustrate the Sisters' dedication to articulating the needs of PWAs in the midst of continued marginalization within the gay and lesbian community and in the midst of stonewalling from the US government at the time. The speech also represents the Sisters' way of confronting political situations with compassion and style.

The Sisters also act to affirm the people in the community through their advocacy and fundraising projects. I discussed the Sister's participation in the Mass at Holy Redeemer Catholic parish. This was as an act of political affirmation of the queer community through their appearance in their unique whiteface makeup and habits and joining the parish community in their religious ritual. The Sisters' participation in the Mass demonstrated their affirmation of the queer community by performing their own kind of "welcome" of the new Archbishop. In addition, their full participation at the Mass (taking Holy Communion) affirmed for the GLBT parishioners that they supported the role of spirituality in the lives of queer people.

Finally, I described how the Sisters' more recent activism has moved to an ethics of care of self and community. The Sisters' participation in recent "It Gets Better" campaigns, standing up for queer youth, demonstrates a utopian performative of a future possible queer world for these youth, a world of possibility, creativity and new communities. The ethics of care that the Sisters embody is based on their commitment to expiating stigmatic guilt and serving their community. From the first safer-sex campaigns, to early AIDS activism, and through to recent "Stop the Violence" campaigns, the Sisters have enacted an ethic resting on the logic that every individual in the community is valuable and valued, necessary and needed; and to take care of one's self, then, is a way of taking care of the community. I argued that the Sisters' ethics of care, as an example of affectionate activism is a unique and much-needed addition to queer political activism.

Part V: Futures, Possibilities, and Blessings

Briefly, future performance geographical research on the Sisters would benefit from in-depth interviews to discover the inner workings of the Sisters and their perceptions of the organization, their recruitment practices, how they maintain membership, how they conduct their meetings. Interviews and participation observation at the Sisters' planning meetings would reveal the Sisters' creative processes and the ways in which they analyze the social dramas they confront. Also, the Sisters exist in eighteen US urban and rural communities and in seven countries. A study of the global diffusion of the Sister-effect would allow for a comparative analysis as well as create the opportunity to focus on local queer community (his and her)stories, si(gh)tes and politics. This would add to the literature on the ways that queers exist and live in different cultures

and communities, united by the common cultural phenomena of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

The performance geography approach also has implications for analyzing cultural phenomena beyond the historical case study of the Sisters. There are numerous activist cultural practices that can be studied using the performance geography approach. Anti-war activist theatre such as Bread and Puppets and the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army and street demonstrations could be analyzed for the ways they animate public spaces with humour, celebration and alternative visions of community. Graffiti artists, squatters and buskers perform their artistic practices in direct relation to different kinds of places. Their performances can be analyzed using the performance geography approach to understand their public cultural activities in their local contexts and as a way to understand how people make sense out of, and use of, public places, such as subways, streets, and alleyways. The performance geography approach can also be used to respond to various other ways that people perform their cities. Large-scale cultural events and festivals are used to construct a city's identity and the performance geography approach can focus on the multiple ways these festivals organize, and reorganize, public spaces and people's experiences of those spaces. The performance geography approach has the potential to illuminate contemporary and historical uses of space, people's emotional experiences of places, and the relations of power that structure how we think, feel and act when we encounter the world around us. The potential for performance geography to inform the politics of places lies in its ability to uncover the complex forces at play in the construction of place, its meanings, and the everyday situated practices that can alter and redefine what a place means for a particular community.

The Sisters have developed unique cultural performances within the spaces of their community and their story tells us the story of a community's emergence, its hardships and its celebrations. The Sisters have accompanied this community for the past thirty years, offering queer people rituals to commemorate the dead, to honour those who have served the community and to give blessings to anyone who wishes to receive them. It is appropriate, then, that the thesis ends with comments on "blessings" by Sister Constant Craving of the Holey Desire:

> The whiteface is what we call the "walk-in confessional." Individuals will walk up to us and say "Bless me Sister for I have sinned," doing the whole Catholic parody thing. But the funny thing is, is that we're not here to bless you *after* you've sinned. We're blessing you *because* you've sinned. You know, sin has been a concept that organised religion has used to actually subjugate individuals. And our idea is: whatever you're doing, as long you're doing it to actually bring pleasure to yourself or to others, it's not about subjugation, it's about living into it and experiencing it and enjoying it, and blessing yourself for all that Creation has been able to provide for you. (Sister Constance Craving of the Holey Desire *The Lesbian Podcast* 2009)

A-men, A-women, and All the beautiful others. Blessed be.

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Appendices

Appendix A. 25th AIDS Candle Light Vigil Ritual, Sunday June 4th, 2006

We're here tonight to celebrate 25 years of Living with HIV and AIDS. We're also here tonight to celebrate the many loved ones we have lost to this disease.

We will start tonight by calling out those we have loved and we have lost because it is so important to know those who have come before ourselves. On the count of three, I would like you to call out those names so dear to your hearts… Call them out with love, laughter and passion.

One… Two… Three…

Now take a deep breath and ground yourself.

Now we're going to take a little ride on the love train… That's right my little lambs, we're gonna have ourselves a little love in!

This is a call & response ritual so turn to your left and repeat after me:

- People are born to Love, I was born to Love!
- Love is for everyone, I deserve to be loved!
- All love is equal, My Love is REAL!
- I will Promulgate Love, I will receive Love!

Now turn to your friend, lover or even a perfect stranger and embrace them with open arms, an open mind & an open heart. Look into their eyes and if the spirit moves you, give them a loving kiss.

Now with the power invested in us by the State of
Erotic Bliss, Self Love & Loving Affirmations…
And now with a mighty hey ho (Hey Ho!)
I now declare the gathered faithful overflowing with
Joy & Love

In the name of the Father, Daddy
In the name of the Son, Daddy's boy/boi
And in the Holy Name of Harvey Milk
Ahhh Men, Ahhh Women & Ahhh All the Rest!

Blessed Be

Appendix B. A Vow of Engagement in the World. Written by Sister Kitty Catalyst and her beautiful daughter, Sister Mary Timothy Simplicity, October 2005.

The dictionary provides many definitions for the word "engage," and as the theme of Castro Street Fair 2005 perhaps no more fitting a word could be found as a call for action from the talented and diverse community that this fair brings together. This is a time in our world when we all need to engage just a little more.

Engage means to offer: as in engaging your knowledge, resources and support.
Engage means to participate, as in political, cultural and social events.
Engage means to involve, as in encouraging others to take part.
Engage means to promise, as in binding oneself to another.

All the ways to define the word, however, really come down to the same thing:
To engage is to play an active part in one's own life and the lives of others, to share talents and strength, and to create stronger personal and community bonds. To engage in a meaningful way is what we all can do to help bring about a more rewarding life for ourselves and others, and a happier and healthier society in general.

I want to invite you all to join us now as we engage in a vow and a blessing: Repeat after us:

Today, at this moment, I vow to engage my life.

I vow to meet this moment and each moment fully, and with an open heart and an expansive mind

I vow to share the lessons joys and pains of my life so they may engage the growth of others

I vow to suit up, show up and fully participate in my life and the lives of those I call family

I vow to open my heart to new experiences and new people, and to truly see those who cross my path each day.

I vow to fully bind myself to my community, my brothers in sisters on this planet who surround me. To seek Justice and liberty for all that the divine has brought onto the planet.

I vow To see the places I am like those around me, not different from, to see the ways we connect instead of how we are separate, and to recognize the unique gifts that only that person in that place at that time can bring to this world.

I vow to offer up all of myself and all of my unique gifts to this planet in pursuit of peace, freedom, justice, and love.

And with this blessing I recommit myself to being truly a part of the world that needs me now more than ever.

May Blessings Flow:

Appendix C. Monologue for the High Priestess, manifested by Sister Lolita Me Into Temptation. This piece was written by Sister Lola and Sister Sharin' Dippity Reveal. (No Date Given).

(A slow procession to audience while "God" by Tori Amos is playing. I lay a line of glitter down in front of me. Music lowers slowly.)

First things first…
A glitter sacrament will sanctify our presence.
(Pause while Sr. sharing blows glitter towards the audience)

May the winds of intent… pierce (Cross over the glitter line on the floor) the veil this evening.

Now that we can see one another…clearly…

The agreement is complete.
I have answered my calling and you have arrived.

It is no coincidence my lambs, that you all are here tonight.

The universe gave you a map and you followed it to the here and now.

If each of us were to take a pause….We could easily go back to the day of our desire that called forth this graceful moment that we are now sharing.

And so now we move further into our agreement.

I… have our voice…
You… have our ears…
Together… we are the body…

All we have is ourselves… and one another.

The work that is done here today… I ask you to share with those around you.

This is internal revolution that begets external evolution.

This is MAGIC!

(This part will be done a bit like a gospel preacher to bring up the energy a bit)

Look to your neighbor, look into their eyes, look hard…Now say hello, give them a hug or shake their hand. Don't be scared. I'm sure they won't bite. Tell them your name and something about yourself.

Just so we're all on the same page. I'm Sister Lolita Me Into Temptation. I am the High Priestess, I am a palmist, I am a loving husband, I am a proud mother, and I am a freak!

This is our dance and the steps to the music are the vows I will now ask you to take.

I will read you the vows and after each vow please repeat "Together Together."

Take you neighbor's hand please…

We will tear down common fences
And embrace without barbed wire
We will build across the canyons
We will be beloved companions
And we'll be lifted higher
"Together Together"

We will share our confidences
We will share each others laughter
And we'll share each other's sorrows
Through a million new tomorrows
And what ever comes after
"Together Together"

With the vow that now commences
Two converging roads become one
I will change but never hurt you
I will change but not desert you
And we'll learn to love the virtue
Of trusting in someone
"Together Together"

Ah Men, Ah Women and Ah the Others

Blessed be…

Appendix D. Mother's Day May 7th, 2005 Peace Walk & Rally

This is a call to the Mother's who came before today...

We now kneel at your altar,

We kneel to you and Pray...

Grandmothers, Mothers, Aunts, Sisters too,

Our Children have been taken across the ocean Blue,

Please help keep them safe, let them know they are loved...

Please deliver our message like a kiss from a dove.

Will you please tell the Mothers in that land Oh so Far,

We know that they're scared, some bloody, some scared.

We send our PINK LIGHT from our hearts to theirs

And just when they thought that nobody cares.

We shout "WE DO! WE DO! WE DO! WE'RE HERE!"

We are out yelling, not hiding or scared...