Queering the (Sacred) Body Politic

Considering the Performative Cultural Politics of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

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Some people would say that we need a ground from which to act. We need a shared collective ground for collective action. I think we need to pursue the moments of degrounding, when we’re standing in two different places at once; or we don’t know exactly where we’re standing; or when we’ve produced an aesthetic practice that shakes the ground.

—Judith Butler (1994, question 6, ¶ 4)

While living in San Francisco, I took them for granted. For me, they were fixtures in SF’s cultural milieu, a “natural” element in and of the sociopolitical landscape. I attended their Halloween-in-the-Castro celebrations; I saw them at AIDS Dance-a-thon and Walk-a-thon benefits; they greeted me at the Castro and Folsom Street Fairs; and they...

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were always in the foreground at lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Pride Day celebrations. If the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence were absent from a major GLBT-supported benefit or critical action, somehow the event seemed to be missing something. The Sisters’ presence signaled, at once, a deadly serious political critique and an opportunity to celebrate the wicked camp of the Sisters, tricked out in (among other things) nuns’ habits, lace, high heels, rubber, and mascara.

Formally established in 1979, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Inc. (SPI), is a San Francisco–based not-for-profit organization dedicated to social service and political activism, primarily focused on human rights concerns, HIV/AIDS prevention, and protection of freedom of expression. Although originally an organization of gay men, the SPI currently includes members who self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, androgynous, and straight men and women. The Sisters are also self-identified performance artists. Donning nuns’ habits and accessorizing with buttons, jewelry, hats, and make-up, they identify themselves as “holy sacred clowns” as well as “21st Century nuns” (Day, 1997, ¶ 26). According to their mission statement, SPI members vow to assist with “the spiritual enlightenment and spirits lightenment of the community” by “propululating universal joy and expiating stigmatic guilt” and “help[ing] others through humor and hard work” (The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Inc., 2001, p. 1).

The Sisters, because of their high profile presence in SF cultural politics, have attracted considerable media attention. Some supporters, defending against the critique of the Sisters’ ostensible heresy, have described them simply as “drag artists” who merely “put on a show” as they raise money and awareness about important “gay issues” (Carroll, 1999, p. E8). SPI’s public performances have been variously characterized as innocuous entertainment, satirical street theater, carnivalesque camp, and political parody (Carroll, 1999; Garcia, 1999; Lattin, 1999). These descriptions, although they sketch an outline of the lighthearted aesthetic (or discursive and celebratory) aspects of SPI, tend to do so by foregrounding the campy characteristics evident at events and only parenthetically mentioning the Sisters’ significant everyday (material) commitment to action in the communities they serve through political activism and critique.

When I became acquainted with them in 1994, I was not aware of other important facets of SPI’s public persona: their solemn commitment to community service and their habitual participation in political activism. The Sisters’ performances as glammed-out nuns are driven by a deeply held desire to materially contribute an affirming, nurturing, and joyful presence to, and affect positive change within, queer communities through a modality of queer performance art as activism. As such, SPI offers an intriguing and important example of the power of cultural politics, of the material political force of ludic discursivity, and of the playful ways that a wicked wit can work in political activism.

My objective in this study is to explore aspects of SPI’s cultural politics that trouble what Judith Butler (1998) points out is a trend in reading and gauging the political efficacy of particular social groups:

The untimely resurgence of the culture/material distinction is in the service of a tactic . . . that seeks to identify some social movements with the merely cultural and then the cultural with the derivative and the secondary, and what tends to happen then is that an anachronistic materialism becomes the banner for a new Left orthodoxy. (¶ 8)

I take Butler to mean, here, that those movements identified as “merely cultural” are understood as superfluous (derivative, secondary)—that is, the cultural constitutes little “real” material impact in the body politic. SPI’s playfully discursive mode of cultural politics, from this perspective, can easily
be dismissed as ineffectual in creating material change. The either-or characterization of the “merely” cultural and the “real” material (what I refer to in this chapter as a discursive-material or ideal-material binary) can have serious consequences for those groups who engage in cultural politics. At least one penalty imposed on groups identified as employing ludic (playful), discursive tactics is the dismissal of their efforts as useless, navel-gazing capriciousness, at best, and as being hostile toward collective political efforts, at worst. The “Left orthodoxy” to which Butler refers is reflected in Donald Morton’s (1996) comment that “queer idealism is rendered more clearly as allied with the self-interested individualistic idealism of the bourgeois subject” (p. 15) than it is with making actual, material collective contributions to change. Such a charge, I argue, misses its target with respect to the Sisters’ queer activism.

SPI embodies the very material political change and collective spirit for which Morton and other materialists call—precisely through the uniquely situated performative actualization of their ideals in the real constructs of the body politic. In other words, SPI’s celebratory discursive idealism (the Sisters’ playful, campy, aesthetic modality) does not neglect but, in fact, recognizes, embodies, and strengthens the powerful materiality inherent in the discursive. In what follows, I offer a fleshier reading of the Sisters (than has been offered by mainstream media representations) to examine the non-normative performative appropriation of “nun” by the queer bodies of SPI and how their cultural politics demonstrate the materiality of discursive ideals and the discursiveness of the material.

I recognize that the sense of taken-for-grantedness with respect to the Sisters I mentioned at the outset is bound up in the unique cultural strands that constitute San Francisco’s diverse sociopolitical quilt; in many other contexts, the Sisters would probably stretch, even rip, that fabric. From its unique beginnings, San Francisco has been recognized as a brawling, contentious, volcanic, “raw democracy” (Roff, 1996, p. 42), alive with fractured and fracturing cultural and community identities and diverse political factions. Various scholars have attended to this “politics of hyperpluralism” (Wirt, 1971, p. 101), and San Francisco’s unique cultural personality has been considered in terms of its cosmopolitan character and tolerant, libertine ways of life (Asbury, 1933; Findlay, 1986; Matthews, 1997) and its bohemian counter-culture histories (Ashbolt, 1989; Cavan, 1972; Perry, 1984; Smith, 1995). More specifically, some scholars have focused on San Francisco’s gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities with respect to social space (Castells & Murphy, 1982), queer culture and tourism (Howe, 2001; Stryker & Van Buskirk, 1996), and San Francisco’s sometimes explosive political climate (Shilts, 1982; Weiss, 1982).

Scholars, however, could devote more attention to this distinctive cultural community and the myriad of intersecting queer identities, performances, and activist organizations. Several researchers make mention of San Francisco’s queer culture and political critique in studies concerned with rhetorical strategies (Darsey, 1991; Slagle, 1995; Smith & Windes, 1997), and this study adds to that body of work by examining a specific example of San Francisco’s queer activism. This is an effort to contribute to the ongoing conversation one noteworthy example (perhaps, exemplar) of a queer activist organization that demonstrates how the discursive power of performative and subversive appropriation of oppressive symbols of authority can instantiate material change.

In the first section, I suggest several theoretical points of orientation with respect to “queer” and “camp” and briefly outline the process through which a potential Sister advances to full-fledged Sisterhood. Described in the second section are the Sisters’ aesthetic practices and activism. In the third and fourth sections, I analyze the performative nature of
SPI's artistic activism and situate it within a sociopolitical context. In the final section, I offer tentative implications for further analyses of the Sisters' activism in particular and locally situated camp activist performance in general.

CAMP AND VOWS: QUEERING THE (SACRED) BODY

Queer is a symptom, not a movement, a symptom of a desire for radical change. *(Alcorn, quoted in Smith, 1996, p. 277)*

*Queer* is a contested term, one that incites much debate and discussion in the literature theoretically treating subjectivity as it relates to gender and sexual orientation. For opponents of queer theory and practice such as David Horowitz (1996), the “Queer revolution” represents “the ultimate subversive project” (p. 328). It is “a war against civilization and nature” (p. 336) that, ultimately, renders meaningless concepts such as God and Nature in an effort to break down the “natural” distinctions between sexes and empty those categories of any gender-related value or norm and that thereby moves toward creating “a gender free world” (p. 328). Others, like Cherry Smith (1996), take a less strident approach in describing “queer.”

In her chapter “What Is This Thing called Queer?” Smith (1996) reads the term through the politics of groups such as Queer Nation, OutRage, and Perverts Undermining State Scrutiny (PUSSY):

[Queer] defines a strategy, an attitude, a reference to other identities and a new self-understanding. . . . Both in culture and politics, queer articulates a radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality and the family. [It is a term that underlines] how much of our history and ideologies operate on a homo-hetero opposition, constantly privileging the hetero perspective as normative, positioning the homo perspective as bad and annihilating the spectrum of sexualities that exists. (p. 280)

Rather than moving toward a “gender free world,” as Horowitz (1996) would have us believe, queer projects open up the possibility of recognizing and honoring a vast array of genders and sexualities, according to Smith (1996). Although Horowitz understands the objective of queer politics as a “radical enterprise” seeking an “impossible ideal” (p. 336), Smith suggests that this “ideal” is present in the actual, in the material sociopolitical bodies of gendered and sexed subjects. Through their performative art and political activism, queer subjects actualize change by reinterpretting oppressively gendered or sexed “signs of the moment” (Smith, 1996, p. 285), thereby creating the conditions for the possibility of acknowledging, respecting, and celebrating a vast array of gendered and sexed subjects.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence embrace a plurality of gendered and sexed subjectivities. In their mission statement, SPI describe how “queer” informs their organization:

We are a queer family. “Queer” means the freedom to be an individual in a close knit family of individuals: diversity and unity. The sisterhood, priesthood or any subset of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (SPI) membership is open to women and men, young and old, rich and poor, gay and lesbian, straight, bisexual and transgender; our organization includes masculine and feminine identified as well as androgynous personas. (The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Inc., 2001, p. 2)

This description echoes Queercore’s appropriation of the term. Dennis Cooper (1996) describes Queercore as “a place where ‘queer’ defines not a specific sexuality, but the freedom to personalize anything you see or hear then shoot it back into the stupid world more distorted and amazing than it was before” (p. 295). For SPI, that “anything” is the persona of “nun.” The Sisters appropriate—through a
subversive, discursive aesthetic—and embody the sign “nun,” bending it, twisting it, distorting it, and, ultimately, making it amazingly their own.

Like queer, camp is also a contested term. For some, camp is simply pretense; it is a “certain mode of aestheticism . . . one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon . . . not in terms of beauty, but in terms of degree of artifice” (Sontag, in Case, 1989, p. 287). Sontag, as Case points out, understands camp within a context of heterosexual aestheticization, a context that fixes the notion of camp against heteronormative standards of authenticity. Case suggests that the assimilationist tendency in such a move prompted a response in gay camp discourse to retain its “constantly changing, mobile quality” (p. 287).

Camp, then, like queer, is a fluid term and an embodied, ever-shifting performative practice: as Smith (1996) puts it, “Queer seems as chameleon as camp” (p. 285). Thus, rather than imposing a definition of camp onto the Sisters’ practice, it makes more sense to read how SPI embodies and practices its own sense of camp. With respect to that queer embodiment and those camp practices, it is important to acknowledge the rigor of the demanding process through which a potential Sister embodies full-fledged Sisterhood.

It is not easy to become a Sister. Those interested in joining the order are warned that if they are not willing to make a lifelong commitment to the order and to the community, they should probably reconsider joining. Put simply, a habit and makeup do not make a Sister. Those who aspire to be Sisters actualize that commitment through a performative process of pledging to a seemingly simple vow and actualizing the ideal immanent in that vow through everyday material practices. Sister Mish, in a 1998 interview with Gaywave magazine, reads and explains the vow:

“While I remain a Sister of Perpetual Indulgence, I will ever strive to fulfill our mission of promulgating universal joy and expiating stigmatic guilt. I pledge my support to my fellow Sisters toward our personal and collective enlightenment.” And that is about as much as what we could agree upon [when SPI was established], but it’s, I think, quite a lot. (Day, 1997, ¶ 33)

These “common vows,” although seemingly vague and abstracts tenets, require a specific, significant, and rigorous commitment on the part of aspiring and current Sisters. Also, these vows performatively merge the Sisters’ embodied aesthetic with the materiality of the body politic.

There are three stages through which one must move to reach the “Black Veil” status and become a full-fledged Sister: (a) Aspirant, (b) Postulant, and (c) Novice. During the first stage, Aspirants are involved in meetings and activities but refrain from wearing a habit or speaking on behalf of SPI. After a minimum of 2 months, Aspirants can request the move to Postulancy, which requires them to develop a sponsorship relationship with a fully professed Sister. At this stage, Postulants learn the history of SPI by working in the archives, and they must attend at least four official events. Postulancy requires at least 4 months and, when completed, the Postulant’s sponsorship relationship with SPI moves into mentorship as the Postulant becomes a Novice. Novices are mentored by a full-fledged Sister and spend at least 6 months rehearsing their own full membership. This involves consistently participating in community work and events, spending hours working in the archives, and wearing the nun’s habit with whiteface and a white veil. At this point, Novices are always accompanied by their mentor (“Mother”) and cannot speak on behalf of SPI. Finally, Novices can move into the “Black Veil” stage and become a fully professed Sister. It takes approximately a year to reach this stage, and three quarters of the fully professed Sisters must approve the move from Novice to Black Veil, which endows the new Sister with all the
SPI responsibilities, rights, and privileges (see “What it takes,” 2006).

This is unmistakably a painstaking, time-consuming process, one that demands of aspiring members an embodiment of not only the camp but also the everyday sociopolitical commitment inherent in the spirit of SPI. This commitment to service and activism, over the more than 25-year span of SPI, performatively merges the Sisters’ campy aesthetic performance with embodied queer politics and practice.

ARTISTRY AND ACTIVISM: REMAPPING AND RECLAIMING THE (SACRED) BODY

We are artists as well as social activists, and our faces and bodies are our canvases. (The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Inc., 2001, p. 1)

It is difficult to do justice to the array of practices that the Sisters use to appropriate and transform traditional “nun” personae. Because it is, in large part, an aesthetic mode of performance, the language I might employ to describe it can neither fully apprehend nor represent how that performance manifests in lived bodies. I offer the following descriptions as examples of the SPI aesthetic.

When I found myself, for the first time, in the presence of several Sisters, I read their performance aesthetic in primarily ludic terms. Even among all the other outrageously costumed revelers at the 1994 Halloween-in-the-Castro celebration, the Sisters stood out: grouped together, offering a glance or a nod or a brief greeting to those brave (or inebriated) enough to approach such conspicuous celebrities, they were like a live, hot cluster of brightly colored neon lights. I was astounded by their artistic inventiveness: Each Sister was a highly individualized and stylized incarnation of his own imaginative vision. I remember one Sister in particular who wore a habit of hot pink satin and cool white lace adorned with luminous beads and brilliant bangles in every color of the rainbow. Strings of shiny faux pearls and glittering crystals hung, like garlands, from his neck; shimmering white satin gloves offset by sparkling, oversized rings; thigh-high black stockings, and white, mile-high heels peeked out from between the generous slits in his habit. And the makeup: blue, green, and pink eye shadow, impossibly arched black eyebrows, eyelashes that seemed to go on forever, and lush raspberry frost lipstick on a stark whiteface canvas. Like glamorous, grownup, consecrated cartoon characters, the Sisters were, for me, vibrantly embodied installations of artistic play, vivid imagination, and impertinent absurdity.

Put simply, when appearing at public events, the SF Sisters dress in traditional nun habits and accessorize with whatever accoutrements they desire; their camp is manifest, in part, through “nun drag.” As Sister Missionary P. Delight puts it,

Each house has a traditional habit. . . . the only traditional part [in the SF order] is our wimples, our ear [brassieres]. But, we do have our long black flowing robes, and scapula, bibs, and what have you. We are also allowed to show our own individuality and our artistry as we see fit. . . . The [traditional] nuns are discarding this fabulous drag, and far be it from us to let fabulous drag molder in the closet, so we resurrected that drag and indeed [did it] in honor of all their [traditional nuns’] work. (Day, 1997, ¶ 31)

More than this, the Sisters’ chosen names reflect the creative wit inherently a part of the SPI persona (e.g., Sister Homo Celestial, Sister Krishna Kosher, Sister Mystery of the Holy Order of the Broken Hymen, etc.). The emphasis, here, in both embodying and naming the nun persona is on creative human artistry, rather than on an effort to appropriate gender.

Sister Mish points out that although some interpret the Sisters as “just drag queens making fun of nuns” (Day, 1997, ¶ 24), Sister Phyllis Stein the Fragrant Mistress of Sistory suggests that
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. We definitely minister to the spiritual needs of our community, while drag queens sort of focus on camp and fun within our communities. A lot of people refer to us as drag queens, but we say we’re in nun drag. We are nuns. (McClelland, 1997, ¶ 16)

This distinction in focus and objective—between drag as campy gender appropriation and nun drag as appropriating the nun persona—is important in understanding how camp serves SPI’s materially transformative manifestation of nun practice. Whereas the drag community focuses exclusively on “camp and fun,” according to Sister Stein, the Sisters use—without abandoning the fun—this aesthetic to further their sociopolitical commitments to the community.

Although it may be easy to read SPI as only playful entertainment, as a fabulous example of a ludic queer cultural phenomenon, they are that and more. The Sisters also devote themselves to extensive sociopolitical activism and work: They lend their presence to various fundraising events; some perform wedding, blessing, and funeral ceremonies. Often, without makeup or hoopla, the Sisters volunteer in various capacities for numerous not-for-profit organizations that lend assistance to needy populations. Moreover, through the Sisters’ grant and scholarship programs, SPI has raised and donated more than half a million dollars to progressive projects that promote wellness, identity, tolerance and diversity within our communities. We have a vision that encompasses diverse communities and groups that have a common interest in human rights, people of every gender, gender identity, race, class, age and sexual orientation. (“Grants,” 2006, ¶ 3)

Given this focus, SPI’s queer politics and community commitment extend not only to those individuals and communities that face the “realist [and material] terror mounted by heterosexist forces” (Case, 1989, p. 288), but to individuals in general who are marginalized by dominant discourses. In other words, artistry and activism merge, for SPI, to ironize, critique, and transform oppressive conditions.

PERFORMATIVITY AND HABITUS: ENTERING THE (SACRED) BODY POLITIC

One kneels in prayer, and only later acquires the belief. (Butler, 1997a, p. 155)

In this section, I move to show how the Sisters’ campy discursive performance of identity also acts as a performative vehicle, through which ontological change (change of being) is fostered in the sociopolitical field. In other words, this section explores how “Performativity is the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed” (Butler, 1997b, ¶ 3). I make this move to demonstrate how reading SPI offers a way to orient scholarship and political practice in between the either-or–ness of choosing to engage—in scholarship or not—at either a materialist or a discursive level to analyze or create the possibility for change. Instead, the performativity of SPI helps us to understand that scholarly and political projects (certainly not mutually exclusive) find room for transformation within the relational processes of materiality and discursivity, the actual and ideal.

SPI’s aesthetic performances do (and do more than) imitate nuns in a parody meant to satirize that normed identity and those organized religious doctrines traditionally espoused and embodied. By adopting roles that find their grounding in the conventions of sacred individuals generally, the Sisters embody a mimetic identification that constitutes their lived experience as nuns and, in the
process, transforms the sociopolitical field. Put simply, by imitating and embodying an idea(l) of traditional nuns, the Sisters are nuns. At the same time, by practicing an expanded array of nun subjectivities, the Sisters materially bring into being what they discursively embody in the sociopolitical field. To help make sense of this play between SPI’s variety of performance art and the sociopolitical field, Butler’s (1994, 1997a, 1997b) elucidation of performativity—or the constitutive aspect of discursive practices that has the power to produce what it names—is helpful. Moreover, the notion of habitus is instructive in making sense of the performative instantiation of the Sisters’ identity as nuns in the actuality of the social field.

For Butler (1994), “performativity . . . contests the very notion of the subject” (¶ 3), and a subject, in these terms, is fixed: Subjects are autonomous entities whose identities are essentially unchanging and from whom all meaning originates. The constitutive aspect of performativity challenges this notion of the subject because it demonstrates how subjectivity is fluid and how meaning is created in the discursive processes between subjects and the sociopolitical field. In the Sisters’ case, they do not perform “nun,” presuming there is a fixed subject “nun”; rather, they challenge the commonsense idea that “nun” is a fixed subjectivity. By performatively appropriating—via vows and related practices—the sign or idea(l) of “nun” as subject and embodying “nun” in uniquely queer modalities, the Sisters expand both the practice and meaning of “nun.” Moreover, it is because there actually (materially) exists a normed subjectivity of “nun” in the sociopolitical field that it is possible for the Sisters to ideally (discursively) appropriate it. At the same time, because of the power of performativity, the Sisters are not limited to (but are always, in part, limited by) “traditional” modalities of embodying and performing “nun.”

The everyday lived commitment that the vow of the order demands of Sisters also contributes to the performative nature of their cultural politics. The Sisters live their roles as nuns; they do not simply put on a drag “costume.” They embody the roles of nuns in the way they live and take action in their everyday lives. For example, Sister Phyllis Stein explains:

A lot of the work I do is done out of habit but people still know me as Sister Phyllis. I also do a lot of grant writing for smaller organizations, organizations such as the Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center. A grant proposal came across my desk and I thought “Hey, this proposal fits perfectly for this organization,” and I called them up and told them that I wanted to write this grant application for them. I got them 5000 dollars, and I also got a donation of 10 Mac computers, and a laser printer with fax capability. It’s also about being at the right place at the right time. People know that you’re a nun and they say “I’ve got this thing, I’ve got something, I’ve got this venue, and I see that it could really help somewhere, where can you put it?” (McClelland, 1997, ¶ 34)

Because of his public persona as Sister Phyllis, people recognize the role he can play in his everyday life to contribute in material ways to social organizations that might be in need of assistance. Also, because he keeps an eye directed toward ways that his everyday professional persona connects to SPI’s mission through his vows, Sister Phyllis is able to blend the everyday with what the public performance makes possible: access to material resources that can be of benefit to community service organizations. This is only one example, but it is one that is repeated over and over, in uniquely situated ways, by other SPI members.

It is in this performance of everyday life and its creation of the habitus that the constitutive nature of the Sisters’ performative finds its power. Examining Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus, Butler (1997a) clarifies her reading of the concept: “The habitus refers to those embodied rituals of everydayness by which a given culture produces and sustains belief in its own ‘obviousness’” (p. 152). For a performative
to produce what it names, it must be situated in and adopt, to some extent, the conventions of the social field. In the Sisters’ case, by adopting and living their vows—by enacting “nun” through the conventions set forth in their vows and preceded by those legitimated by various organized religions—they set into motion a mimetic identification with their own adaptation of “nun.” By constructing and practicing their vows over, through, and with the vows that constitute the legitimated social field of other religious organizations, the Sisters effectively create their own habitus and, through it, situate their obviousness in the habitus of the larger social field.

Further, by adopting these conventions and embodying them in everyday lived experience, the Sisters enact a process that “performatively produces a shift in the terms of legitimacy as an effect of the utterance itself” (Butler, 1997a, p. 147). Put differently, the Sisters, by appropriating “nun,” put into effect an iterative process (more precisely a reiteration) and, in doing so, demonstrate how “an invocation that as no prior legitimacy can have the effect of challenging existing forms of legitimacy, breaking open the possibility of future forms” (Butler, 1997a, p. 147). The Sisters take on the legitimated persona of “nun,” expanding what that subjectivity means, repeating over and over again practices that continually modify it, and, in the process, create the possibility of diversely legitimated ways of understanding and practicing “nun.”

As a consequence of the possibilities created by the Sisters’ performatively powerful discursive practices, a process of resignification is underway. Resignification means that power or discourse is not a stable entity, possessed only by some; rather, power is an unstable and fluid process, and the engagement of power is discursively available to anyone through reiteration. In the Sisters’ case, they recognize that the power to call oneself a “nun” and, thus, to be a “nun” is not limited to those who are ensconced in centralized religious organizations. Rather, that power is discursively available to them through their repeated and diverse performative appropriation of that identity. More than this, the sociopolitical power (discourse) process is modified by the Sisters’ resistance of the commonsense acceptance that only certain individuals possess the power to legitimately call themselves “nuns” and to practice as “nuns.” When the Sisters discursively perform as if their identities as “nuns” were legitimate (that is, they perform subjunctively), they actualize (bring into being) a reconstructed aspect of the material sociopolitical field. This reconstruction calls into question the idea that there is an essential, fixed material reality (or an essential, fixed subjectivity) that can only be imitated and from which all else is derivative. The Sisters’ discursive cultural practices do not elide an actuality, nor are they simply derivative of an actuality; rather, the Sisters embody and, thus, constitute a reconstructed actuality.

The Sisters’ performative embodiment of “nun” constitutes and reconstitutes the habitus. By performing and embodying their vows, the “simultaneity of the production and delivery of the expression” (Butler, 1997a, p. 152) merges what is thought and spoken with the realm of livable, living, and lived political reality. This formative notion of habitus means, in SPI’s case, that the performativity of the Sisters’ subversive, repetitive reiteration of identity alters the social field’s reality constructs in such a way as to generate an inclination on the part of other subjects in that field to interact with and embody the actual changes instantiated by the Sisters’ performances. In other words, the expectations for what constitutes a “real nun” in the social field are expanded by SPI’s performances as queer, 21st-century nuns.

The “nun” subjectivity, considered by many to be “sacred” and unchanging, is productively destabilized and opened up to variation by the Sisters. However, the modality through which this destabilization occurs—the Sisters’ political parody—has prompted resistance from those
who consider the Sisters’ performances blasphemous acts. The political consequences, then, of this challenge to the boundaries of the “sacred” raise an important question: How does one judge whether a parody is too bold to have a positive political impact?

POLITICAL PARODY:
DISTURBING AND ALTERING THE SACRED BODY POLITIC

The Sisters drag sexual politics onto the streets, and the streets are all the brighter and safer for it. (Chumbawamba, 1994)

I remove sacred from the parenthetical position it has occupied in this study thus far in order to examine, more closely, notions of the sacred as they relate to “the body” and “the body politic.” Sacred is a term much like queer and camp in that each of these terms is contextually defined. According to Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionary, the Hebrew word for sacred (or holy) is qadosh. Its etymology traces to the verb qadish, meaning to set apart—in particular, setting apart outside the temple. The sacred, then, is set apart from the mundane in honor of a (or “the”) divinity. In other words, when we deem something sacred (or sanctify it), we take what was outside the temple, in the mundane realm, and bring it inside, into the divine realm. (In contrast, the word profane simply means “before the temple” or “outside the temple” [“King James Bible,” 2001].) SPI’s political parody challenges the boundaries of what is sacred by sanctifying and bringing into the temple the queer bodies of the Sisters and, at the same time, explicitly situating the temple (in this case, organized religion and associated doctrines) in the mundane arena of the body politic. As such, through political parody, what constitutes a “sacred body” is open to contestation, critique, and, consequently, variation.

The critique inherent in the Sisters’ appropriation and alteration of “nun” and SPI’s unique mode of political activism provokes fierce reactions among some, and a number of SPI’s critical actions have prompted harsh responses from SF’s Catholic communities. For instance, in 1987 during the Pope’s visit to SF, the Sisters performed an “exorcism” of the Holy Father in the middle of Union Square—while he passed by in the motorcade—to protest the Church’s condemnation of queer lifestyles. This action ultimately landed the organization on the official Papal “List of Heretics” (“A sistory blow,” 2006, ¶ 11). More recently, in 1999, the SPI 20th anniversary celebration in the Castro—which, coincidentally, coincided with Easter Sunday that year—prompted representatives of the Catholic Church to denounce the Sisters as “an anti-Catholic group” whose blasphemous, even fascist, exhibition on the holy day served to “mock nuns, mock the Mass, and mock the Pope” (Ostler, 1999, p. A3).

Along those same lines, according to the Catholic League’s 1999 Report on Anti-Catholicism, the Sisters’ appropriation of “nun” is “so vicious that it goes well beyond the bounds of parody,” and the report goes on to compare the Sisters’ whiteface makeup to blackface bigotry:

If there were an Al Jolson society of white boys with black faces who mocked African Americans, no one would defend them because they give a few bucks to AIDS research. None of [the Sisters’ actions] falls within the bounds of good humor. More properly, it is called hate speech. (¶ 2)

A similarly condemning accusation was lodged by Professor Hitchcock (1999), writing in the magazine Catholic Dossier. He argued that the Sisters represent “frenzied blasphemy” of the most dangerous sort:

The frenzied symbolic assaults on religion [by SPI] are numerous and frightening, revealing as they do the barely suppressed violence which its enemies harbor and which, it is fair to judge, they would eagerly act out in life if given the opportunity... Frenzied
blasphemy—the mocking of sacred symbols, the association of those symbols with the sickest kind of pornography—reveals the depth of the violent hatred because it represents an assault in some ways worse than the desire to do bodily harm. It aims to annihilate the sacred core of the believer’s very being. It is a mentality in which the actual killing of individuals would be almost an anti-climax. (¶ 1)

To be sure, this is an overreaction on Professor Hitchcock’s part. At the same time, charges of hate speech, the “defamation” of sacred symbols, and ostensible ontological assault and annihilation deserve some response, particularly if the Sisters’ activism is to be understood as a useful political contribution in a context broader than that of San Francisco.

With respect to the hate speech charge, the interpretation of SPI’s actions points to a significant misunderstanding of that doctrine. Butler (2000a) points out that hate speech is understood as “used by a person or group who occupies a dominant position in society against those who occupy subordinate positions, and that the speech act itself is a further act of subordination” (¶ 3). Clearly, then, those who charge the Sisters with hate speech misconstrue the power dynamic and political contingencies involved when a group of queer activist performance artists appropriate dominant (and often oppressive) symbols of massive religious organizations to reconceive them in the service of liberatory, joyful, and guilt-expiating discursive performances.

Professor Hitchcock’s remarks (and those like his) are more difficult to answer. One response to this sort of reaction points to the contingency of context. That is, in San Francisco (or other urban settings where SPI orders are established), the freedom to express dissent or critique by diverse means may be more abundant and, as such, tolerance levels may be higher. Even so, the move to bring the mundane into the temple, to sanctify the queer bodies and politics of SPI, constitutes profanity for some and raises the issue of political efficacy.

Part of SPI’s political usefulness may be located in their embrace of the idea(l) “nun.” Even though various actions are explicitly meant to parody and critique some status quo religious doctrines (e.g., condemnation of same-sex partnerships, guilt as an instrument of discipline and control, etc.), the Sisters do not ridicule or disparage the idea(l) of “nun”:

We are not making fun of nuns, WE ARE NUNS. . . . We are an Order of 21st century nuns dedicated to the promulgation of universal joy and the expiation of stigmatic guilt. . . . We are very dedicated to our calling and our vows reflect our commitment to our community. We care for the sick and the disadvantaged, just like other orders do. We raise funds for the needy just as other orders do. We educate the masses on important and even life threatening topics just like other orders do. We strive to promote worldwide love and understanding just as (some) other orders do. . . . This is what it is to be a nun, what it is to support the community, and what it is to serve the human race. (The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Inc., 2001, p. 3)

For SPI, “nun” is not an idea(l), a persona, a way of being, or a modality of activism limited only to persons who belong to traditional religious organizations. Rather, the Sisters’ appropriation and embodiment of “nun” allows them, as an organization, to adopt general ethical conceptions (ideals) and commitments of community service that are understood as inherent in the normed role of “nun.” That is, when “nun” is “queered” by SPI, it opens up a vast range of ethical subjectivities that can be associated with “nun.” With respect to the question of political efficacy, then, at least in the case of the Sisters, perhaps they have been able to maintain an effective organization—even in the face of those who suggest they go beyond the bounds of propriety—because their practices sustain a close relationship with the ideal (“nun”) they
attempt to approximate. In other words, the Sisters’ campy aesthetic may offend some, but it is difficult to argue with the community service ethic materially manifest and embodied in that camp—the material and ideal are effectively braided for SPI.

Moreover, the SPI may help us to understand how it is possible, more generally, to use identity politically without the traps of identity politics. Identity politics have a general tendency to limit and fix both the political ground on which groups stand and the subjectivities presupposed by the identities claimed in the name of political action (see Butler, 2000b, for an excellent general discussion of identity and identity politics along these lines). The Sisters’ use identity in their politics precisely by unfixing, from the norms established in various sociopolitical contexts, both the subjectivities they embody and the political ground they occupy. Put differently, rather than limit the possibilities for politics and the political subject, SPI queers both and creates the conditions for the possibility of a multitude of political subjectivities and modalities.

At the same time, attempting to measure political efficacy is a tricky business. Is there a scale by which we can tote up the costs and benefits of this type of performative activism? Butler’s point (in the introduction) with respect to the “culture/material” distinction can be interpreted as questioning this notion of gauging political efficacy by standards primarily associated with materialist politics. From an orthodox materialist perspective, if the Sisters, through their camp aesthetic, enable some change in the sociopolitical field, it is far too easy to attribute that change primarily to their community service and to relegate to the derivative their discursive (camp aesthetic) mode of being. However, each mode finds its power in the other. This is not to say that it is unimportant to try and understand how political activism like that of the Sisters can work both for and against positive change. Rather, it is simply an acknowledgment that there is no guarantee of change that accompanies any political activism. All political activism takes a risk in offending someone and “going too far.” However, it may be that in going “too far”—in disturbing the actual—political activism of this sort helps us begin to understand and perhaps move toward what is possible.

SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS

There can be no pure opposition to power, only a recrafting of its terms from resources invariably impure. (Butler, 1994, ¶ 2)

The performative nature of the Sisters’ embodiment of differently gendered nun identities finds its power in the social field of conventions, and at the same time, it critiques and exceeds those conventions by producing a reconfigured habitus. Power, in this sense, is fluid and unstable, and the power and discourse process always already includes the potential for resistance. Further, the subversive, repetitive reiteration of identity suggests that SPI’s performances have material effects in and through the discursive, thereby demonstrating the relational processes that braid these aspects together.

Of course, mine is only one reading, and by their very nature, the Sisters are not easy to define, nor are their discursive performances easy to read in connection with the sociopolitical field. However, it is precisely this difficulty that may enable effective responses to social recuperation:

Subversive practices have to overwhelm the capacity to read, challenge conventions of reading, and demand new possibilities of reading. . . . [The performatives] that challenge our practices of reading, that make us uncertain about how to read, or make us think that we have to renegotiate the way in which we read public signs, these seem really politically important to me. (Butler, 1997b, p. 138)

Scholarship that attempts to read other locally situated queer performance art activism like SPI
Chapter 18: Queering the (Sacred) Body Politic

could demonstrate the constitutive—rather than derivative or secondary—power of discursive, celebratory cultural performances. Finally, continuing this line of analysis helps to recognize and acknowledge “the reproduction of persons and the social regulation of sexuality as part of the very process of production, and hence part of the materialist conception of political economy” (Butler, 1998, ¶ 11, my emphasis). My hope is that this study makes a contribution to that recognition and acknowledgment.

NOTES

1. The SF order “is often referred to as the ‘Mother House’” (“World orders,” 2006), but each order sets its own guidelines for Sisterhood, develops its own organizational structures, and personalizes its appropriation of the nun habit. There are U.S. SPI organizations (e.g., Seattle, Tennessee, Chicago, Iowa, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles) and international orders (e.g., Australia, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom).

2. The Sisters explain that “nun drag” does not mean “Catholic nun drag.” Rather, “nun,” for SPI, is a generic term for individuals who vow to dedicate their lives to serving their communities in a variety of different ways. Thanks to Sister Kitty for clarifying this for me.

3. Three of the Sisters—Sister Betty Does, LNM, Sister Camille Leon, and Sister MaryMae Himm—are legally ordained ministers or clergy who can provide services that any other clergyperson might perform.

REFERENCES


Chapter 18: Queering the (Sacred) Body Politic

Discussion Questions

1. Glenn makes several claims in regard to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and the work that they do. Identify and summarize them.

2. How does Glenn define *camp*, and how is camp relevant to the Sisters? Can a performance be camp as well as politically significant? Offer a justification for your answer.

3. How have the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence challenged conventional sexual identity images to advocate their platform of political activism?

4. How can we measure or evaluate the political efficacy of a performance?