

## Introduction to Queer Criticism

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What does a person mean when they ask, “What is your identity?” Many people adopt an **essentialist** worldview that assumes identity is fixed, stable, and biologically determined. Think of the common expression, “Boys will be boys.” The phrase assumes that boys are biologically impulsive and predisposed to behave aggressively but ignores key environmental factors that shape young men, like peer groups, family relationships, media messages, individual psychology, and nutrition. Queer critics believe that identity is *what we do*, rather than *who we are*. Religious texts, literature, television shows, movies, and social groups provide scripts that teach us how to perform race, gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, and social class. In other words, boys are boys because cultural discourses socialize them into masculine communication patterns.

A similar process constrains and enables our understanding of sexuality. Magazines, TV programs, literature, and other modes of

communication teach us the “appropriate” ways to perform desire. Consider the delayed consummation trope prevalent on U.S. sitcoms. Workplace situation comedies often revolve around the flirtation and eventual intimate pairing of a lead male and female character. Jim and Pam on *The Office*, Ross and Rachel on *Friends*, Sam and Diane on *Cheers*, and Niles and Daphne on *Frasier* are all embedded in a will-they-or-won't-they romantic storyline.

On the other hand, television programs depict sexual minorities as symbolically impotent, or unable to display physical and emotional affection. The titular gay character of NBC's *Will & Grace*, for instance, engages in more sexual behavior with Grace than any of the men he dates on the show. Bravo's short-lived reality program *Boy Meets Boy* also exemplifies the symbolic impotence of gay characters. Producers intended *Boy Meets Boy* to be a gay version of ABC's popular dating show *The Bachelor*. *The Bachelor* regularly features heterosexual couples on sexually charged overnight dates. Unlike *The Bachelor*, viewers were hard-pressed to locate displays of intimacy on *Boy Meets*

*Boy. Boy Meets Boy* participants signed a contract that prohibited the men from sexual contact. Lesbian TV characters do not fare better than their gay male counterparts. After disclosing and acting upon their same-sex attraction, women on TV often fall victim to what TV critic Islay Bell-Webb describes as **“lesbian death syndrome,”** or a tendency for producers to quickly and randomly kill lesbian characters after they confirm their sexual orientation.<sup>1</sup> Television’s repeated message is that 1) same-sex attraction is somehow more salacious than heterosexual affection, 2) heterosexual people will naturally and inevitably end up in sexual relationships, and 3) sexual minorities should keep their sexual inclinations private or suffer dire consequences. Television viewers then perform, or mimic, these romantic scripts and internalize them as the natural way to *do* sexuality.

Queer critics examine television shows, films, music videos, public speeches and other cultural discourses that normalize traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Islay Bell-Webb, “Modern TV is Still Killing Off Its Lesbians, And It’s Dead Boring,” *Hornet.com*, last updated March 14, 2016, accessed July 19, 2018, <https://hornet.com/stories/modern-tv-still-killing-off-lesbians-dead-boring/>

gender performance and marginalize and often vilify alternate models of gender and sexuality. In this chapter, we review the historical and philosophical underpinnings of queer theory and criticism, consider artifacts and research questions consistent with queer critique, and outline some of the key terms queer critics use to examine the rhetorical construction of gender and sexuality.

### Background and History

Homosexual, gay, and queer are not synonyms, although people often use the words interchangeably. Coined by 19<sup>th</sup> century sexologists, the term **homosexual** suggests that, regardless of sexual inclination, feminine men and masculine women, or “gender inverts,” are mentally ill and require medical correction. At the turn of the century, same-sex attraction merely added a layer of deviance to men and women who failed to enact traditional gender norms. No gender-related infraction proved too small to capture the attention of sexologists. A woman wearing pants in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was fit for prison or an asylum. The perceived transgression of a woman

in “men’s clothing” was in fact so great that, “A person in pants would have been assumed to be male, and only the most suspicious would have scrutinized facial features or body movements to discern a woman beneath the external appearance.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, 19<sup>th</sup>-century sexologists initially created the term “heterosexual” to characterize men and women who were attracted to members of the so-called opposite sex but diverged from procreative norms, meaning they had sex for pleasure, not children.<sup>3</sup> Chronic masturbators, promiscuous men and women, fetishists, and other sexual “deviants” caught the scrutinizing gaze of sexologists. Labeling a patient homo- or heterosexual implied the person was ill and required medical intervention. So-called cures for homosexuality and “perverse” heterosexuality included and in some states *still* include castration, electro-shock therapy, lobotomy, reparative therapy, and the use of

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<sup>2</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 42.

<sup>3</sup> James G. Kierman, “Responsibility in Sexual Perversion,” *Chicago Medical Recorder* 3 (1892), 185-210.

nausea-inducing drugs in aversion treatment. Decades passed before heterosexuality lost its connotation of sexual perversion and medical professionals agreed that heterosexuality would be the “master sex from which all others deviated.”<sup>4</sup> In sum, homosexual is a negatively connoted, psychiatrically deployed *medical condition* that assumes sexual minorities and gender outliers are mentally ill.

Gay’s association with same-sex sexuality, on the other hand, emerged from *within* 20<sup>th</sup>-century gay and lesbian subculture. Homophile activist Frank Kameny’s notion that “Gay is Good” signaled an ontological shift from medically objectified homosexuals to proud and self-described gays and lesbians. By mid-century, gay became increasingly identified with the emergence of gay neighborhoods in urban areas and social movements that aimed to ease anti-gay oppression and animus. Gay bars became some of the country’s first “explicitly gay institutions,” representing both a place of affirmation for

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan N. Katz, “The Invention of Heterosexuality,” *Socialist Review* 20 (1990), 7-34.

sexual minorities and a primary site of “anti-gay crackdowns and panic.”<sup>5</sup> Police officers raided bars, like the Black Cat Tavern in the Silver Lake area of Los Angeles and the Stonewall Inn in New York’s Greenwich Village. Sometimes posing as homosexuals, cops elicited sexual advances from patrons and then arrested them for lewd conduct. Public shaming added to state-sanctioned persecution. Reporters and law enforcement agents photographed raids and released snapshots to the public, thereby “outing” gay and lesbian clientele. Tabloids like the *Examiner* published names, professions, and addresses of gay culprits. The media’s disclosure tactics often resulted in broken families and lost jobs.<sup>6</sup>

The **Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement** of the late 1960s responded to systemic harassment of sexual minorities by police officers, media outlets, employers, doctors, and businesses. Gay, lesbian, and transgender people initiated a countercultural rebellion,

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<sup>5</sup> Allan Bérubé, “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44 (2003): 38.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Marcus, *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights: 1945-1990: An Oral History* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

including a spontaneous public disturbance at Cooper's Donuts, where, in May 1959, a group of largely Latino and Black hustlers and drag queens threw donuts at and fought with Los Angeles police officers; San Francisco's 1966 Compton Cafeteria riot, in which drag queens and transgender women "beat police with their heavy purses and kicked them with their high-heel shoes";<sup>7</sup> and New York's 1969 Stonewall Inn riot, where LGBTQ people pelted NYPD officers with pennies, bottles, and fists.

Communication has played a central role in Gay Liberation and the medical community's formal recognition that sexual minorities and gender "outlaws" suffer from homophobia and transphobia, rather than a mental illness that results in non-normative sexual attraction and gender identification. The American Psychiatric Association's 1973 decision to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders aided LGBTQ activists' quest to secure fair treatment in housing and

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (New York: Seal Press, 2017), 65.

employment and helped them challenge misrepresentative portrayals of gays and lesbians in the media.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps no recent controversy better illustrates communication's function in sexual ideology and the rhetorical construction of madness than the American Family Association's (AFA) refusal to describe gay people as gay. Members of the organization prefer the term "homosexual" because it grounds same-sex desire in a history of mental illness and sexual perversion. The Southern Poverty Law Center classifies the AFA as an anti-gay hate group. The American Family Association uses its website One News Now to spread false information about LGBTQ people and perpetuate the myth that sexual minorities are subhuman, crazed, and diseased. One News Now is a digital portal that collects and reposts news from the Associated Press, Reuters, and other media outlets. The website raised eyebrows in 2012 after it published a story about Olympian Tyson Gay. The AFA's version of the

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<sup>8</sup> Fred Fejes and Kevin Petrich, "Invisibility, Homophobia and Heterosexism: Lesbians, Gays and the Media," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10 (1993): 396.

narrative read, “Tyson Homosexual was a blur in blue, sprinting 100 meters faster than anyone ever has. ‘It means a lot to me,’ the 25-year-old Homosexual said.”<sup>9</sup> By a simple act of anti-gay automation, the AFA sent a heterosexual “Homosexual” to the Beijing Olympics. Later that year, One News Now trumpeted the accomplishments of Memphis Grizzlies basketball player Rudy Homosexual. The AFA’s use of digital technology to replace “gay” with “homosexual,” regardless of context, demonstrates the connotative and historical differences between negatively connoted, identity-denying homosexual and positively connoted, identity-affirming gay.

So how does **queer** fit into all of this? For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people used “queer” as an anti-gay epithet. Gender theorists and AIDS activists re-appropriated the term in the late 1980s. Members of the AIDS advocacy group ACT UP and LGBTQ activist organization

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<sup>9</sup> Mary A. Akers, “Christian Site’s Ban on “G” Word Sends Homosexual to Olympics,” *The Washington Post*, last modified July 1, 2008, accessed January 28, 2012, [http://voices.washingtonpost.com/sleuth/2008/07/christian\\_sites\\_ban\\_on\\_g\\_word.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/sleuth/2008/07/christian_sites_ban_on_g_word.html).

Queer Nation reclaimed queer to distinguish between the assimilationist and gender-conforming strategies of early homophile movements and the politics of difference celebrated by queer activists. Like *liberal* feminists, gay and lesbian *liberationists* emphasize the ways in which they are like their heterosexual counterparts. Gay liberationists' call for equality is premised on the idea that sexual minorities should enjoy the same rights as heterosexual people because "gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals are essentially no different from heterosexuals."<sup>10</sup> Like radical feminist, queer theorists argue that queers are fundamentally "different from the mainstream and these differences should be celebrated, not silenced."<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, gay subjectivity is often predicated on essentialist notions of identity that assume sexuality is biologically determined, fixed, and stable. Gender and sexual essentialists, in other words, contend that people are born gay or straight and their primary sexual

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<sup>10</sup> R. Anthony Slagle, "In Defense of Queer nation: From *Identity Politics* to a *Politics of Difference*," *Western Journal of Communication* 59 (1995): 86.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

inclinations do not change over time. Queer theory challenges essentialist notions of gender and sexuality. Queer criticism is predicated on the belief that identity is not *who we are*, identity is *what we do*. Queer theorists situate gender and sexuality as performances, meaning humans are exposed to repetitive, interlocking scripts that teach us how to behave.

The distinction between gay and queer becomes clearer when we distinguish between social locations and standpoints. **Social locations** refer to aspects of one's identity that make him or her *objectively* but not always correctly identifiable to others. Examples of social locations include race, sex, and sexuality. **Standpoints** characterize how a person *subjectively* sees the world. Social locations influence but do not determine standpoints. Not all woman (social location), for example, are feminists (standpoint). Conversely, many men (social location) identify as feminists (standpoint). Gay is a social location, or a way one might discuss identity; queer is a standpoint, or a lens one might use to interpret communication practices. Queer criticism involves examining

cultural discourses that guide our performances of gender and sexuality. In the next section, we consider specific concepts queer theorists use to critique rhetoric that molds our sense of gender and sexuality.

### Queer Theory's Sensitizing Concepts

Queer criticism is the product of social movements that have challenged the normative organization of gender and sexuality. Binary thinking structures our core assumptions about gender and sexuality. Many fallaciously assume one is either born male or female, despite a statistically significant number of people born intersex, or with ambiguous genitalia. Similarly, the hetero-/homosexual dyad manufactures the illusion that sexual desire and expression are determined at birth and fixed throughout life. These epistemological and ontological themes are not the exclusive purview of philosophy. Fashion designers, politicians, and pop singers use clothes, public speeches, and music to theorize the nature of sex, desire, and sexual activity. In her pro-gay anthem "Born This Way," for instance, Lady

GaGa asserts that gender and sexuality are determined by DNA. She sings, “There ain’t no other way/Baby I was born this way.” The irony is that GaGa spends most of the “Born This Way” music video wearing horns affixed to her forehead and cheeks, an assortment of over-the-top wigs, and dramatic makeup. GaGa’s vibrant imagery runs in sharp contrast to the song’s lyrical celebration of essentialism. The artist’s notoriety is largely due to her ability to expose gender as a monstrous performance constantly in flux.

In their graphic history of queer theory, Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele argue that, “Queer theory is all about breaking down binaries, which oversimplify the world into everything being either *this* or *that*. Queer theory is also all about questioning identity, so it would challenge any kind of fixed identity categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, etc., including queer if it’s used in that way.”<sup>12</sup> Working from a queer perspective, one might identify and contest Lady GaGa’s

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<sup>12</sup> Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele, *Queer: A Graphic History* (London: Icon Books, 2016).

advocacy of gender, racial, and sexual essentialism in “Born This Way.”

A queer critic might also explore the abovementioned irony when comparing the song’s lyrics to the anti-essentialist images in the “Born This Way” video. Exploring GaGa’s irony is especially queer because it enables a scholar to discuss how a text, like a person, defies singular interpretation and can be read multiple ways.

Many of the methods covered in a rhetorical criticism class offer straightforward and consistent manners of application. A neo-Aristotelian researcher, for instance, focuses on how a public speaker’s delivery, arrangement, invention, memory, and style affect his or her audience. A critic utilizing Kenneth Burke’s dramatistic pentad notes how a storyteller defines a narrative’s scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose. Queer critique resists neo-Aristotelianism’s and dramatism’s uniformity. Ways of deploying queer criticism are bound only by a critic’s imagination. Scholars have used the theory to queer public

memory of Abraham Lincoln,<sup>13</sup> investigate the heteronormativity of public school architecture,<sup>14</sup> and challenge Facebook's "real" names policy that once prohibited drag queens and some transgender individuals from maintaining profiles on the social media site.<sup>15</sup>

Although quite versatile, queer criticism usually takes one of four forms: 1) queer critics often focus on the ways in which a communication artifact perpetuates heteronormativity, or the myth that heterosexuality is the only viable option; 2) one might queer, or locate the LGBTQ potential of, a text; 3) queer rhetoricians sometimes investigate how politicians use LGBTQ themes to substantiate U.S. exceptionalism, dehumanize "enemies" of the state, and rationalize war; and 4) queer writers conceptualize non-normative ideas of what

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<sup>13</sup> Charles E. Morris, "My Old Kentucky Homo: Abraham Lincoln, Larry Kramer, and the Politics of Queer Public Memory," *Queering Public Address: Sexualities in American Historical Discourse*, ed. Charles E. Morris (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 93-120.

<sup>14</sup> Ragan Fox, "Tales of a Fighting Bobcat: An 'Auto-Archaeology of Gay Identity Formation and Maintenance,'" *Text and Performance Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2010): 122-42.

<sup>15</sup> Maggie MacAulay and Marcos D. Moldes, "Queens Don't Compute: Reading and Casting Shade on Facebook's Real Names Policy," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30, no. 1 (2016): 6-22.

the future may bring. The rest of the chapter will cover these four modes of deploying queer criticism.

### *Queer Criticism as Heteronormative Critique*

Queer theorist Michael Warner popularized the term heteronormativity in the introduction of his 1993 edited collection *Fear of a Queer Planet*, where he recognizes how social theory and most cultural assumptions about humanity are largely premised on heterosexuality.<sup>16</sup> **Heteronormativity** is the belief that heterosexuality is the only worthwhile, “natural,” and healthy form of sexual feeling and expression. Warner writes that:

People are constantly encouraged to believe that heterosexual desire, dating, marriage, reproduction, childrearing, and home life are not only valuable to themselves, but the bedrock on which every other value in the world rests. Heterosexual desire and romance are thought to be the very core of humanity. It is the one

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), vii-xxxi.

thing celebrated in every film plot, every sitcom, every advertisement. Nonstandard sex has none of this normative richness, this built-in sense of connection to the meaningful life, the community of the human, the future of the world.<sup>17</sup>

Challenging heteronormativity is not anti-heterosexual because heterosexuality and heteronormativity are not synonyms.

Heterosexuality characterizes sexual proclivities and a means of communicating desire for the opposite sex. Heteronormativity assumes heterosexuality is the solitary mode of sexual desire and expression.

Moreover, we assume heterosexuality as the default even when information about sexual preference is not provided. Alexander Doty refers to this inclination as **heterocentric textual essentialism**, or an audience member's tendency to "[fill] in the missing narrative blanks about a character's sexuality." Doty suggests most people presume that "all characters in a film are straight unless labeled, coded, or otherwise

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 47.

proven to be queer.”<sup>18</sup> Consider the shockwaves author J.K. Rowling sent through the Harry Potter fan community when she announced that beloved character Dumbledore is gay. The author explains, “Recently I was in a script read-through for the sixth [Harry Potter] film, and they had Dumbledore saying a line to Harry early in the script, saying ‘I knew a girl once, whose hair--.’ I had to write a little note in the margin and slide it along to the scriptwriter—‘Dumbledore is gay!’”<sup>19</sup>

Rhetoric scholars have used heteronormativity as a sensitizing concept to call attention to heterosexuality’s privileged status and examine the ways in which non-normative sexuality is marginalized in media, organizational communication, and interpersonal exchanges. Take, for example, Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow’s queer critique of NBC’s gay-themed sitcom *Will & Grace*. Battles and Hilton-

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<sup>18</sup> Alexander Doty. *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Hanna Siegel, “Rowling Lets Dumbledore Out of the Closet,” *ABC News*, last modified October 20, 2007, accessed July 16, 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=3755544&page=1>.

Morrow note that both the programs gay characters are in heterosocial, or opposite-sex, dyads with heterosexual women. Will is paired with Grace and Jack with Karen. *Will & Grace's* celebration of gay subjectivity—albeit White and affluent—is limited by its heteronormative trappings. The authors point out that, “Will and Grace share an intimacy with one another that they cannot find in a sexual partner. They routinely perform roles associated with couples, particularly married heterosexual partners. They have lived together, arguing over matters of bathroom time and other mundane issues associated with marriage.”<sup>20</sup> *Will & Grace* premiered seven years before the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that gays and lesbians have a constitutional right to marry. Dramatizing gay marriage on the program would have resulted in a different sort of queer critique that focuses on internalized homophobia in the LGBTQ community.

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<sup>20</sup> Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow, “Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: *Will and Grace* and the Situation Comedy Genre,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 1 93.

Many sexual minorities adopt a heteronormative worldview that assumes heterosexual rituals and behaviors are superior. Lisa Duggan uses the term **homonormativity** to identify LGBTQ people who enact politics and behaviors that do not “contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”<sup>21</sup> The fight for marriage equality exemplifies a homonormative approach to so-called liberation. Unlike their liberationist counterparts, queer critics question the ways in which the institution of marriage is historically built upon a foundation of racial, sexual, gender, and financial inequality.<sup>22</sup> Homonormativity can also be seen in more commonplace communication exchanges, such as when

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<sup>21</sup> Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, Ed. Dana D. Nelson and Russ Castronovo (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 179.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Boellstorff, “When Marriage Fails: Queer Coincidences in Straight Time,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2-3 (2007): 227-48.

gay men describe themselves as “str8acting,” or “straight-acting,” on mobile dating applications and online dating websites.<sup>23</sup>

Writers wanting to examine the ways in which heterosexuality structures communication practices will get a lot of scholarly mileage out of heteronormativity and homonormativity. The concepts are designed to challenge the myth that gender and sex only make sense when viewed in traditional terms and as a complementary binary.

Heteronormativity also enables a critic to dispel the notion that heterosexuality is mandatory and the only legitimate sexual practice.

Here are four sample research questions that use heteronormativity as an anchoring analytical term:

- How are LGBTQ characters on the television show [*Will & Grace*, *Big Brother*, *Transparent*, or a program you want to analyze] narratively positioned to reflect heteronormative communication practices?

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Payne, “Str8acting,” *Social Semiotics* 17, no. 4 (2007): 252-238.

- In what ways do pro-marriage equality [protest signs or public speeches] reflect a homonormative worldview?
- What are the ways in which heteronormativity frames news media reports about trans and intersex athletes?
- In the television show *Sex and the City*, how might Carrie Bradshaw's obsession with shoes function as a critique of heteronormative romance?

### *Queering Texts*

**Queering** characterizes a form of cultural spectatorship and production that locates and celebrates non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality. Queer readings of texts respond to two aforementioned phenomena: 1) a lack of LGBTQ characters in media, and 2) heterocentric textual essentialist predispositions that cause readers and viewers to assume heterosexuality as the default in characters, even when heterosexuality is not explicitly stated or acted upon. First, queer youth often must read between the lines or invent LGBTQ subjects in media. Imagine all the heterosexual romance

narratives studied in secondary school English classes. Students read about the love of Romeo and Juliet, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, and Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara. Media's obsession with heterosexual passion forces LGBTQ youth to creatively reimagine stories as if they included gay characters. Romeo and Juliet may be queerly read as Romeo and Julian, or Romey and Juliet, two star-crossed lovers whose families keep them apart because they disapprove of the pair's same-sex attraction.

Second, queer readings of a text often underscore a character's queer sensibilities, or LGBTQ characteristics that fly under a heterosexual audience member's radar. Let's return to the example of Dumbledore from *Harry Potter*. Some readers say that Rowling provides textual evidence of the character's sexual inclinations. Dumbledore's multi-colored pet phoenix is "flaming," a term usually reserved for over-the-top gay men. Additionally, his extravagant fashion drew "many curious glances due to the flamboyant cut suit of

plum velvet.”<sup>24</sup> Plum, or purple, symbolizes gay pride and “flamboyant” is an adjective associated with feminine gay male performativity. In the absence of explicit information about Dumbledore’s sexuality, one could reasonably assume he is gay based on Rowling’s subtle clues. Doty explains that, “Queerness is frequently expressed in ways other than by nude bodies in contact, kissing, or direct verbal indicators; the reasons for finding different means of expression are many— psychological (fear, repression), cultural (oppression), and institutional (censorship, commerce).”<sup>25</sup> Queering a film or piece of literature does not replace the mainstream reading of text. Queer readings celebrate how a single artifact may be read in multiple ways. Queer interpretations run alongside rather than replace heterocentric understandings of cultural discourse.

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<sup>24</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (Scholastic Paperbacks, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Doty, 5.

The student exemplar included at the end of this chapter is a queering of the Disney movie *Frozen*. Disney's canon is loaded with characters that call for queering. Animators designed *The Little Mermaid's* Ursula after famed drag performer Divine (see Figure 1). In 2017, Disney produced a live-action version of *Beauty and the Beast*, in which Le Fou is in love with Gaston. Sean Griffin, author of *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out*, notes that Disney won its first Oscar for *Ferdinand the Bull*, "an eight-minute animated short about a bull who fails to perform hegemonic masculinity. Ferdinand did not want to fight like the other bulls. Griffin writes that, "He still liked to sit just quietly under the cork tree and smell the flowers. The bull is drawn with long eyelashes and a lot of effeminate characteristics."<sup>26</sup>

One may queer a movie, such as *Frozen* or *The Wizard of Oz*; a public figure, like Abraham Lincoln; grammar, like when some trans

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<sup>26</sup> Sean P. Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 64.



Figure 1. Ursula and Divine.

people use “they” as a preferred singular pronoun; and an organization, such as the anti-gay group the Westboro Baptist Church (see “Phags for Phelps”). The group Guerilla Gay Bar even queers public space. Each month, the organization takes over different businesses in major cities and transforms them into gay bars. Disney performs a function like Guerrilla Gay Bar when it becomes the site of Disney Gay Days, a four-day annual event where “an estimated 50,000 red-shirted Gay Day

attendees pack Walt Disney World's original park."<sup>27</sup> Queering space encourages people to consider who typically has access to and what it usually celebrated in a public place.

Here are three sample research questions that feature queering as a central concept of inquiry:

- What textual clues does [J.K. Rowling, Disney, or an author or producer of your choice] provide in [*Harry Potter*, *Frozen*, or a text of your choice] to promote a queer reading of the [character, book, or film]?
- How might the phrase "No Homo" both reinforce a heteronormative worldview and cause seemingly homophobic rhetors to locate the queer potential of everyday interactions?

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<sup>27</sup> "Disney Gay Days at Walt Disney World," WDWinfo.com, accessed July 23, 2018, <http://www.wdwinfo.com/disney-gay-days.htm>.

- How do screenwriters use mutant powers as a metaphor for queer subjectivity in the [television show *Heroes*, the movie *X-Men*, or an artifact of your choice]?

### *Weaponizing Gay Rights*

It was not until September 2011 that gays and lesbians could openly serve in the U.S. military. Sustained and state-sanctioned persecution of sexual minorities in the United States speak to political antagonism against LGBTQ people. Our country's history of anti-gay animus makes it hard to believe that lip service to pro-gay politics is now used to justify war. Jasbir Puar coined the term **homonationalism** to describe Western policy that uses pro-LGBTQ sentiment to rationalize xenophobic positions, especially against Islam.<sup>28</sup>

Homonationalism highlights how pro-war policy makers—many of whom have a history of voting against LGBTQ rights—co-opt portions of pro-gay rhetoric to justify political stances against Muslims and

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<sup>28</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

immigration. Puar indicates that, “‘Acceptance’ and ‘tolerance’ for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated.”<sup>29</sup> US policy makers appeal to homonationalism to assert U.S. exceptionalism in two ways. First, the United States references its “humane” treatment of sexual minorities to substantiate its superiority, or exceptionalism, over Eastern countries. Second, speakers who advocate homonationalism except, or exclude, the U.S. from being held accountable for the country’s past and ongoing mistreatment of queer people. Puar believes that homonational advocates manufacture “narratives of progress and modernity that continue to accord some populations access to citizenship—cultural and legal—at the expense of the delimitation and expulsion of other populations.”<sup>30</sup>

Take, for example, President Trump using the Pulse Nightclub massacre to push for an anti-Muslim travel ban. In summer 2017, Omar

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<sup>29</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (2013): 336.

<sup>30</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism,” 337.

Mateen killed 49 people inside Pulse, a gay bar in Orlando. Mateen was later identified as a domestic terrorist and “Islamic Soldier.” Trump quickly linked the mass shooting to immigration, suggesting that, “The only reason the killer was in America was because we allowed his family to come here.”<sup>31</sup> Trump then claimed that attacking a gay bar is “an assault on the ability of free people to live their lives, love who they want, and express their identity. It’s an attack on the right of every single American to live in peace and safety in their country.” Trump’s pro-gay rhetoric is not as revolutionary as it first appears. First, underscoring Mateen’s allegiance to radical Islam obscures the fact that “White men have committed more mass shootings than any other group”<sup>32</sup> in the United States, yet U.S. media and politicians rarely describe homegrown, White terrorists as terrorists. Second, Trump’s

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<sup>31</sup> Tessa Berenson, “Donald Trump Pushes for Muslim Ban After Orlando Shooting,” *Time*, last modified June 13, 2016, accessed July 23, 2018, <http://time.com/4366912/donald-trump-orlando-shooting-muslim-ban/>

<sup>32</sup> John Kruzel, “Are White Males Responsible for More Mass Shootings than Any Other Group?” *Politifact*, last modified October 6, 2017, accessed July 23, 2018, <https://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2017/oct/06/newsweek/are-white-males-responsible-more-mass-shootings-an/>

grandstanding on gay rights belies his political record. The same year as the Pulse shooting,

Trump's administration instructed federal lawyers to take anti-gay sides in court cases, tried to reinstate a military ban on trans troops, rescinded Obama-era policy that argued trans people are protected by Civil Rights law, advocated that anti-gay discrimination is legal, repeatedly nominated anti-LGBTQ judges to the courts, failed to

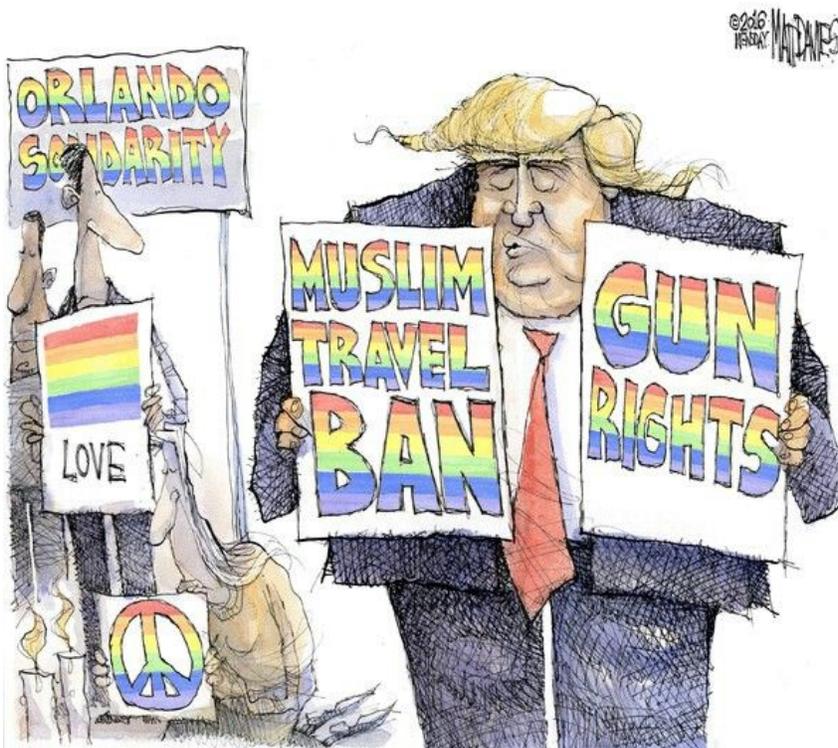


Figure 2. Matt Davies' cartoon editorializing Trump's Muslim travel ban in the wake of the Pulse shooting.

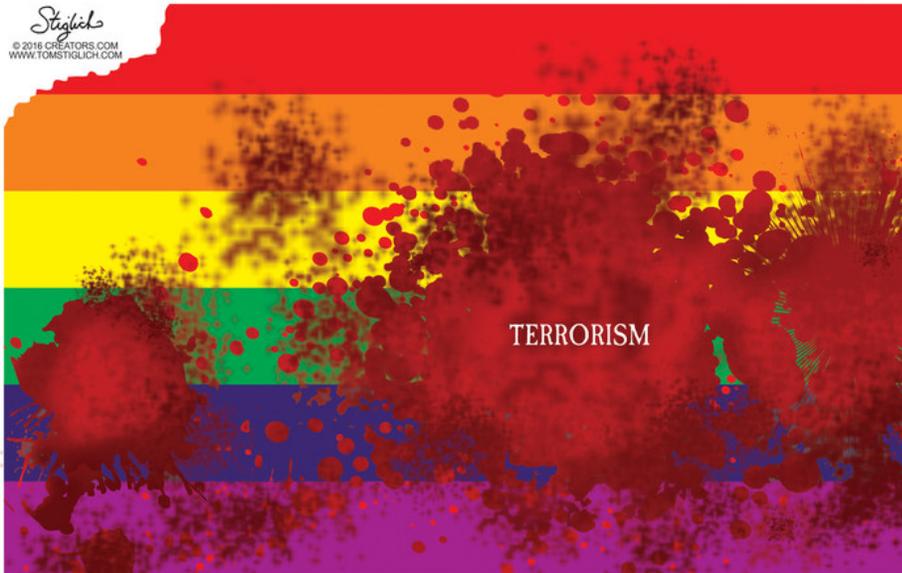


Figure 3. Stiglich's post-Pulse Pride flag.

acknowledge LGBTQ Pride Month, and entirely dismantled the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS.

Political cartoons illustrate the irony of anti-gay politicians appropriating pro-LGBTQ rhetoric to marginalize perceived enemies of the state. Pulitzer Prize winning editorial cartoonist Matt Davies illustrates the fragility of Trump's homonational argumentation. In the cartoon (see Figure 2), Trump holds rainbow-colored signs, one trumpeting his Muslim travel ban and the other advocating gun rights. Three men at a candlelight vigil hold placards calling for love, peace,

and solidarity. Davies' art helps us understand how the "U.S. government uses a specific conceptualization of [pro-gay] sexuality to legitimize counterterrorism actions against Sikhs, Muslims, and Arabs at home and abroad."<sup>33</sup>

Cartoonist Tom Stiglich employs a less ironic take on homonationalism when pictorially reflecting on the Pulse shooting. In Figure 3, Stiglich reworks the gay Pride flag so that large blood spatters blemish its rainbow. The most pronounced bloodstain contains the word, "terrorism" in capital letters. Stiglich's suggestion is that the act of one Islamic domestic terrorist is the greatest threat to LGBTQ rights in the United States. As discussed earlier in the chapter, LGBTQ Pride is borne from a long history of anti-queer violence, dehumanization, and exclusion. Mateen's attack is one of the most significant mass murders in U.S. history but his violence should not be used to obscure ongoing, state-sanctioned human rights abuses against LGBTQ people at home

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<sup>33</sup> Richard C. Mole, "Homonationalism: Resisting Nationalist Co-optation of Sexual Diversity," *Sexualities* 20 (2017): 661.

and abroad, nor should the mass shooting be used to symbolically legitimize the persecution of other populations.

Sample research questions focusing on homonationalism might include:

- What are the ways in which political cartoonist call attention to the [Trump, Obama, or a president of your choosing] administration's homonational worldview?
- How do notions of homonational citizenship shape congressional testimony about U.S. immigration law?
- When hosting the [2012 Olympic games in London<sup>34</sup>, 2018 Miss America Pageant, or an event of your choice], how did organizers rely on homonationalism to regulate and promote a specific sort of sexual citizenship?

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<sup>34</sup> Phil Hubbard and Eleanor Wilkinson, "Welcoming the World? Hospitality, Homonationalism, and the London 2012 Olympics," *Antipode* 47, no. 3 (2015): 598-615.

### *The Future of Queer Thought*

Heterosexual people have a solid sense of the future. Television shows, movies, and literature have indoctrinated most men and women into the nuclear family, where a man and woman get married and have a few kids. Production and reproduction are the foundations upon which hetero-capital notions of the future are built. Think of the so-called biological clock that symbolizes competing cultural pressures for women to produce capital and offspring. Capitalist structures also dictate the appropriate age for retirement, at which point older citizens—likely grandparents—are no longer part of the coveted 18-49-year-old consumer demographic. Even in the age of divorce, movies like Nancy Meyers *Some Things Got to Give* and *It's Complicated*, Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*, and Forest Whitaker's *Waiting to Exhale* provide filmic blueprints to navigate life after marriage.

LGBTQ people lack the same sense of the future for three primary reasons. First, prior to the 1980s, mass media outlets failed to provide affirming and three-dimensional depictions of sexual minorities.

Narrative renderings of gay and lesbian subjectivity focused on the “lonely life” of homosexuals, many of whom had been exiled from their families. Communication scholar Dustin Goltz reminds us that, “Queers are consistently positioned in opposition to the future. Sedimented myths of LGBT sexual predation, suicidal ideation, and misery have circulated for decades in mainstream discourses.”<sup>35</sup> Members of early homophile movements, like The National Gay Task Force, demanded that TV networks and other media producers provide more positive portrayals of gays and lesbians. During the 1970s, these activists instituted letter-writing campaigns protesting negative stereotypes of sexual minorities. Second, AIDS ravaged nearly an entire generation of gay men in the 1980s. Many equated homosexuality with AIDS and assumed same-sex attraction between men would ultimately lead to a future of disease and death. Third, without the help of medical technology, gay sex is not reproductive. As such, gay sex acts are

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<sup>35</sup> Dustin Goltz, “It Gets Better: Queer Futures, Critical Frustrations, and Radical Potentials,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30, no. 2 (2013): 136.

philosophically incommensurable with the *logos*, or logic, of capitalism, a worldview that is rooted in ideologies of production and reproduction.

Millennials are the first generation of U.S. sexual minorities that have the cultural mechanisms in place to collectively imagine and creatively render a queer future. **Queer futurity** describes one's sense of what the future beholds and strategies for survival. José Muñoz explains that queerness is a "formation based on an economy of desire and desiring. This desire is always directed at the thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise."<sup>36</sup> A solid and affirming sense of future is crucial for gay and lesbian youth who "contemplate suicide at almost three times the rate of heterosexual youth" and are "almost five times as likely to have attempted suicide compared to heterosexual youth."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> José E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 29.

<sup>37</sup> CDC, *Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Risk Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9-12: Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance* (Atlanta, Georgia: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

Futurity also aids LGBTQ adults, providing a roadmap with which they can navigate aging. Heteronormative conceptualizations of the future overwhelmingly deny the sexual desires and activities of older men and women. Cultural discourses propagate the myth that sexual appetites wane and eventually disappear once men and women pass the age of accepted procreation. Queering futurity contests heteronormativity's assumption of sexual ambivalence once we reach a certain age. Although LGBTQ representation in media has grown exponentially since the 1980s, few TV shows and movies include sexual minority characters past the age of 40. So, what might a queer future look like? Cultural critic Drew Mackie predicts sexual minorities will use the television show *Golden Girls* as a narrative blueprint for how to spend their senior years.<sup>38</sup> The program's emphasis on platonic co-habitation and robust sex lives in a person's "golden" years may resonate with many people who are not convinced by the grammars of

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<sup>38</sup> Drew Mackie, "Sharing the Lanai: *Golden Girls* is a Model for How Some Gay Men Will Spend Their Senior Years," *Hornet*, last modified May 9, 2017, accessed July 26, 2018, <https://hornet.com/stories/golden-girls-gay-men-lanai/>.

compulsory monogamy and sexless aging. *Golden Girls* is a fitting roadmap for LGBTQ people given its celebration of “chosen families.”

Queer futurity may prove especially complex for queers of color who must navigate intersectional and interlocking oppressions of homophobia and racism. Performance Studies author E. Patrick Johnson proposes a race and class-focused form of queer theory that calls attention to queer’s homogenizing tendencies and considers the “different standpoints found among lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgendered [sic] people of color—differences that are also conditioned by class and gender.”<sup>39</sup> Johnson pays homage to his grandmother’s pronunciation of “queer,” which she articulated in a “thick, Black, southern dialect” as “quare.”<sup>40</sup> **Quare theory** is both a critique of queer theory’s obsession with whiteness and an alternative sense of queer theory’s futurity, or a critical horizon that is more reflexive about race, ethnicity, and class. Academic considerations of

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<sup>39</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, “Quare Studies or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2001): 3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

homonationalism, for example, take into account how western thinkers center a particular sort of homosexuality—gay, affluent, and White—at the expense of queers of color.

Queer futurity is highlighted in the following research questions:

- How does Dan Savage’s YouTube-based “It Gets Better” campaign romanticize notions of queer futurity?
- In what ways does the televisual lesbian-death trope forego serious consideration of lesbian futurity?
- How do news media reports about LGBTQ hate crimes trivialize the murder of trans women of color? Moreover, how does this marginalization shape media narratives of trans futurity?

### Vocabulary Terms

- Essentialism
- Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement
- Heterocentric Textual Essentialism

- Heteronormativity
- Homonationalism
- Homonormativity
- Homosexual
- Lesbian death syndrome
- Queer
- Queer futurity
- Queering
- Quare theory
- Social locations and standpoints

# STUDENT EXEMPLAR

“Let [Heteronormativity] Go”: A Queer Interpretation of Disney’s *Frozen*

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June 3, 2015

“Let [Heteronormativity] Go”: A Queer Interpretation of Disney’s *Frozen*

This paper explores how the film *Frozen* challenges and critiques normative notions of gender and sexuality portrayed in previous Disney princess films. I note how the movie’s main characters, Princess Anna and Queen Elsa, fail to submit to stereotypical feminine and heterosexual ideals. This failure is examined using a low theoretical perspective to reveal how *Frozen* acts as a source of queer pedagogy to people of varying intellectual abilities, including children. I reveal how the movie’s celebration of Anna’s and Elsa’s failures ruptures hegemonic ideals of gender and sexuality and provides alternate imaginings of what it means to be female.

*Keywords: Heteronormativity; Disney Princesses; Frozen; Queer Theory; Hegemonic*

Walt Disney Animation Studios' 53rd animated feature film *Frozen* is the highest-grossing animated film of all time (Ray, 2014). On its 101<sup>st</sup> day of release, the film became the second animated film to surpass the \$1-billion mark (McClintock, 2014) and is the fifth highest-grossing film amongst all genres ("All Time Worldwide Box Office Grosses," 2014). Since its release, *Frozen* has received widespread popular and critical acclaim. The prestigious movie has won thirty-six awards, including the Best Animated Feature at both the 2014 Academy Awards and Golden Globes ("Awards," n.d.). As a Disney animated musical, *Frozen* also won Best Original Song in the 2014 Academy Awards for the movie's liberating anthem, "Let it Go" ("Awards," n.d.). The film's soundtrack is currently the best-selling album of 2014, having sold 2.5 million copies – 1.85 million more than Beyonce's eponymous album which holds the second place title (Caulfield, 2014). The *Frozen* album has also held the number one spot on the Billboard Top 200 for twelve weeks in a row, making it the longest-running number one soundtrack by an animated film (Gundersen, 2014).

*Frozen*'s undeniable ability to shatter records in the ticket office can be attributed to its captivating storyline and unique characters. The film features two princesses of the fictional kingdom of Arendelle, Elsa and Anna. The eldest princess, Elsa (who eventually becomes queen), possesses magical abilities to create ice and snow from her fingers and feet. Elsa's powers are seemingly carefree and innocent until she accidentally strikes Anna with her magical frost. This causes Elsa's wintry magic to suddenly be seen as a dangerous threat. Elsa is told to control her icy powers by suppressing her emotions, which paradoxically stimulates and strengthens her magical abilities. To protect Anna and the kingdom from the monster she believes she has become, Elsa withdraws into complete isolation behind the door of a single, lonely room in her vast castle. For years, Elsa attempts to "conceal, don't feel" her growing

powers, but the more she attempts to suppress her magical abilities, the more uncontrollable they become.

*Frozen* is considered Disney's most progressive Disney princess film to date (Leon, 2013). *Frozen* has even been deemed by some viewers as *too* progressive, as seen in the film's criticisms for being pro-gay, promoting bestiality, and for subverting the two leading male characters (Greydanus, 2014). These criticisms derive from Anna's and Elsa's unprecedented ability to confidently crash through traditional expectations of gender and sexuality, especially those engendered by most other Disney princesses (Leon, 2013). While Anna reverses traditional damsel in distress stereotypes by repeatedly rescuing a man, it is Elsa who commits the biggest princess taboo – showing no interest in finding a prince. Anna's ability to save herself (and others) and Elsa's lack of a romantic love interest, unusual powers, and inability to conform to societal expectations deviate from normative notions of gender and sexuality. Anna's and Elsa's failure to perform traditional acts of romance and femininity is celebrated throughout the film and subsequently functions to rupture hegemonic ideals regarding gender and sexuality. Thus, the aim of this essay is to provide a queer reading of the film *Frozen* in order to examine the ways in which the movie's celebration of failure provides alternative imaginings of gender and sexuality.

### Defrosting Disney

As the world's largest media conglomerate, Disney has become a foundational pillar of U.S. popular culture (Cokely, 2005). Disney's grandeur status is due in large part to the company's exceptional ability to cast a spell on its audience through its magical movies. The cult-like popularity of Disney films has resulted in many analyses of the movies' depictions of race, class, gender, and romance (Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, & Tanner, 2004.).

These studies reveal that, while Disney is synonymous with magic, its enchanting fairy-tales often uphold hegemonic ideals of gender and sexuality.

An analysis of gender role depictions in Disney movies reveal common narratives regarding what it means to be male and female. The depictions of masculinity in Disney films perpetuate hegemonic masculinity, or the culturally constructed and idealized form of the masculine character (Connell, 1983). This is seen in the way males are consistently depicted as physically strong, assertive, and heroic (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2001). Similarly, a vast majority of Disney movies cast men as valiant rescuers who save the day, a theme particularly salient in Disney princess films such as *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Aladdin*.

Hegemonic masculinity is intimately connected to stereotypical notions of femininity. This can be seen in the way females are typically painted as damsels in distress who are in need of a noble savior. While some strong and independent princesses, such as Mulan and Pocahontas, have played an active role in the final climatic rescue scene, no Disney princess has ever saved the day without the help of a man (England et al., 2001). Another commonality found among female Disney characters is the goal of marriage (Towbin et al., 2004). This quest for marriage is the most persistent message of sexuality found in Disney movies.

In order to keep its films suitable for children, Disney's pedagogy of sexuality revolves around the marriage plot which includes depictions of romance, true love, and the white wedding (Cokely, 2005). This is seen when princesses, such as Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, and Ariel, sing about finding their one true love. When a princess meets her prince charming, she instantly falls in love, a theme present in a vast majority of Disney films (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003). Another commonality is that males are romantically aggressive and

make the first move in pursuing the female (Cokely, 2005). The females, on the other hand, play a passive role in the pursuit of romance, simply waiting for their true love to sweep them off their feet and ride off into the sunset.

Another common theme of Disney princess movies is the idea that true love cures all ailments. Time and time again, Disney princesses become entrapped in unfortunate situations, either physically, emotionally, or financially, from which they need to be rescued. Princesses are not only saved by the strength and bravery of their Prince, but through the magical kiss of their true love. Disney films often depict true love's kiss as powerful and transformative (Martin & Kazyak, 2009). A true love's kiss, for example, awakes Princess Aurora and Snow White. In addition, Ariel's attainment of Prince Eric's kiss in *The Little Mermaid* not only brings back her ability to sing and speak, but permanently transforms her from a mermaid into a human. This type of physical transformation is also seen in *The Beauty and the Beast*, but with one difference – Belle's love is so strong that merely crying over Beast transforms him from a monster to a handsome prince. Martin and Kazyak (2009) contend that a kiss, or act of love, is only transformational if it is rooted in heterosexual romance. For example, Timone and Pumba share a non-heterosexual and non-romantic kiss at dinner when they are sucking on opposite ends of a worm and their lips meet in the middle. This kiss is meant to be humorous and is non-transformational. Similarly, Jasmine from *Aladdin* shares a kiss with Jafar, but because the kiss was one of deception and distraction, it does not constitute true love's kiss and therefore does not have the ability to create "a whole new world."

While depictions of gender and sexuality possess common themes interlaced throughout most Disney movies, it is prudent to examine alternate readings of Disney films. By doing this, one can uncover the potential of some Disney characters to resist stereotypical gender and sex

roles (Martin & Kazyak, 2009). This disruption of the normative ideals of gender and sexuality reveals the queer potentiality of Disney movies.

### *Lowering Temperatures*

Queer theory is the belief that “identity is not *who we are*, identity is *what we do*” [emphasis in original] (Fox, 2015, p. 5). Operating from a post-structuralist standpoint, queer theorists examine and seek to disrupt the construction and production of gender binaries. Judith Butler (1999) asserts that gender is performed through repetitive actions that reinforce binary categories such as “man” and “woman” or “gay” and “straight” (p. 5). By their very nature, binaries contain a dominant term and subordinate term. While the subordinate term is considered “less than,” the dominant term becomes an ideal so normalized that it automatically functions as a lens through which the world is decoded. The notion of categories acting as power structures is based on Michel Foucault’s (1978) concept of the deployment of sexuality. In *History of Sexuality, Volume I*, Foucault (1978) contends that the strategic deployment of Western sexuality is economic in nature. In capitalist societies, heterosexuality’s reproductive abilities renders it natural and normal. Romantic and sacred notions of heterosexuality create a “way of thinking that conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution” (Ingraham, 1994, p. 203). In addition to perpetuating gender and sex stereotypes, the belief of heterosexuality’s divine normality justifies its privilege in a variety of social arenas through an array of social practices, a prejudice known as heterosexism (Steiner, Fejes, & Petrich, 1993).

Heterosexism, or the failure to acknowledge the distinct realities, diversity, and identities of gays and lesbians (Steiner et al., 1993), has replaced homophobia in mainstream media through more subtle expressions of subordination and repression (Battles & Hilton-Morrow,

2002). Heterosexism is perpetuated through heteronormativity, or the complex construction of heterosexuality as natural and preferred (Warner, 1993). Heteronormativity includes the abundant, seemingly ordinary ways through which heterosexuality pervasively structures and orders our daily existence (Martin & Kazyak, 2009) and acts as the lens through which we know and understand gender and sexuality (Herman, 2003). In order to survive in a heteronormative culture, one must learn to see straight, read straight, and think straight (Sumara & Davis, 1999). This limits the ability to imagine alternate ways of life and realize the queer possibilities of texts.

Textual essentialism, for instance, is the tendency to assume all characters in a film are inherently straight unless explicitly labeled, coded, or proven to be queer (Doty, 2000a). Textual essentialism can be combatted through queer interpretations of texts. As an “interpretive device and a distinct way of looking at the world,” queer readings seek to break free from heteronormativity by providing an alternative interpretation of a particular discourse (Fox, 2013, p. 6). Alexander Doty (2000a) explains that queering texts is not about *making* texts queer, but about viewing a text through a queer lens in order to understand how it might be understood as queer. Thus, a queer interpretation of *Frozen* does not attempt to negate a Southern Baptist university professor’s popular perspective that *Frozen* is an “an allegory for the Christian gospel” and possibly the “the most Christian movie” of the year (Pinsky, 2014). Instead, a queer reading of the film suggests that *Frozen* can be a Christian allegory *as well as* a queer parable.

Doty (2000a) contends that classic texts can often be more queer-suggestive than openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual texts, allowing queerness to penetrate the larger audience of mainstream texts. For example, Alexander Doty’s (2000b) queer analysis of the *Wizard of Oz* uncovers representations of lesbianism in the “bad butch” Wicked Witch of the West and the good “femme-inine” witch, Gilda, who tries to “pass” as a fairy (i.e., straight) (p. 59). Much like

*Frozen*'s Anna and Elsa, neither of these characters explicitly states their queerness. Instead, subtle counter-hegemonic portrayals of gender and sexuality are exposed through a queer reading of the text. Doty (2000b) reveals that, unlike heteronormative readings, queer interpretations require no obvious performances of queerness, but instead rely on more elusive expressions of counter-normative behaviors.

Subtle performances of queer behaviors have saturated Disney movies for decades. Ursula, the evil sea-monster in *The Little Mermaid*, was created after the image of the iconic drag queen, Divine, and is depicted as a strong, dangerous woman who confidently expresses her beauty, sexuality, and power (Roth, 1996). Ursula also fails to adhere to "proper" expressions of gender by outwitting and overpowering the story's heroine as well as some male characters (Cokely, 2005). Similarly, the effeminate sardonic demeanor of Scar, the primary villain in *The Lion King*, can also be read as queer (Roth, 1996). Not only is Scar's physicality and personality different from the other lions, but he is pushed to the shadows, or margins, of the animal kingdom. While neither Scar nor Ursula explicitly state their sexual orientation, the characters' subtle rejections of normative notions of gender and sexuality reveal their queer potentialities.

I utilize a specific form of queer reading called low theory. While high theory is theoretically dense and often difficult to decipher without an advanced degree, low theoretical artifacts are simple enough to appeal to and be understood by an audience of varying intellectual abilities. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam (2011) discusses the ways in which eccentric and non-serious artifacts that operate from low theoretical standpoints can act as theory. Halberstam rhetorically analyzes how seemingly childish, silly, stupid, and ridiculous texts, such as children's films, function as pedagogy. Low theoretical artifacts that fail to adhere to normative notions of gender and sexuality provide unconventional imaginings of identity.

Halberstam (2011) identifies failure as one of low theory's key characteristics. Halberstam states that, "failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style" (3). Failure frees people from the punishing norms that function to discipline behavior and ruptures the seemingly clear boundaries of binaries by offering alternative notions of identity. Halberstam further contends that failure possesses a unique ability to "poke holes in the toxic positivity" deployed through normative ideals of success, revealing how failure and success are dependent on structural conditions (3). Anna and Elsa's inability and/or unwillingness to enact "normal" performances of sex and gender highlight their failure as Disney princesses. This failure is ultimately celebrated as a source of invention and resistance to hegemony.

Queer narratives of failure are examined in Halberstam's (2011) analysis of "Pixarvolt" films. These animated children's movies initially appear to be conventional stories that "pit an individual, independent, and original character against the conformist sensibilities of the masses" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 43). However, the Pixar protagonist is often queer in the sense that the character can only save the community or find his or her way in the world by seeking relationships with others. It is *only* through these relationships that the protagonist is able to mature and freely enact the identity of their choosing. By offering stories of collective action, group bonding, and anticapitalist critiques, these narratives are queer by their deviance from normative notions of individualistic and capitalistic success.

By operating at low theoretical levels, animated films such as *Frozen* are understood by children and therefore have been deemed "portable professors" (Freeman, 2005, p. 85) for their ability to enculturate both children and adults in regards to ideologies of gender and sexuality (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2008). Depictions of sexuality in children's films are

counterintuitive in Western culture because of the “pedagogization of children’s sex,” or the belief that children are pre-sexual creatures that must be protected from the contamination of sexuality (Foucault, 1987, p. 104). The need to protect kids from the “dangers” of sexuality is heightened when “threatened” by those who are labeled perverse, such as members of the LGBTQ community. Therefore, it is particularly revolutionary to argue how *Frozen*, a seemingly innocent text for children, can be read as queer. Not everyone celebrates the film’s queerness, as seen in the backlash that *Frozen* has received by some viewers, most notably Pastor Kevin Swanson, who proclaimed that *Frozen* is “a satanic attempt to make kids gay” (Walters, 2014).

While I agree with Swanson that elements of queerness saturate *Frozen*, I argue that counter-normative depictions of Anna and Elisa provide positive perspectives of gender and sexuality. Because the “pedagogization of children’s sex” calls for representations of sexuality in children’s films to be subtle or preferably nonexistent, a queer reading of the movie will enable me to determine elusive ways in which hegemonic ideals are ruptured through the celebration of failure. I will do this by first analyzing how *Frozen* challenges conventional tropes of gender and sexuality portrayed in Disney princess films. I will then argue that a queer reading of *Frozen* illuminates the possibility that Elsa embodies a lesbian identity.

### Freezing Failure

*Frozen* challenges typical expressions of femininity and romance by critiquing one of Disney’s foundational components - the “love at first sight” trope. As one of the most persistent and pervasive messages in Disney princess movies, the notion of love at first sight is rooted in romance, magic, and the marriage plot. While *Frozen* initially appears to reinforce this trope, it not only fails to adhere to this stereotypical aspect of Disney princess movies, but successfully satirizes the idea of finding “the one” within moments of meeting.

Princess Anna's relationship with Prince Hans of the Southern Isles at first appears to succumb to the love at first sight trope. Through an act of fate, Anna dances around the kingdom of Arendelle singing about finding her true love when she (literally) runs into Hans. Sparks fly and awkwardness ensues as the two attempt to have a conversation. In a Cinderella-esque fashion, the clock chimes, calls Anna out of her love-dazed trance and forces her to hurriedly depart in preparation for the coronation ball. As destiny would have it, Anna and Hans reunite at the party, where they spend the night dancing, talking, adventuring and bursting into song about how love is an "open door" and they are "just meant to be." At the end of the night, Hans proposes to Anna, perpetuating the love at first sight trope by getting engaged less than twenty-four hours after meeting.

The newly engaged couple rush to deliver the good news to Elsa, the newly crowned queen, and ask for her blessing of their marriage. Elsa refuses, arguing that "you can't marry a guy you just met." Anna defensively argues that "true love" makes marrying a stranger permissible, but Elsa is not persuaded. Instead, she challenges Anna's very notion of "true love" asking her, "What do you know about true love?" Anna's unexpected companion in her journey to find Elsa, Kristoff, also partakes in ridiculing Anna for getting engaged to someone whom she just met. When Kristoff is made aware of Anna's speedy engagement, he becomes fixated on the audacity that Anna would get engaged to a "stranger" and tests Anna by asking her simple questions about her fiancé, none of which she can answer successfully. Anna's relationship with Hans is confirmed as a scam when the prince admits that he never loved Anna, but was marrying her in order to inherit the throne. Hans exposes Anna's foolishness for buying into the notion of love at first sight when he states: "As heir, Elsa was preferable, of course. But... you were so desperate for love you were willing to marry me, just like that."

While Anna and Hans' relationship is originally framed as love at first sight, their engagement is continuously ridiculed and ultimately fails when Hans' ulterior motive is revealed. Because Hans has twelve younger brothers, he perceives marriage to Anna as an "open door" to inheriting the kingdom of Arendelle. This queers marriage by framing this institutionalized form of heteronormativity as an achievement of power and status, as opposed to love and romance. The deceptive and disastrous framing of a seemingly perfect prince/princess relationship is atypical for a Disney film and exposes the queer ways in which *Frozen* deviates from normative notions of romance.

Stereotypical narratives of romance are also critiqued as Anna's character develops throughout the film. Anna incessantly perpetuates normative notions of true love by defending her idealistic relationship with Hans. Hans' deception ruptures Anna's faith in heteronormative romance and brings her to the realization that she knows nothing about true love. It is Elsa's magical snowman, Olaf, who explains to the princess that "love is putting someone else's needs before yours." Olaf goes on to explain the ways in which Kristoff expresses love for Anna. Anna and Kristoff's relationship symbolizes an alternate understanding of romance that is not sparked by love at first sight, but is rooted in an enduring friendship and partnership. This relationship further counters stereotypical depictions of sexuality by casting Anna as the romantic aggressor when she kisses Kristoff on the cheek. Thus, Anna's relationships with Hans and Kristoff queerly function as a rejection of the normative, yet fantastical, notions of romance and sexuality that Disney princess films are known for.

In addition to critiquing hegemonic ideals of romance, *Frozen* fails to succumb to hegemonic gender roles, particularly through Anna's reversal of the damsel in distress trope. While the princess is often put in unfortunate situations, both physically and emotionally, she

does not embody the typical role of damsel in distress found in traditional Disney movies. Instead of being stereotypically portrayed as a helpless, weak, female who does not have the strength or ability to save herself, Anna breaks the barriers of the status quo by being independent and fully capable of saving not only herself, but others.

Anna's heroic acts are a pervasive theme throughout *Frozen*. When Elsa flees to the North Mountain after her powers have been revealed, Anna calls for her horse and refuses her new fiancé's request to accompany her, venturing through the wilderness without fear to find her sister. On this journey, Anna meets an ice miner, Kristoff, and his reindeer sidekick, Sven, who also want to find Elsa in order to stop the wintery storm she has cast on the kingdom. On their trek to the North Mountain, Kristoff realizes they are being chased by wolves and tells Anna, "Don't fall off (the sleigh) and don't get eaten." Despite Anna's reassurance that she can help, Kristoff refuses because he "doesn't trust [her] judgment." Anna responds by grabbing Kristoff's lute and swinging it at his head. The lute purposefully makes contact with an attacking wolf that even Kristoff failed to notice, saving him from the animal's menacing teeth. As Kristoff stares at Anna in disbelief, he is suddenly pulled off the sled by another wolf. Anna's quick reflexes are displayed when she snatches the torch he was holding out of midair. As her new friend is being dragged behind the sleigh with wolves nipping at his feet and sides, Anna uses the torch to light a blanket on fire. She then commands Kristoff to "Duck!" before hurling the burning blanket at the wolves, saving her companion and allowing them to escape.

A similar scene plays out when Anna and Kristoff are being chased by Elsa's ice monster, Marshmallow. As they're trying to escape, the princess grabs a tree branch that sags with the weight of snow, pulls it back, and releases the branch so that it snaps upright, knocking Marshmallow off of his feet and giving Kristoff and her a chance to put distance between

themselves and the threatening snow-monster. When Marshmallow catches up with them, Anna bravely saves an unconscious Kristoff and herself by using a knife to cut loose from the snowy beast's menacing grip.

Anna's repeated success in not only saving herself, but a (gasp!) man, defies Disney princesses' traditional need and desire to be saved by "prince charming." Anna takes this one step further and reverses the damsel in distress trope by repeatedly saving a man. Her heroic acts demonstrate bravery, athleticism, and independence, which are characteristics typically reserved for male Disney characters (England et al., 2001). Thus, Anna fails to perform the typical gender roles ascribed to Disney princesses by her refusal to be fearful, tentative, and physically weak (England et al., 2001). In past films, Disney makes it very clear that only the characters who enact the "proper" expressions of gender are rewarded, typically with the ultimate prize of a man (Cokely, 2005). Anna not only defies normative standards of what it means to be a princess, but breaks the mold by showing that failing to possess stereotypically feminine characteristics does not make her unattractive or unlovable.

Anna's most powerful act of bravery is seen in *Frozen*'s climax. When Elsa accidentally strikes Anna in the heart with magical frost, Anna is taken to the elder troll, Pabbie, who declares that "only an act of true love can thaw a frozen heart." Weak and blinded by the thick snow storm that encompasses all of Arendelle, Anna stumbles along the frozen fjord looking for Kristoff to provide her with true love's kiss, which she believes will thaw her ice-stricken heart. A break in the storm allows Anna to see Kristoff on one side of the fjord and Hans holding a sword above Elsa's head on the other side. Anna sacrifices herself, running away from Kristoff and throwing her body in front of Hans' evil sword in order to save her sister's life. Anna's body turns into solid ice just as the blade strikes, saving Elsa and knocking Hans off his feet. Elsa is

heartbroken at the sight of Anna succumbing to her icy powers and every character bows their head in somber silence until suddenly, Anna's heart begins to thaw. In disbelief Elsa asks Anna, "You sacrificed yourself for me?" Anna states simply, "I love you." Elsa realizes that love will allow her to end the frosty storm surrounding Arendelle. With a lift of her arms, Elsa sends her love through Arendelle, thawing the kingdom and leaving only a warm summer day.

By sacrificing herself, Anna saves Elsa and in doing so performs the act of true love needed to thaw her own ice-stricken heart. This subsequently saves the entire kingdom of Arendelle. Anna's act of love and bravery inspires Elsa to feel, not conceal, her emotions, which ends the wintry storm. Anna's ability to change the world through an act of love toward Elsa, as opposed to Kristoff, goes against one of the most foundational aspects of Disney – that only a romantic, heterosexual act of true love is powerful enough to be transformational. In addition, by placing Elsa and Anna's relationship at the core of the plot, *Frozen's* central theme deviates from the typical marriage plot, queering the relationship. The fact that this queer relationship is enough to thaw Anna's frozen heart provides a narrative that diverges from typical portrayals of gender and sexuality by suggesting non-romantic and non-heterosexual acts of love can be powerfully transformative.

#### Queering the Ice Queen

Elsa's wintry magic differentiates her from every other person in the kingdom of Arendelle. Thus, Elsa's powers are seen as unnatural and non-normal. In the magical/non-magical binary, non-magical is the dominant term that is idealized, much like heterosexuality is epitomized in the sexual orientation binary. This is consistent with other Disney movies that depict females with magical abilities as "less than" by casting many of these characters as the story's primary villains (i.e., Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*, The

Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and the witches in *Brave* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (“Magic Users,” n.d.). In fact, *Frozen* almost succumbed to these stereotypical castings of queer characters as Elsa was originally written as a villain who uses her powers for evil (Moskowitz, 2014). By not portraying Elsa as the enemy, *Frozen* breaks free from Disney’s tendency to vilify characters who fail to fit the mold of their societies. These outcasts are often argued to be characters that gays and lesbians might relate to (Griffin, 2000). By casting Elsa as a non-normal outcast whom is literally chased to the margins of society, *Frozen* provides an exemplar of a queer queen who fails to adhere to societal norms. More importantly, by not casting Elsa as a villainous monster and ultimately celebrating Elsa’s queerness, *Frozen* provides an alternative narrative of queerness.

In addition to being perceived as unnatural, Elsa’s powers are feared to be contagious. This is first seen when she “contaminates” Anna by accidentally striking her in the head with a ray of frost. Anna is taken to the elder troll, Pabbie, who disinfects the princess by removing all memories she has of Elsa’s magic. After this incident, Elsa is given gloves to help conceal and contain her powers. During Elsa’s coronation ball, Anna accidentally slips off one of the newly crowned queen’s glove, increasing Elsa’s fear of revealing her powers. Elsa frantically claws at her sister to retrieve her glove, but it’s too late – as sparks of frost and spikes of ice erupt from her fingertips, Elsa is “outed” to the kingdom of Arendelle. Once Elsa’s powers are revealed, the townspeople shield their children in an attempt to protect them from the evil “sorcery” that Elsa represents.

Elsa’s suppressive gloves are a physical barrier that function to prevent Elsa from spreading her powers (i.e., queerness) and protect the kingdom from contamination. The fear of infection and the townspeople’s attempt to protect themselves, especially their children, from

Elsa illustrates Foucault's (1978) notion of the pedagogization of children's sex, or the need to protect children from the contamination of sexuality. The townspeople of Arendelle want to protect their children from being exposed to something "unnatural" and "wrong" in order to prevent their children from inheriting Elsa's impurities.

Elsa's queer potential is illuminated during the King's discussion with Pabbie before he cures young Anna of Elsa's frosty blow. Upon seeing her powers, Pabbie asks if Elsa was "born with the powers or cursed." The King discloses that Elsa was "born with it" and that her powers are getting stronger. Pabbie turns his attention to Anna and warns the King, "You're lucky it wasn't her heart. The heart is not so easily changed, but the head can be persuaded." This interaction metaphorically depicts the popular debate regarding if being gay or lesbian is a choice or biological. By asking if Elsa was "born with [it]" Pabbie questions if the princess has always possessed queer characteristics, or if her queerness was an attribute she picked up from her surrounding circumstances. By debating if Elsa's powers are an act of nature vs. nurture, Elsa's magic is rhetorically positioned alongside a common debate about the source of gay and lesbian sexuality. This is illustrated further when Pabbie implies that Anna's contamination is a result of queer exposure, or nurture, and therefore less severe because she can be "persuaded" into being cured.

Another parallel *Frozen* has with typical gay and lesbian politics is its coming out narrative. In order for us to understand how Elsa comes out of the closet, we must first identify the ways in which she was forced into the closet. In other words, how did Elsa's powers become a part of her identity that she felt the need to hide and suppress? After Pabbie finds out that young Elsa was "born with [it]," he warns her, "There is beauty in your magic." The screen pans upward and the Northern Lights are used to show a silhouette of adult Elsa creating beautiful,

magical snowflakes. “But also great danger,” he continues. The fluffy snowflakes turn into sharp, threatening spikes. As the elder troll warns Elsa that she “must learn to control [her powers],” the display in the Northern Lights show panic-stricken human figures responding to the sharp spikes by attacking the magical creature. Pabbie declares, “Fear will be your enemy!” The King frantically reassures Pabbie that he will lock the gates, reduce the staff, and keep Elsa hidden from everyone until she learns to control her powers. The King makes good with his promise and Elsa is locked in a small bedroom in the vast castle. Elsa is given gloves and a new life motto: “Conceal. Don’t feel.”

Forcing Elsa to control and conceal her differences reinforces heteronormativity by rejecting anything that falls outside of the norm. Requiring Elsa to “Conceal, don’t feel” literally and metaphorically forces Elsa into the closet as she spends every moment of her life in a small room living in fear of being outed and attempting to “pass” as non-magical. Elsa is ultimately outed the moment she comes face-to-face with heteronormativity in its most common and pervasive form – the marriage plot. Not only is Elsa outed at her coronation ball (a very formal, traditional, and heterosexual event), but her powers are revealed at Anna’s request to bless her heterosexual marriage. Elsa becomes so upset that she loses control and her powers are exposed to the crowd, causing the people of Arendelle to chase the “monster” to the margins of their kingdom. It is only when Elsa is far enough away from the heteronormative kingdom of Arendelle that she finally feels free enough to come to terms with who she really is. This realization of self-acceptance is revealed in *Frozen*’s most popular song, “Let it Go,” which serves as Elsa’s coming out anthem.

The “Let it Go” scene begins with Elsa trudging up a mountain covered in snow. She is wearing her coronation outfit, which covers her from head to toe, leaving only her face and one

gloveless hand exposed. Her hair is pulled up in a tight up-do with her crown resting squarely on top. Elsa sings sadly, with signs of suffering streaking her face:

A kingdom of isolation and it looks like I'm the queen.

The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside.

Couldn't keep it in, Heaven knows I tried.

Don't let them in, don't let them see.

Be the good girl you always have to be.

Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know.

Well, now they know!

Elsa rips off her one remaining glove, letting the wind take the symbol of suppression far away as a vow to never again conceal her powers. As she continues singing, her anguish-stricken face is suddenly splashed with a smile as she slowly sets her powers free and magically creates simple snowflakes, snow flurries, and a snowman named Olaf:

Let it go, let it go!

Can't hold it back any more.

Let it go, let it go!

Turn away and slam the door.

I don't care what they're going to say.

Elsa frees herself from her cape (and the opinions of others), letting the wind steal it from her body. Elsa “tests the limits [of her powers] and break[s] through” as she creates an intricate ice castle on the side of the North Mountain. She dances around the huge palace and creates her new home, beautifying it with an ice crystal chandelier hanging from the center of the gorgeous high ceilings. Elsa’s castle represents her own stigmaphile space, or the space occupied by those who

are stigmatized, where she is able to learn to value the very thing the rest of the kingdom condemns as her biggest failure - her magic (Warner, 2000). This leads Elsa to the climax of the song, when she grabs the crown off her head and tosses it away with glee, singing in pure delight:

Let it go, let it go.

That perfect girl is gone.

Here I stand, in the light of day...

Let the storm rage on!

Elsa literally and figuratively “lets her hair down” from the restrictive up-do which falls into a thick, strong braid. She uses her magic to transform her conservative coronation dress into a sexy, sparkly, gown. The gorgeous dress hugs her figure and shimmers as she walks confidently with her arms outstretched and her hips swaying sexually from side to side. She stands on the balcony in the sun, revealing her true self to the world.

The act of coming out is an acknowledgement that the person has been “passing” and concealing their true identity under a veil of heterosexual assumptions up until that point (Sedgwick, 1993). “Let it Go” begins with Elsa describing the life of constantly trying to pass as non-magical (i.e., straight). She describes the “swirling storm inside” that stems from the tension to “be the good girl [she] always had to be” and her desire to “let it go” and become the ice queen she truly is.

“For gays and lesbians, ‘coming out’ is much more than a string of words, it is a shift in perspective” (Bacon, 1998, p. 251). “Let it Go” altered the perspective of *Frozen*’s directors who, after hearing the song, requested that the entire script be rewritten to free Elsa from her original fate as the film’s evil villain (Gomez, 2014). The transformational effects of the song

also leads to the pivotal moment when Elsa decides she will no longer allow oppressive structures to regulate her into concealing her true identity. She vows that she will never again be held captive by her fears of being outed because “now they know” thus, she can stand, exposed, “in the light of day.” Elsa reveals that she is far enough away from Arendelle to be extricated from the heterosexist constructs that rule the kingdom by stating, “The fears that once controlled me, can't get to me at all,” and “No right, no wrong. No rules for me. I'm free!” Now that she's liberated, Elsa promises that she's “not going back” into the closet of concealment as she decidedly throws away the crown of Arendelle in order to be a queen of her own making. With this declaration comes Elsa's (and *Frozen*'s) most central transformation. Elsa's assertion of queerness alters her attitude from guarded and self-regulating to confident and free. Her magical abilities that were once suppressed are now pushing the boundaries of her imagination. By coming out, Elsa transforms her dress from conservative to sexy. Her body language reveals she is simultaneously embracing her powers and sexuality as she proclaims, “That perfect girl is gone!” The “perfect girl” symbolizes one seemingly void of both powers and queer sexuality.

The parallel between Elsa's powers and sexuality is a reoccurring theme throughout the film, but it is most evident in the “Let it Go” scene. When Elsa's magical abilities are suppressed, her sexuality is repressed as well. Similarly, the more Elsa lets her powers run wild the more her sexuality is revealed. Because the pedagogization of children's sex requires children to be protected from sex and sexuality, it is evident that Elsa's powers are a subtle representation of her sexuality. Specifically, because her powers set her apart from everyone else, Elsa possesses a lesbian sexual identity. Elsa's lesbianism is further exposed throughout the film through the juxtaposition of heteronormativity and queerness. This can be seen most

evidently in the comparison between Anna and Elsa. While Anna represents the heteronormative world, Elsa signifies the lesbian realm.

The stark contrast of Anna and Elsa is evidently seen on coronation day. Anna and Elsa both sing about their contrasting perceptions of what the day means to them. Anna begins singing as she bursts out of her room with excitement. She slides, skips, and dances her way throughout the castle and reenacts pictures of famous heterosexual couples on the walls, dreaming of finding her true love. The focus switches to Elsa, alone in her room (i.e., the closet), looking anxiously out the window as crowds of people spill into her castle. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes, repeating her mantra to herself: “Conceal. Don’t feel. Put on a show” and reminds herself that “one wrong move and everyone will know.” The song then moves swiftly between Anna and Elsa, revealing their respective emotions about coronation day.

ANNA. For the first time in forever

ELSA. Don’t let them in. Don’t let them see

ANNA: I’m getting what I’m dreaming of

ELSA: Be the good girl you always have to be

ANNA: A chance to leave my sister’s world, a chance to find true love

ELSA: Conceal. Conceal. Don’t Feel. Don’t let them know

ANNA: For the first time in forever, nothing’s in my way!

Throughout the song Anna is seen running free through the town of Arendelle, unable to contain her joy and excitement, while Elsa is confined in her “closet,” struggling to control her fear and anxiety.

When faced with the heteronormativity of the ball, Elsa is virtually paralyzed with the burden of concealing her queerness and “passing” as non-magical to a crowd of people. In

contrast, Anna falls in the dominant, idealized group of heterosexual so she is privileged with the comfort of living without the constant threat of being outed. In fact, Anna's only concern is finally having "a chance to find true love." At a heteronormative occasion, such as the coronation ball, Anna knows that there will be men for her to dance with and excites at the opportunity to meet potential suitors. In contrast, Elsa views the event as structural heterosexism that functions to suppress her queerness and force her to partake in the heteronormative ball because it's the "normal" and "natural" way to do things.

While Elsa does attend the ball, she doesn't fully submit to heterosexist ideals as seen by her polite refusals of men's requests to dance. In fact, Elsa's notorious disregard for men is evident when Hans reveals his plans to Anna about his intent to inherit the throne of Arendelle: "As heir, Elsa was preferable of course. But no one was getting anywhere with her." This is in stark contrast to Anna who was "desperate" for a man's love. Through her lack of a romantic love interest and her reputation for being indifferent toward men, Elsa fails at performing one of the most common characteristics found in Disney princesses, namely dreaming of finding a prince charming. Cokely (2005) explains that "messages like [princesses dreaming of their true love] mask the ways in which heterosexuality is institutionalized. Also masked is the possibility that females may have aspirations separate from marriage" (p. 171). Elsa's lack of romanticism and disinterest in men reveal the way that heterosexuality is culturally constructed and shows that not every female aspires to marry. Elsa's failure to subscribe to the marriage plot prescribed to every Disney princess that has preceded her arguably makes her the queerest queen Disney has ever created.

## Conclusion

Through Anna's and Elsa's failure to enact "normal" performances of gender and sexuality, *Frozen* has freed itself from the heteronormative "spell" that Disney has cast on its past princesses. While Disney has provided stories of failure in the past, what differentiates Anna and Elsa is the celebration of their deviance from hegemonic ideals as well as the position of their failure as the focal point of the film. Anna's and Elsa's alternative ways of being reveal a new genre of queer Disney characters who are praised for critiquing, satirizing, and ridiculing stereotypical ideals that are at the very heart of Disney. This celebration provides alternate imaginings of gender and sexuality and pokes holes in the suffocating nature of hegemony.

Disney films are known for representing "the magical, the wholesome, the imaginary" and therefore are often dismissed as mere fantasy, leaving Disney an underexamined source of education (Cokely, 2005, p. 167). By operating from a low theoretical framework, *Frozen's* disruption of gender and sexual binaries provides a queer pedagogy for audiences of all intellectual levels, including children. Not only can this film be read as queer, but it can be utilized as a guide to being queer.

At face value, arguing that a children's movie offers a queer expression of living seems counterintuitive. Asserting that Elsa embodies a queer identity is especially revolutionary due to Western society's need to protect children from the contamination of sex, particularly sexuality that is deemed "perverse." By showing that sexuality is the very root of all Disney movies in the form of the marriage plot, this analysis reveals that *Frozen* is rendered "too progressive" not because the film possesses sexual subtleties, but because it offers queer narratives by *failing* to perpetuate *heterosexual* notions of sexuality.

The magic of Disney is undoubtedly entangled in heterosexist ideals. As theory, *Frozen* contributes to the way queer readings can be used to rupture hegemonic notions of "normal".

This analysis questions the textual-essentialist assumption that all texts and characters are straight, unless explicitly stated otherwise. The audacity of textual-essentialism is illuminated by Greydanus (2014) when he states that “the assumption that every protagonist in every cartoon is by default heterosexual — that every heroine gets her prince, every hero gets the girl — is no more acceptable than it would be for every protagonist to be white, or male” (para. 21).

A queer reading of *Frozen* ruptures the notion that a Disney princess must be hyper-feminine or heterosexual and disrupts the idea that children’s movies cannot function as theory. *Frozen* points out the utility of failure as a source of invention and encourages us to see the queer potentiality in low theoretical artifacts as a way to discover new ways of being. Interrupting heteronormative thinking not only promotes social justice, but expands possibilities for identifying, understanding, and representing experience (Warner, 1993).

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## “Phags for Phelps”: Exploring the Queer Potential of the Westboro Baptist Church

Ragan Fox

*This essay explores a digital flow of anti-gay rhetoric delivered by members of the Westboro Baptist Church. I note how the Phelps family and their followers construct elaborate media spectacles. I then queerly read the group's rhetorical strategies and suggest that the organization's over-the-top homophobia paradoxically works as a form of LGBTQ activism. Specifically, the church's excessive, campy public performances call attention to many of the myths upon which anti-gay hate exerts itself. I also analyze how some audience members have turned to digital media to respond to the Westboro Baptist church's anti-gay discourse.*

Former Civil Rights attorney Fred Phelps created the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) in 1955. The church's forty congregants, most of whom are Phelps' family members, identify as Biblical literalists, meaning they believe in literal interpretations of scripture. Phelps' assembly is best known for picketing funerals of U.S. soldiers, celebrities, and hate crimes victims. Their carefully crafted protest events are designed to capture media attention and amplify the church's anti-gay viewpoint. Members of the congregation proudly display signs that read, "God hates fags," "Fags are beasts," and "Fags doom nations." Over the past two decades and by their own count, the Westboro Baptist Church has visited 852 cities and staged 47,671 picket lines. The group has increasingly relied on digital media to sermonize. The WBC's website, GodHatesFags.com, features pictures of WBC protest events, Bible verses that document God's "hate," and a blog wherein churchgoers repeatedly suggest that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people are the cause of all the world's problems.

Phelps' church is not surprisingly considered one of the most notorious anti-gay hate organizations operating in the United States. The Southern Poverty Law Center lists the WBC as a "hate group" and the Anti-Defamation League characterizes the church as "virulently homophobic" ("Westboro" 1). The term

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"virulent" suggests that Phelps' speech is infectious, or that his histrionics successfully maintain heteronormative social order and convert LGBTQ advocates into like-minded anti-gay extremists. Describing the WBC as "virulent" obscures the repellant effect the church has on many (if not most) people. Indiana's, Illinois', and Arizona's state legislatures have censored the Westboro Baptist Church. The group has been banned from entering the United Kingdom and chastised by political pundits, ranging from progressive filmmaker Michael Moore to conservative commentator Bill O'Reilly.

Conventional readings of the Westboro Baptist Church fail to recognize the group's queer potential. Phelps and his followers discuss gay sex more than most sexual minorities. Their church is only six blocks away from Gage Park, a popular gay cruising area in Topeka, Kansas. Similar to queer activists, the oddly dressed clan critiques the military-industrial complex and creates over-the-top media spectacles that frequently take place *at* gay pride parades. Some of Phelps' teen devotees have, in fact, attended more Gay Pride festivals than I, and I am a 37-year-old gay man living in West Hollywood. The zealots hold up brightly colored placards featuring stick figures anally penetrating one another. Many Pride participants welcome the WBC's carnivalesque presence by kissing and groping in front of the family and taking whimsical photos with the congregants. The Westboro Baptist Church has paradoxically helped endear gay and lesbian people to the masses. A few digital rhetors contend that the WBC's over-the-top performance of bigotry calls attention to some of the myths upon which homophobia is based. In this essay, I follow the lead of these online critics and explore how the church's obsession with lambasting gay people might alternately be read as queer, or a radically subversive performance and critique of "institutional practices and discourses producing sexual knowledges and the way they organize social life, attending in particular to the way these knowledges and social practices repress differences" (Seidman 13). Understanding the Westboro Baptist Church's queer potential necessitates a more nuanced understanding of queer theory and what it means to *queer* digital communication.

### Friends in *Low* Places

Queer theory is predicated on the poststructural belief that identity is not *who we are*, identity is *what we do*. Queer theorists situate gender and sexuality in the realm of performance, meaning humans are exposed to repetitive and interlocking discourses that teach us how to behave (Butler). Scholars who focus on gender performativity (e.g., Butler; Sedgwick) co-opt J. L. Austin's notion of illocutionary speech, wherein some utterances perform the very actions they describe. Austin's most referenced instance of performativity cites the "I do!" spoken during a marriage ceremony. He uses the example to illustrate how certain speech acts alter social terrain and construct a world of obligation between husband and

wife. Austin's "I do!" highlights how compulsory heterosexuality shapes the very theories upon which we begin to understand performative communication. "Unlike Austin's heterosexual first person," explains queer theorist Jason Edwards, "our queer spouse has a much less secure or empowering relation to family, witnesses, church, and state" (83). The illocutionary force of "I do!" gains much of its performative power by creating and maintaining a world of outsiders (i.e., LGBTQ people), as it celebrates heterosexuality's reiterative power.

Similarly, members of Phelps' church engender the scripture to which they remain so devoted. In their speech acts, Phelps and his followers performatively enact the Bible's simultaneous celebration of heterosexuality and disavowal of homosexuality. Phelps and his minions' castigation of LGBTQ people is a profound celebration of self, a way to performatively render scripture by repeatedly and publicly displaying what they believe they are not, namely "fags" or "fag enablers." The irony is that few people in the United States are as queer as the Phelps family. Queer, in this sense, is a matter of perspective, an interpretive device, and a distinct way of looking at the world. *Queering* is an act whereby a critic or consumer challenges the grammars of compulsory heterosexuality and contests hetero-"textual essentialism," or the tendency to assume heterosexual themes and characters even when heterosexuality is not explicitly stated (Doty 3); or, in the case of the Phelps family, even when heterosexuality is explicitly stated. Queer readings of a text do not replace heterosexual frameworks; rather, queer interpretations run alongside heteronormative conceptualizations of communicative events.

This project animates a specific form of queer imagination known as "low theory." In her book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam lays a methodological foundation for low theory, noting how queer, unconventional takes on stupidity/silliness and failure may help explain attitudinal shifts about LGBTQ people. In the remainder of this section, I clarify Halberstam's queer take on stupidity and failure—the defining characteristics of low theory—and explain how the concepts relate to rhetoric produced by the Westboro Baptist Church and some of the organization's digital critics.

### *The Queer Import of Silly Texts*

Stuart Hall notes that, "We expose ourselves to serious error when we attempt to 'read off' concepts that were designed to operate at a high level of abstraction as if they automatically produced the same theoretical effects when translated to another, more concrete, 'lower' level of operation" (413). A poststructural thinker, for example, produces theoretical work that may not adequately animate the day-to-day theoretical maneuverings of a street activist, and *vice versa*. "Everyone participates in intellectual activity," Halberstam claims, "just as they cook meals and mend clothes without necessarily being chefs or tailors" (17). Different lev-

els of theory speak to distinct intellectual communities. Digital media, for instance, may be considered "lower" than more conventional forms of theory, inquiry, and high art; but, time and again, online rhetoric proves its consequentiality by being passed around by millions and critically dissected.

Low theory celebrates work that comes from silly, eccentric archives, or pop culture artifacts that may otherwise be labeled "unserious." In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam argues that animated films like *Finding Nemo* and stoner movies like *Dude, Where's My Car?* provide a queer way of looking at the world for audience members operating from a range of intellectual backgrounds and capabilities. Take, for example, how Dory, the forgetful fish in *Finding Nemo*, might function as a queer intervention in the film. First, Dory is voiced by Ellen DeGeneres, one of the most celebrated lesbians in the United States. Second, Dory "signals a new version of selfhood, a queer version that depends upon disconnection from the family and contingent relations to friends and improvised relations to community" (Halberstam 80). Halberstam's underlying argument is that "silly" artifacts constitute a form of queer theory. Despite (and sometimes in spite of) author intent, many eccentric texts challenge the status quo and offer new, queer-positive ways of looking at the world.

A similar argument has been less eloquently articulated by a few conservative media personalities, like Jerry Falwell who insisted one of the Teletubbies promotes a gay lifestyle, and Focus on the Family leader James Dobson who faulted TV cartoon character SpongeBob SquarePants' gender ambiguity and perceived pro-gay advocacy. Three ties bind Falwell, Dobson, and Halberstam: First, all three cultural critics are keenly aware that texts may be interpreted in numerous ways. Second, even silly films and TV shows made for children are theoretically provocative. Third, one need not be versed in the intricacies of post-structural theory to queer artifacts that are otherwise assumed to be heterosexual or devoid of sexuality. The texts are commended by Halberstam and feared by Falwell and Dobson precisely because of their potential to expand intellectual horizons. Audience members can do something transgressive with these bits of discourse.

Similarly, a Westboro Baptist Church protest functions as a mode of low theory that incites some people to think more abstractly about the performativity of religion, sexuality, citizenship, and hate. Despite the organization's ability to stir national debate about key critical/cultural issues, Communication scholars have paid little attention to the WBC's doomsday prognostications; and few have investigated the ways in which people react to Phelps and his followers. Only one essay about the church has been published in Communication journals. This dearth of research may be partially explained by an expectation for rhetoric and performance scholars to worship at the altar of high theory and analyze "sophisticated," "credible" artifacts. I understand why many scholars do not take the Phelps seriously. The group's glassy-eyed spokesperson, Shirley

Phelps-Roper, comes off as more of a hilarious anti-gay caricature in a John Waters film than a menacing threat to gay people and LGBTQ rights. Low theory hails the signifying capacity of stupidity. "Stupidity," argues Halberstam, "could refer not simply to a lack of knowledge but to the limits of certain forms of knowing and certain ways of inhabiting structures of knowledge" (12). A push away from conventional epistemologies, or a predictable reading of Phelps' rhetoric, is precisely what makes a queer interpretation of the Westboro Baptist Church's stupidity productive and evocative.

Taking this argument a step further, the Phelps congregation may actually cause some people to notice and discuss the socially constructed mechanics of homophobia and other forms of prejudice. The organization's outlandish rhetorical strategies have made them a topic of national conversation for over twenty years. Even members of the Ku Klux Klan have protested the church and, without a hint of irony, claimed the Phelps are "hate-mongers" (Hughes).

In this essay, I examine digital responses to the WBC in an effort to theorize what I queerly perceive to be a significant disconnect between the illocutionary, intent-related aspects of Phelps' rhetoric and its perlocutionary, affect-driven implications. Placing Phelps' anti-gay theater and reactions to it in the realm of low theory may offer "new conceptual tools for moving back and forth between speech act theory and dramaturgical performance; ideally, it might even make room for talking about performative affectivity in a way that would not reintroduce either intentional or descriptive fallacies" (Sedgwick 68). Literary critics Wimsatt and Beardsley use the term "intentional fallacy" to characterize how an author's values and biography come second to an audience member's use of a text. Throughout this essay, I rely on the language of performativity (e.g., illocution, perlocution, and queer reading) to discuss the glorious insignificance of Fred Phelps' intentions.

Phelps' silly texts and some equally peculiar responses to his ramblings generate complex thought about LGBTQ people and rights. Members of the WBC are excellent instructors because their lessons mock contemporary forms of rationality and, in doing so, cause some to think about LGBTQ issues in provocative ways. I am not suggesting that, in a roundabout way, Fred Phelps and his disciples intend to promote gay and lesbian causes by way of excessive hate; rather Phelps' church miserably fails at its call for gay hatred and, as a result, leads prospective converts away from literal interpretations of scripture and ironically toward pro-LGBTQ sentiments. I turn to low theory in this project because Halberstam's perspective situates the Westboro Baptist Church's rhetoric and digital responses to the WBC as unique modes of theoretical involvement, ones that speak to communities that may not open a book of high theory. Moreover, low theory provides an alternate and affirming way to make sense of the competing failures of Phelps' congregation and their detractors.

*Failure as Queer Strategy*

Much to the chagrin of many LGBTQ advocates, debating the merits of scripture has proven to be a prolonged exercise in failure that only provides more and larger stages from which Phelps’ choir may sing its anti-gay gospel. Reconceptualizing failure is one of low theory’s defining characteristics. “If success requires so much effort,” argues Halberstam, “maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards” (3). Take, for example, failed attempts at censoring the WBC. The more people demand silence from the Westboro Baptist Church, the more they render Phelps and his followers visible. Efforts to censor the Westboro Baptist Church have resulted in protests staged by the WBC, protests of the church’s picket lines, increased media attention, YouTube videos and websites that chronicle reactions to Phelps’ tactics, state laws aimed at limiting the group’s speech acts, numerous court battles waged against the church, and a Supreme Court case (*Snyder v. Phelps*) that ultimately ruled in favor of the Phelps’ right to picket funerals of fallen soldiers. Each bit of communication created and provoked by the WBC contributes—sometimes unwittingly—to a theoretical mosaic that does LGBTQ people more good than harm.

Inspired by Halberstam’s notion of queer failure, I suggest that the Westboro Baptist Church’s “successes” are entangled in failures to silence the Phelps family. The more the church’s opposition fails to quiet them, the more opportunities the WBC has to theatrically enact over-the-top, odd, and I dare say *queer* representations of anti-gay hate. While I most certainly would not claim the WBC is the cause of LGBTQ-related victories over the past two decades, Phelps’ triumphs paradoxically and temporally run alongside increased social acceptance of LGBTQ men and women. This odd temporal relationship calls for a closer look at the Westboro Baptist Church’s theatre of homophobia and its performative implications. In other words, how have some people interpreted, appropriated, and altered Phelps’ anti-gay edict?

Because queer theory is uniquely concerned with matters of textual reception, I primarily examine what people *do* with Phelps’ message. I am not the first to look at mediated responses to the Phelps church. Brouwer and Hess analyze online reactions to the WBC’s military funeral protests. The rhetoricians find that, when discussing the controversy, most military bloggers “fail to address or express indifference toward the broader topics of homosexuality and gay rights,” despite the fact that Phelps and his followers emphasize anti-gay rhetoric in their protests. Brouwer and Hess’ findings reinforce the idea that a meaningful intellectual divide separates Phelps’ intent and the ways in which his messages are received.

Like Brouwer and Hess, I focus on the perlocutionary effect<sup>1</sup> of the Westboro Baptist Church’s speech, or look at how their performances have affected specific online speech communities. I turn my attention to two websites that Halberstam might characterize as “silly” or “eccentric.” The first is Phags-ForPhelps.com, a digital space started by gay author and media personality Josh Kilmer-Purcell. Kilmer-Purcell champions a queer reading of the WBC, attempted to donate money to the church, and has even started a friendship with the organization’s primary spokesperson, Shirley Phelps-Roper. Kilmer-Purcell’s website includes queer interpretations of the Westboro Baptist Church, a 2008 *Out* magazine article in which Kilmer-Purcell encourages the publication’s readers to “donate to the Partridge family of hate” (1), and a podcast interview, wherein Kilmer-Purcell and Phelps-Roper discuss their unlikely friendship and the topic that simultaneously repels and connects them: gay rights.

The second website, GodHatesShrimp.com, is a direct parody of Phelps’ GodHatesFags.com. Created by activist Joe Decker and web developer Ryland Sanders, the digital space features scripture that condemns the consumption of shellfish. The men humorously ask Christians who denounce homosexuality to “bring *all* God’s law unto the heathens and sodomites” (Decker and Sanders 1). Decker and Sanders’ strategy is similar to that of the Yes Men, a prankster activist network that carries the “principles of free trade to their logical conclusions” (Hynes, Sharpe, and Fagan 110). Like the Yes Men, Decker and Sanders embrace failure by playfully affirming the frameworks that negate gay and lesbian people. “This kind of practical joke,” argues Hynes, Sharp, and Fagan, “has a capacity to produced unexpected effects and a new direction in thinking because of the way it synthesizes disparate elements” (114). GodHatesShrimp.com functions as “anti-rhetoric, that is, a rhetoric that simultaneously promotes and disavows itself—renouncing its intent even as it amuses audiences and advances agendas” (Gilbert 12). Decker and Sanders embrace the silliness of Biblical literalism, and, in doing so, provide an alternate framework from which others might be able to understand queer aspects of the Phelps church.

Much like drag is said to expose gender’s performativity (Butler), Decker and Sanders’ campy condemnation of contemporary sin calls attention to the performativity of certain aspects of religion and hate. The site includes photos of GodHatesShrimp.com devotees engaging in counter-protests of the Phelps church; downloadable banners and printable signs that highlight the digital community’s mocking, anti-shrimp message; a link to the group’s Facebook community, which includes 4295 members; and podcasts, where representatives of the website talk to Shirley Phelps-Roper and others in the “liberal media”

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<sup>1</sup> J.L. Austin defines a perlocutionary act as speech that “will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of another person” (101).

who “seek to mock [*God Hates Shrimp*] and promote [a] pro-shrimp agenda” (Decker and Sanders).

*Phags for Phelps* and *God Hates Shrimp* demonstrate how groups of people not particularly invested in high theory deconstruct discourse and challenge the conventional logic of anti-gay hate. I consider how each website, in conjunction with the WBC, constructs a low theoretical advocacy of LGBTQ people and rights, regardless of the Westboro Baptist Church’s intent or investments. I specifically look at how *Phags for Phelps* and *God Hates Shrimp* foster a queer understanding of Phelps’ church by re-contextualizing failure and utilizing silly performances.

### Phags for Phailure

Success is made possible by way of a win/loss binary that belies the complexities of victory and failure. A politician’s affirmative stance on gay rights may be characterized as “outrageous” and the cause of political disappointment one day, and “courageous” and the springboard of her success the next. In recent U.S. history, the rights of queer people have been used as a wedge issue in elections. Scholars have noted the ways in which LGBTQ bodies have been described as “scapegoats for failure” (Love 21), where same-sex sexuality represents the failure of desire (Love); and even a breakdown of capitalist logic, wherein queer sex metonymically symbolizes a failed connection between production and reproduction (Hocquenghem; see also Halberstam). In this section, I analyze failure’s heuristic appeal. I first note the ways in which the WBC paradoxically incites pro-LGBTQ sentiment by situating sexual minorities as the cause of *all* world failure. I then note how some online activists engage in gay advocacy by 1) co-opting Phelps’ brand of scriptural failure and 2) pointing out various ways that everyone falls shot of biblical propriety.

Members of the Westboro Baptist Church use gay people as a scapegoat for *all* the world’s problems, focusing on how “fags” and “fag enablers” are the primary cause of U.S. failure. The Westboro Baptist Church’s digital home, GodHatesFags.com, contains numerous “WBC Open Letters,” in which the collective members of Phelps’ congregation blame catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 British Petroleum oil spill on gay people and the United States’ pro-gay policies (Westboro Baptist Church, “Open Letter”). “God hates Doomed america [sic]!” they say in their letters (Westboro Baptist Church, “Open Letter” 7), suggesting that a wrathful, anti-gay God uses natural disasters and other national tragedies to respond to pro-gay sentiment. GodHatesFags.com also includes a blog called Godsmacks, which is short for “God Smacks You!” The blog’s authors explain that, “God’s judgments are everywhere. God is in charge of everything, including your tornadoes, tsunamis, floods, famines, hurricanes, earthquakes, forest fires, mall shootings, etc. God

will repay each of your [sic] to your face with your own personal GodSmack" (Westboro Baptist Church). Blog entries include the church's unique, homophobic take on current events. After a Western journalist was killed in Syria, a WBC blogger wrote, "How lovely that God uses the ancient city Syria to execute judgment upon arrogant fag-media" (Westboro Baptist Church, "Judgment" 4).

In the next few pages, I analyze how *Phags for Phelps* and *God Hates Shrimp* repeat and augment the Westboro Baptist Church's anti-gay hate. I also explore the ways in which the websites' contributors intervene upon the WBC's scapegoating practices. Both modes of reading—where "reading" connotes interpretation and campy, gay invective—allow the men to recast scriptural failure as queer intellectual triumph.

Phelps and his followers' messages are designed to provoke strong reactions, which, in turn, make their particular brand of hate speech intellectually generative. A Google image search of WBC protests reveals that, overwhelmingly, people who post images of the church are among the ones who most vehemently disagree with Phelps' anti-gay message. Josh Kilmer-Purcell's webpage PhagsForPhelps.com features several photos of WBC congregants celebrating national tragedies and bemoaning the acceptance of LGBTQ men and women. A photo of Phelps-Roper sits atop the "Shirley You Jest" section of the website. In the picture, she stands at a protest event, clutching a neon red, yellow, and green placard that reads, "Thank GOD for 9/11." The front page of the site features a photograph of another WBC picket line, where three young, white children hold colorful pieces of poster board. A curly-headed boy stands behind a neon sign that says, "God blew up the shuttle." The "shuttle" is a synecdochical reference to the 2003 Space Shuttle Columbia disaster. A pre-adolescent girl stands next to him and grips a red, white, and blue poster with the words "God hates America" etched across its width. The second girl in the picture hugs a placard that announces, "God hates fag enablers." Kilmer-Purcell showcases Phelps' homophobia by including the photos on his website. Kilmer-Purcell contends that, "The more Shirley and her gospel of homophobic hate are exposed, the more friends GLBT Americans make. I want Shirley's message out there, and so does she. For different reasons. It just might be the strangest win-win situation I've ever been a part of" ("News" 16). Rather than deny the content of Phelps' message, Kilmer-Purcell aids in its repetition, and, in doing so, reconfigures queer failure—as it relates to scripture—as symbiotic triumph. Kilmer-Purcell reveals that he is a friend of Judy Shepard, whose son Matthew was killed in one of the United States' most widely publicized anti-gay hate crimes. Members of the Westboro Baptist Church attended Shepard's funeral and held up signs declaring, "Matthew is in hell." "As a result of the Phelps coming up [to Wyoming]," Kilmer-Purcell explains, "some other gays and lesbians and their supporters blocked them from the [Shepard] family with these huge, giant angel

wings. That to me is exactly what I’m in favor of. This great outpouring of love in response to that tiny uproar of hate” (Fernos and Felion).

Kilmer-Purcell’s testimony demonstrates the WBC’s lack of “illocutionary force” (Cohen 118; Austin), meaning there is a significant divide between the church members’ intentions and the ways in which many people decode their message. Kilmer-Purcell’s optimism in the face of extraordinary hate also reveals how success and failure defy either/or bifurcations; triumph and defeat are entangled in one another. In one sense, counter-protests symbolize a failure for Phelps’ congregation insofar as counter-protestors 1) obstruct full display of the WBC’s picket signs, and 2) represent galvanized support of LGBTQ people. In another sense, “fag enablers” provide the proof of the truth of Phelps’ biblical warnings, because gay people and their advocates epitomize what the Phelps clan believe is at the heart of a doomed nation: institutional acceptance of homosexuality. Members of Phelps’s congregation may therefore be invested in failure, meaning they may *not* want to convert “fag enablers.” This unconventional interpretation of the Westboro Baptist Church helps explain the organization’s bold, repellant word choice (e.g., “God hates fags”) and protest strategies (e.g., picketing funerals).

Replicating WBC’s protest images allows Kilmer-Purcell to appropriate and revel in the Phelps’ scripture-driven logos and, in a low theoretical sense, construct a counter-hegemonic interpretation of Biblical literalism. Halberstam explains how the joy of failure may function as queer theory when she writes that, “Failure presents an opportunity rather than a dead end; in true camp fashion, the queer artist works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness. Indeed the darkness becomes a crucial part of a queer aesthetic” (96).

Decker and Sanders step even further into the re-iterative force of the WBC’s “darkness.” The men ask, “Why stop at protesting gay marriage? Bring *all* of God’s law unto the heathens and sodomites” (1). Their website, GodHatesShrimp.com, is a direct parody of Phelps’ GodHatesFags.com. Much the same way Phelps and his family set their sights on homosexuality, Decker and Sanders focus almost exclusively on biblical law that forbids human consumption of shellfish. “We call upon all Christians to join the crusade against Long John Silver’s and Red Lobster,” the men joke. “Yea, even Popeye’s shall be cleansed. We must stop the unbelievers from destroying the sanctity of our restaurants” (Decker and Sanders 1).

Parallels between *God Hates Shrimp* and *God Hates Fags* do not end there. Both sites feature a page of downloadable signs that visitors may print and share. Decker and Sanders’ website also includes images of counter-protests, where their followers attend Phelps’ demonstrations and hold makeshift signs that proudly declare their anti-shrimp agenda. A *God Hates Shrimp* community member named Lauren posted a photo in which she carries a poster that says, “Shrimp are sin (especially with butter).” The image includes the following cap-

tion: “My sign from the Virginia Tech protest of the Westboro Baptist Church on April 9, 2010” (Decker and Sanders). Figure 1 is a photo taken at an Arkansas-based counter-rally of the Phelps church. In the picture, a group of men dressed as pirates wield swords and hold signs that read, “God hates shrimp,” and, “God hates: A) Shrimp, B) Cotton-Polyester Blends, C) Phelps and WBC, D) All the [sic] Above” (Decker and Sanders). Decker and Sanders provide an editorial note under the photo, wherein they explain that, “We at GodHatesShrimp.com do not condone pillaging, plundering, or deck-swabbing, unless they are done in the name of Jesus. Amen” (Decker and Sanders). Counter-protestors from all over North America, including Virginia, Arkansas, New York, California, Indiana, and Calgary, submit pictures located under the “Protest Photos” section of GodHatesShrimp.com.



Figure 1. Pirates spread their anti-shrimp message.

The images underscore the role audience participation plays in queerly spinning Phelps’ bigotry. Layered dialogic interpretations—between the WBC and Decker and Sanders, Decker and Sanders and their audience, and *God Hates Shrimp* fans and the WBC—comprise a low theory of homophobia’s performativity. This low theory does not “gauge transformation [of thought] solely in the intent of the performer or reception of the text, but considers how a [digital] performance has agency—an unpredictable movement that often ignores intention and expectation” (Fox 6).

Decker and Sanders’ supporters repeat Phelps’ pro-scripture message but, through humor, their repetition mutates as it replicates. This *repetition with a difference* is significant in two key ways. First, Decker and Sanders ask their followers to recognize how *all* forms of sin lead to destruction. In expanding the Bi-

ble's range of scapegoats, the men cast a bigger net of failure, one that implicates a broader range of sinners. Second, "fags" are displaced/de-centered in this mutation of Phelps' rhetoric and replaced by people who consume shellfish. Decker and Sanders work in a low theoretical register to implicate shellfish-eating Christians, and, as a result, target a larger scapegoat of God's wrath.

Moreover, the men challenge the logical consistency of Christians who eat shellfish but also consider homosexuality to be an abomination. Members of the *God Hates Shrimp* community frame Christian hypocrisy as queer, or ironic, failure. Decker and Sanders explicitly call out the perceived duplicity of many anti-gay Christians, arguing that:

If you want to quote from Leviticus, despite Jesus' doing away with Mosaic law, then you better be prepared to enforce the whole thing, not just the parts you like. This includes not only the injunction against shellfish and mussels and such, but also against wearing fabrics made of blended fibers, cutting or shaving your beard, sowing mixed seed in a field, and a slew of other things nobody but Orthodox Jews take seriously anymore. (2)

Ironic images on the group's Facebook page advance the men's claim. One picture contains a Middle Eastern woman buried up to her shoulders in sand. Bloody stones circle her bruised and lacerated face. Bright white words hovering over the photo declare, "If she's not a virgin, kill that bitch." Under the picture, smaller words quote Deuteronomy 22:20-21: "But if this thing be true, and the tokens of virginity be not found for the damsel: Then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her." A man in another photograph stands in front of a Walgreens, the location of a counter-protest. He grips a neon yellow sign that contains the following exclamation: "God hates poly/cotton blends!" Camp—a mainstay of queer activism (Newton; Román)—is one of the queerest tools *God Hates Shrimp* community members utilize to lambaste Phelps' scriptural logic. "Camp," explains queer theorist José Muñoz, "is a strategic response to the breakdown of representation that occurs when a queer subject encounters his or her inability to fit within the majoritarian representational regime" (128). Decker and Sanders' campy appropriation of scripture sets the men up to 1) celebrate queer failure in the Bible but do so in a fun, affirming manner; and 2) invite others to recognize their own biblical shortcomings. Failure, argues Halberstam, "provides the opportunity to use [negativity] to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (3). Reimagining failure is one way by which low theorists may expose a "mass delusion" that fools U.S. Americans into thinking "success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of a bad attitude," or, in this context, sinful behavior, "rather than structural conditions" (Halberstam 3).

### Fighting Fire with Phire

Theories of performativity emphasize the theatrical and referential aspects of identity, like gender (Butler), sexuality (Sedgwick), and race (Jackson). Judith Butler notes how excessive theatricalization of femininity, like drag, potentially exposes more mundane gender performances. Likewise, Phelps' over-the-top productions of religious-based homophobia provoke people like Kilmer-Purcell, Decker, and Sanders to think about anti-gay animus in abstract and radical ways. Their websites are *silly performances* that call attention to subtler, day-to-day expressions of anti-gay hate. Silliness, in this context, is queer in two senses. First, queer silliness refers to quirky, unconventional interpretations of the Westboro Baptist Church. Second, queer eccentricity cites specific aesthetic sensibilities that are typically associated with LGBTQ people. In the next few pages, I explore how Kilmer-Purcell, Decker, and Sanders employ puns and play with incongruity and identification to queerly read the Westboro Baptist Church.

Decker, Sanders, and Kilmer-Purcell use silly, sometimes groan-inducing puns to mock the Westboro Baptist Church and ease readers into multiple, queer interpretations of Phelps' brand of Fundamentalism. Kilmer-Purcell's intentional misspelling of "Phags," for example, playfully co-opts the first two letters of Phelps' last name and embeds the characters in the WBC's favorite anti-gay epithet: fag. The pun, which may first come off as sophomoric, metonymically represents a more complex, low theoretical strategy, whereby Phelps' name and degradation of gay people are hijacked by queers, re-contextualized, and used to foster pro-gay attitudes.

Similar tactics emerge on the *God Hates Shrimp* page. Members of *God Hates Shrimp's* Facebook community have posted images that humorously re-render Phelps' "God hates fags!" message. One picture features a black-and-white photo of Fred Phelps holding a poster that once read, "God hates fags!" The Photoshopped placard now says, "God hates *facts*" (*God Hates Shrimp*). Another image includes the play-on-words, "God hates *figs*" (*God Hates Shrimp*). Puns help grease up the queer interpretive machine; they open up audiences to multiple, sometimes incongruous meanings of a text. These seemingly silly strategies train readers to appreciate the website's more sophisticated and nuanced elements.

Under the "News and Blog" section of *Phags for Phelps*, Kilmer-Purcell encourages visitors to listen to a joint podcast interview that "might help clear up" ("News" 4) his seemingly incompatible relationship with Shirley Phelps-Roper. After clicking on a link, listeners hear a 1-hour interview in which Fausto Fernos and Marc Felion, partnered hosts of the podcast, interview Josh Kilmer-Purcell and Shirley Phelps-Roper. Felion contextualizes the magnificent absurdity of the forthcoming exchange when he explains that, "*Out* magazine columnist Josh Kilmer-Purcell has created a website called PhagsForPhelps.com because

he thinks [the Westboro Baptist Church’s] cartoonish vigor portrays homophobia in a negative light and ultimately advances the gay cause by making people second-guess their own hateful opinions.” Fernos then characterizes the exchange as a “freaky show” and “double date.” This introductory information is theoretically provocative for two reasons. First, describing the dialogue as a “freaky double date” underscores the incongruity, or silliness, of Kilmer-Purcell’s and Phelps-Roper’s social locations, sexual orientations, and ideological standpoints. Second, the podcast’s hosts explicitly outline the ways in which Kilmer-Purcell advocates a low theoretical understanding of the WBC. They paint Phelps and his brood as “cartoonish” in their homophobia, and then contend that the church’s silliness is precisely what might cause some people to “second-guess their own hateful opinions.” To modify Butler, a spectacle of excessive anti-gay hate “implicitly reveals the imitative structure of” homophobia — “as well as its contingency” (175).

Kilmer-Purcell’s queer reading of the Phelps church is multi-layered. Along with noting significant points of divergence between the WBC and LGBTQ people, he also points out ironic likenesses between the two groups. A *queer point of identification* characterizes moments when unexpected similarities emerge between queers and heterosexual men and women. This mode of queering is a silly, or productively offbeat, way to engage in textual reception. In the aforementioned podcast, Kilmer-Purcell uses a queer point of identification to partially explain his affinity for Phelps-Roper. He states that, “Part of the reason I have softness in my heart for Shirley is because I believe she was raised in an abusive household, whether or not she believes it” (Fernos and Felion). Kilmer-Purcell’s claim of presumed “abuse” is left open to interpretation. Because Phelps-Roper spent a bulk of the podcast talking about her upbringing with WBC leader Fred Phelps, a critique of heterosexual indoctrination may be implicit in Kilmer-Purcell’s assumption of mistreatment.

When looked at through a queer lens, a parent’s heterosexualizing of moral identity constitutes a form of emotional abuse and “soul murder” (Yep). Two of the three photographs on *Phags for Phelps*’ main page feature the church using children to spread their hateful message. Figure 2 is a photograph of two adorable little girls hugging one another and wearing shirts that read, “GOD HATES FAGS .COM” (Kilmer-Purcell, *Phags*). Two aspects of the picture strike me as silly in the queer sense of the term. First, most people would not expect young children to wear shirts that boldly announce, “God hates fags.” By including the image on the front page of his website, Kilmer-Purcell stresses incongruity between childhood innocence and rabid anti-gay hate. Second, Phelps-Roper presumably endured a form of anti-gay training similar to the young girls in Figure 2. Homophobia functions as an ironic point of identification, because many sexual minorities are intimately familiar with anti-gay indoctrination. Kilmer-

Purcell frames Fred Phelps' misuse of children as abuse, and, as a result, suggests that LGBTQ men and women are not homophobia's sole victims.



Figure 2. The WBC uses children to help spread their homophobic message.

Another significant queer point of identification is articulated at the end of the podcast interview, when host Fausto Fernos likens the WBC's unambiguous hate to "coming of the closet." "She's out of the closet," he explains, "in the sense that I think a lot of politicians actually share [Shirley's] opinion, but they just don't have the ability, or balls, to put it forward" (Fernos and Felion). The "closet" is a synecdochical reference to "skeletons in a person's closet," or secrets people try to keep hidden. The use of the term "closet" to describe performances of homosexual and/or homosocial self-disclosure began in the 1960s (Urbach) and is now largely associated with LGBTQ "coming out" processes. Fausto utilizes the metaphor to make sense of the brashness and openness of Phelps-Roper's hate. The interpretive device allows Fernos and Kilmer-Purcell to call out others who may conceal or sugarcoat anti-gay bias. A quotation posted on the front page of *Phags for Phelps* more explicitly demonstrates the significance of this point. Nate Phelps, an estranged son of Fred Phelps and supporter of Kilmer-Purcell's website, states that:

I'd much prefer to have the in-your-face, truthful hatred of my family toward gays than the equivocating, hair-splitting justifications of so many in the mainstream who mask their prejudice with cute little sayings like, 'Love the sinner,

hate the sin,’ while they behave with hatred and prejudice by merely defining [homosexuality] as sin. (Kilmer-Purcell, *Phags for Phelps 2*)

Kilmer-Purcell also takes issue with “equivocating, hair-splitting,” silly logic used to justify more ordinary instances of anti-gay prejudice.

When asked her opinion of *Phags for Phelps*, Phelps-Roper described the website as “a little funny—okay, a *lot* funny” (Fernos and Felion). The WBC’s tactics, as interpreted by Kilmer-Purcell, help create a low theoretical register that exposes the performativity of more mundane acts of homophobia. Kilmer-Purcell’s and Fernos’ queer reading of the Westboro Baptist Church models one way to qualitatively assess the perlocutionary implications of Phelps’ rhetoric. The men, by way of queer interpretation and response, re-imagine the signifying potential of the WBC; and, in doing so, formulate and execute a unique/queer perspective.

### Strange Bedfellows

Queer theorists like Michael Warner and Lisa Duggan worry that a significant number of gays and lesbians have begun to embed themselves in the same heteronormative structures that marginalized them for well over 100 years. Many LGBT men and women, in other words, have implemented a “homonormative” (Duggan) approach to sexual politics, meaning they have come to value traditional gender performances and conceal or devalue what makes queer people unique. Marriage equality and childrearing, for instance, lead gays and lesbians to assimilate, or live lives analogous to their straight counterparts.

Members of Phelps’ congregation articulate the counterpart of this claim. They believe that social worlds are moving in the opposite direction, or that heterosexual men and women are increasingly turning away from tradition and adopting queer mindsets and behaviors. While interviewing Josh Kilmer-Purcell and Shirley Phelps-Roper, Fausto Fernos eloquently spoke to this point. He said that:

There is nothing more radical to most Christian Fundamentalists than the acceptance of gays. Gays represent an acceptance of sex. It’s not that the world is necessarily becoming more accepting of gay people, as much as straight people’s lives are becoming much more like ours. They’re not having children; they’re living by themselves, outside of these large, extended families; they’re living in urban areas; they’re getting married for love and not for other reasons; they’re having sex before marriage; and they’re *happy*. (Fernos and Felion)

Fernos’ observation is consistent with Brouwer and Hess’ claim that, for Fred Phelps, “fag’ and ‘faggot’ refer not only to same-sex practices and identities. Phelps’ shift from protesting funerals of queers and people with AIDS to protesting funerals of military personnel represents a shift—an expansion—of the

meaning of fag and faggot from behavior and identity to policy” (72). This breakdown of heteronormative ethos indicates that heterosexuals are increasingly able to queer their own sense of home, intimacy, future, and happiness. Understanding this intellectual shift partially requires an appreciation for how popular culture artifacts produce new modes of thought and articulation, even when the texts are cloaked in biblical, heteronormative antiquity.

The WBC’s in-your-face tactics are theoretically provocative and have made me think more abstractly about the perlocutionary, reactive aspects of gender and sexuality. I feel particularly indebted to Kilmer-Purcell, Decker, and Sanders, who have provided a new standpoint from which to view the Westboro Baptist Church. Their creative takes on Phelps’ theatrics might be described as a play within a play, or better still, a performative *within* a performative. Perhaps, then, performativity that animates from the preposition “within” (i.e., *endoperformativity*) is best suited for low theory. This interpretive account, for instance, is a performative (theoretically grounded rhetorical analysis) about a performative (parody websites) *within* a performative (the WBC theatrics). By examining multiple, dialogic levels of textual production, interpretation, and reproduction, I help de-center the content of Phelps’ rhetoric and privilege what audience members do with it.

The method of low theory advocated in this essay opens up the possibilities of what constitutes scholarship. Pop cultural work is not only an object of inquiry, it also functions as a method of investigation that provides unique insights into a range of people’s meaning-making and theory-building processes. Queering failure and considering the scholarly import of silliness are two ways to push past limits of conventional thinking. Halberstam explains that, “Through the use of manifestoes, a range of political tactics, and new technologies of representation, radical utopians continue to search for different ways of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer subject” (2). Low theorists like Kilmer-Purcell, Decker, and Sanders rely on digital technologies of representation to queer the WBC’s dystopian logic. The men disrupt the re-iterative power of scriptural discourse that castigates non-normative sexual expression and demonizes LGBTQ people. By appropriating, amplifying, and altering the WBC’s homophobia, sites like *Phags for Phelps* and *God Hates Shrimp* re-imagine potential trajectories of anti-gay speech.

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