

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

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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 effect¹ 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"

¹ 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 short 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., *endo-performativity*) 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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